

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

Ever since the creation of liberalism, definitions and values have been ever changing. Indeed, different countries can change the understanding of liberalism. In Britain, liberalism has centred on religious toleration, government by consent and personal/ economic freedom. On the other hand, traditional French liberalism has been associated with secularism and democracy. With this in mind, the issue over liberalism makes for a somewhat high level of debate. However, looking beyond all the variables of liberalism, the theory of individualism appears to be ever present. This is why liberalism can be regarded as individualistic. Perhaps the main argument over liberalism being individualistic, is whether or not, this is a strength or a weakness.

“At the philosophical level, liberals have affirmed a commitment to the concepts of equality, liberty, individuality and rationality.”<sup>1</sup>

This statement from Eatwell and Wright conveys that individualism is a key concept in regards to liberalism. Defining liberalism is perhaps the best way in which to regard it as individualistic. The actual term liberalism can be traced as far back as the fourteenth century. The word liberal automatically conveys a sense of freedom in light that it derives from the Latin word ‘liber’ which translated, means free. Liberalism like other ideologies, adheres to a set of values and beliefs. In the case of liberalism, there are five values which are of up-most importance. These are the individual, freedom, reason, justice and toleration. It is of no surprise that individual is perhaps the paramount in the definition of liberalism. Liberals hold the individual as the centre piece of their ideology. This claim is strengthened when taking into account the views of the great liberal thinkers such as John Locke and John Stuart Mill. Locke stated that “humans are naturally in a state of perfect freedom to order their actions...as they think fit...without asking leave, or depending on the will of any other man.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eatwell and Wright, 1999, Pg 24

<sup>2</sup> Locke, 1960, Pg 287

In order to determine whether individualism is a strength or weakness of liberalism, first, individualism has to be defined. According to the individualist, all values are human-centred, the individual is of supreme importance and all individuals are morally equal. Individualism places great value on self-reliance, on privacy and on mutual respect. As a theory of human nature, individualism holds that the interests of the normal adult are best served by allowing him maximum freedom and responsibility for choosing his objectives and the means for obtaining them. All individuals believe that government should keep its interference in the lives of individuals at a minimum, concentrating itself largely to maintaining law and order. This could account for the prevention of individuals interfering with others. Individualism also implies a property system according to which each person or family enjoys the opportunity to acquire property and manage it as they see fit.

The debate of liberalism and its individualist values has raged since its creation. Thinkers have tirelessly tried to discern whether individualism is a strength or a weakness of liberalism. Liberals are those who are likely to argue that individualism is a strength of liberalism whereas conservatives are the main critics of this notion. When dealing with this argument, focus has to be cast on individual liberty and whether or not it is a burden on society as it is generally considered that it is its outcome on society which will determine whether or not it is a strength.

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Individual liberty suggests that the individual is free to their own pursuits. If this is not the case, it can be argued that the individual is being enslaved as Isaiah Berlin hints, "If I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am to that degree unfree; and if this area is contracted by other men beyond a certain minimum, I can be described as being coerced, or, it may be, enslaved."<sup>3</sup>

This argument would suggest that individualism is a strength in light that not having individual liberty could be construed as being enslaved. At the heart of such liberty is the absence of coercion by others which insures that citizens do not interfere with each other without compelling justification.

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<sup>3</sup> Berlin, 1969, Pg 122

Perhaps the main argument for individualism stems from the fact that it allows humans to progress and in turn, help society to progress. Individual liberty entails that a person has the right to free speech. This single fact is of massive importance as it means that democracy can be practised to its maximum potential, which the western world strives for. Without individual liberty, the right to free speech would have not been allowed from many angles. Free speech accounts for many inequalities which have been reversed with examples including racial equality, demonstrated in the fall of Apartheid. Homosexuals are now allowed to practise their ideals to certain degrees and have become accepted by many individuals of society. Religious toleration is far more evident with people of various religions practising their religion in different cultures. All of these factors have come about through individuals practising their individual liberty with the exclusion of coercion from others.

Furthermore, individualism realise their maximum potential and maximum performance. This is in light that individualism creates more competition which drives humans more these potentials and performances. The positive outcome of this is that thought in society is increased. This individualist approach ensures that new ideas are going to be conceived, in turn, progressing society. This line of argument can be expressed through the criticism of conservative ideals. If society were to follow conservatism, the notion of cooperation would be in place rather than competition. The disadvantage of cooperation is that it diminishes incentive, since trying harder than the next person will not achieve anything. Since conservatism states that things are to remain in their current state, new ideas expressed by individuals, which have the potential to benefit society, would be overlooked. This is why individualism can be viewed as a strength of liberalism.

The above arguments convey individualism as being a strength of liberalism. However, there are arguments to suggest that it is in fact, a weakness of liberalism. Perhaps the largest flaw in the individualism theory is that it is based on rational individuals as touched on by Barbara Goodwin, “the individual is assumed to be rational”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Goodwin, 1997, Pg53

There is a large percent of society who given these individual liberties, would quite simply abuse this power due to irrationalness. This ties in John Stuart Mill's 'harm principle' whereby individuals exercising their individual liberty can cause harm to others in society. This can occur in a numerous amount of circumstances for example, a criminal seeks to benefit their interests at the same time as harming society. A polluter finds it cheaper to dump pollution than to treat it. This self-interest is equally harmful to society. Basically, liberalism's individual liberty theory is quite simply only complying to those in society who are rational.

Another argument put forward by thinkers who feel individualism is a weakness of liberalism, is regarding the issue of consensus. It is believed that decision-making is very hard to achieve amongst liberal as line with their ideology, they all have the right to express their own idea. It is even claimed that this causes problems in today's Scottish Executive. This refers to the liberal members of the coalition executive who apparently slow the legislation making process due to their lack agreement. The basic reflection of the argument entails that individualism creates a degree of indecisiveness, which depending on the circumstances could be fatal.

On the whole, the idea of individualism ties in closely to liberalism based on the fact that it encompasses the core belief of liberalism. This is clear to see with regards to the variations of liberalism. Whether it be different liberalism based on historical or cultural differences of liberalism, the key value looks to the protection of the individual's liberty in society. In other words, it concentrates more on the primacy of the individual rather than the primacy of society.

The debate over individualism being a strength or weakness of liberalism is a far more speculative issue. There are many arguments which support either claim with a decision somewhat difficult to determine. The western or developed world prides itself on its democratic systems, which have stemmed primarily from the liberal ideology. This argument, backed up by other claims such as such as the improvement in equality would more than often close the case on the debate, however, the negative factors of individualism cannot be overlooked. This is particularly true on the basis that the individual liberties which liberalism presents, can only be used in a rational manner. In other words, it does not apply to certain degree of society. Upon final assessment, individualism slightly sways in the direction of being a strength of

liberalism after closely weighing the positives against the negatives. However, through different interpretation, this analysis could easily be contradicted.

