

In what sense(s) can liberalism be regarded as individualistic? Should individualism be regarded as a strength or weakness of liberalism?

Liberalism, as a widespread political ideology, came to the fore in the nineteenth century with an industrialised market economy order allowing free-trade between nations without government interference.¹ It was at this time that Classical liberalism ideals were first developed. A variety of different forms of liberalism emerged, and over time these developed into what is termed as modern liberalism. Throughout this transition the importance of the individual has remained a prominent factor.

“The preservation of the individual and the attainment of individual happiness are the supreme goals of a liberal political system.”²

Therefore it is evident that liberalism can be regarded as individualistic. However there are many other qualities that make up this ideology and the importance of these should also be considered. In addition to this, the value of individualism as a part of liberalism must be measured in order to validly assess whether it is indeed a strength or a weakness of this political ideology.

Before discussing liberalism and the subsequent relevance of individualism, it is essential to define what these terms mean in a political sense. Liberalism is best defined by an examination of the set of values and beliefs which it is characterised by. The first of these, which will be discussed in depth later, is the supreme importance of the individual. A commitment to the individual naturally leads to a belief in individual freedom, which is the second belief of liberalism. Although liberals are in favour of the freedom of individuals, they do not believe it should be absolute and are of the opinion that certain limitations must be put on individual freedom in order to ensure the liberty of others. A strong faith in reason is also central to liberal ideology. This entails that humans are rational and capable of defining and pursuing their own best interests. However, this is

¹ Heywood, 2003, pg 26

² Goodwin, 2000, pg 37

not to suggest that they are infallible in this sense. A belief in equality ensures that justice is also a factor of liberalism. In other words, liberals believe in both the punishment and rewards of particular actions. A fair distribution of social rights is key to this, and liberalism rejects privileges given to those on the basis of their circumstances, including race religion or social background. The final central characteristic of liberalism is that of toleration. Social and cultural diversities are to be celebrated and not rejected, as humans are viewed as separate and unique creatures.³

These values and beliefs lay the foundations of liberal theory. The primary characteristic, being that of individualism, must be properly defined in order to discuss its importance and merits as a part of liberalism. Individualism can have a variety of meanings depending upon how it is used. A definition relevant to liberalism is that the ultimate goal of a human being should be the pursuit of happiness through free self-development resulting in a well-lived existence. This means that each individual is supremely important and society must exist only for the sake of the individual. The only purpose of the state should be to allow individuals to achieve their own happiness. This definition of individualism is consistent with classical liberalism. Each person is their own sovereign in a social and political context. Subjects in a classical liberal society are to be seen to have a moral nature with ultimate control over their own life. No state or government may deny individuals their natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of their own happiness.⁴

Following this definition it can be demonstrated how liberalism can be regarded as individualistic. Liberals see the role of the government as providing a framework in which individuals can develop their lives and contribute to society. This can be achieved through the regulation of private industry to protect customers and workers. A goal of equal opportunity should also be implicated in order guard against poverty and discrimination. These regulations would be put in place to place in order to ensure individual freedom.

³ Heywood, 2003, pgs 28-36

⁴ Heywood, 2003, pgs 28-30

A testament to liberalism being individualistic is the fact that all forms of liberalism believe in the importance and freedom of the individual. Three main political thinkers in particular support individualism in classical liberalism: John Stuart Mill, John Locke and Adam Smith.

John Stuart Mill was a British philosopher who lived from 1806 to 1873 and is best known for his defence of individual liberty that one would usually associate with arguments based on rights. He argued for the importance of autonomy and individual self-development. He claimed that if other people tolerated such freedoms, the benefits would be reaped by the wider society. Mill also argued for toleration of diverse opinions, resting his argument on the idea that knowledge is fallible. In 1859, Mill wrote *On Liberty*. In this he laid out the ethical foundations of democratic individualism. In doing such, Mill considered the circumstances under which individual liberty might be justifiably restricted and concluded by forming his “harm principle”. This principle is central to his views on freedom and its influence is substantial in all liberal democracies. “The sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not sufficient warrant”⁵

John Locke was a British philosopher who lived from 1632 to 1704. His political philosophy emphasises individual rights, mainly the right of a person's personal interests not to be interfered with and the right of justly acquired property. He argued that the purpose of a government is to protect those rights and that we can be justified in rejecting a government that interferes with them.⁶

Adam Smith was a Scottish economist who lived from 1723 to 1790. Smith argues that individual rights allow for the development of wealth within commercial

⁵ Mill in Wooten, 1996, pg 610

⁶ Wooten, 1996, pgs 82&85

society. People's specialisation in different tasks could lead to immense gains in productivity. These activities need co-ordination through economic self-interest. A developed market economy would permit issues of human well-being to take care of themselves. It would not be necessary to maintain government institutions to guarantee a right to subsistence because wealth would be generated automatically. Particular needs of individuals, then, could safely be left to charity.

It could be said that what we term as liberalism today, came from the writings of these three thinkers. Therefore their evaluation of the significance of individualism in liberalism being so high strengthens the case for liberalism being fundamentally individualistic.

It is evident that liberalism therefore is extremely individualistic and social implications of a liberal society are to be in place only for the assurance of the rights of the individual. However what has to be decided is whether this individualistic attitude is a strength or a weakness of liberal theory. Individualism definitely does have many undoubted strengths. The theory of free-trade through a market economy is desirable for liberals due to the fact that it rewards talents and hard work through equal conditions of trade. Also a belief in the freedom of expression can be seen as a strength. This creates more diversity in society, allowing people access to a wider variety of views and opinions, and in turn to bettering their understanding of themselves and their ideas of happiness. Without this diverse society in which people can openly express themselves, individuality would be lost to conformity. The problem here is that without individualistic views radical change would never come about and human development would greatly suffer. Finally, if people are allowed the freedom to pursue their own personal interest then they have more chance of discovering what happiness in life means for them.

Despite these strengths of an individualistic view of liberalism, many criticisms are also evident. A perceived weakness of individualism is that for some being individualistic prevents them from social or community participation. Critics of

individualism often point out that this is a defect in the individualistic philosophy. However modern liberals believe in society and see it as necessary as something that can increase freedom for the individual. Modern liberals could be classified as following ethical individualism where society is constructed to help the individual prosper and achieve their full potential as they realise the importance of community and social responsibility. In addition to this we are necessarily born into a community of some sort through our families and for our early years we are not in a state of self-sufficiency. We learn our language from the society around us and receive our early education within a social context. Individualist views should not discourage us from voluntarily participating in social groups and cooperation with one another may in fact be essential to achieve common goals. Also individualism does not mean that one isolates oneself from society, communities, associations and organisations. In fact, Individualists need to join together and work together if the political philosophies of Classical Liberalism are to be promoted. Also charity towards others is not necessarily to be avoided. Individualists are not always hesitant about voluntarily working together in social associations, acting in charity, or expressing concerns of sympathy toward others whom they value as human beings.

The ideas of people pursuing individual goals and enjoying freedom of action and expression are also open to criticism. Firstly it is argued that not all people are in a position to realise what happiness for themselves involves. A good example of this is drug taking, as this might seem like a route towards individual happiness for someone who is not aware of the potential dangers and misery involved. Secondly someone expressing their rights to freedom of speech and action through racism could clearly infringe on another persons freedom through discrimination. However Mill goes some way in clearing up these potential problems with his harm principle by suggesting that we should not interfere with someone's actions providing they do not harm another.⁷ Mill's principle has also seemed to have more relevance since the additions to it in 1960 by J.C Rees, in his paper, *A re-reading of Mill on Liberty*.⁸

⁷ Mill in Wooten, 1996, pg 610

⁸ <http://www.philosophypages.com/ph/mill.htm>

Mill's desire for minimal state intervention has also been subject to substantial criticism. Many believe that a society without a more authoritarian figure or body would simply not work. As H.J McCloskey puts it;

“Most contemporary liberals today, including those who profess great loyalty to Mill's liberalism, lack, Mill's optimism about the future progress of mankind and favour considerable curtailments of freedom of expression and action for the sake that Mill would not have entertained.”⁹

In conclusion, despite the various forms of liberalism and the transition from classical to modern ideologies, individualism has remained the outmost prominent factor throughout. Liberalism, in the main, is individualistic and this is mainly evident from the liberal ideologies displayed by Mill, Locke and Smith. Individualism has numerous strengths, particularly its freedom of speech and expression. Although many criticisms of individuality have been made, its weaknesses are few and tend to have counter-arguments which are particularly convincing. In essence liberalism should be regarded as a strength of liberalism.

⁹ Muschamp, 1986, pg178

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