

Can liberty and
equality be reconciled
in political theory?



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The word reconcile means that, to find a way in which two situations or beliefs that are opposed to each other can agree and exist together. It is sometimes difficult to reconcile for instance science and religion. When two people are reconciled they become friendly again after they have argued, (Cambridge advanced learners dictionary). In this essay I will dwell much on whether liberty and equality can be reconciled by defining these concepts.

Liberty and freedom are often used interchangeably, however they essentially mean the ability to think or act as one wishes. Gerald McCallum: “Freedom is always of something (an agent or agents) to do or not to do, become or not become something”. Most political theorists assume that people ought to be free unless there are compelling reasons for restricting their freedom. For instance J. S. Mill believes that, to be human is to enjoy a sphere of in which one is able to think, express ideas and lead a lifestyle of one’s own choosing. He went on to say, “ even if a person finds himself in an opinion, he should be free to express that opinion” and “ if all mankind, minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would not be justified to silence that person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind” By allowing individuals to be free, society can progress, hence the ideas of minimal government and protection of human rights and freedoms.

There are two concepts of liberty, these includes negative and positive liberty (Isaiah Berlin, 1969). Negative liberty involves response to the question: what is the area within which the subject a person or group of persons is or should be left to do what he is able to do or be, without interference by other people. It implies freedom of choice, therefore, Law
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and Government should only serve to enlarge and not restrict freedoms, and privacy of the individual must be respected by recognizing a clear distinction between what is public and what is private and finally it advocates individual rationality as the basis for choice. On the other hand, positive liberty is involved in the answer to the question: what or who is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do or be, also interested in the question ' By whom am I governed?' However, as opposed to " How much am I governed? G. C. Mc Callum, (1972). According to T. H. Green it means personal growth and self-development.

Liberalism is one of the dominant political ideologies of the contemporary world that favors liberty in terms of equality. It is founded on the traditional notions of individualism: this reflects the belief in the supreme importance of the human individual as opposed to any social group or collective body. The liberal goal is therefore to create a society within which individuals can flourish and prosper with everyone pursuing what they consider as good in any way they choose to define it. Therefore, individual freedoms or liberties are given priority over notions of equality, justice and authority. It is thus based on the presumption that freedom is a good thing and that any limitations of the same should be justified. It is strongly against limitation on freedom of individuals to pursue self interest. It however, favors private property and free enterprise, for instance freedom to buy and sell anything. And finally it is against state control and seconds that role of the state limited to maintaining law and order, in this respect, it should provide defense and oversee enforcement of contracts.

Equality refers to the belief that human beings are born having equal rights. The Declaration of Independence asserts some of these rights to be life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Equality is not about blanket uniformity but rather to establish the legal, political or social conditions in which people will be able to enjoy equally worthwhile and satisfying lives. The principle of equality sometimes contains the assertion that people must have equal access to wealth and property in order for them to more fully realize the principle of equality.

According to Oxford English Dictionary, equality implies the condition of having equal dignity, rank or privilege with others, the condition of being equal in power, ability, achievement of excellence, fairness, impartiality, due proportion, and proportionateness. Therefore, this term is defined in the light of equal conditions guaranteed to each for making the best of him. In the words of Barker, it implies that “ whatever conditions are guaranteed to me in the form of rights, shall also, and in the same measure, be guaranteed to others and that whatever rights are given to others shall also be given to me”. So says Laski: undoubtedly, it implies fundamentally a leveling process. It means that no man shall be so placed in society that he can over-reach his neighbor to the extent which constitutes a denial of the latter’s citizenship”, J. J. Rousseau [(1762) 1969].

There are two forms of equality positive and negative. Positive form implies the adequate provision of opportunities for all. Here, the term ‘ adequate opportunities’ does not mean ‘ equal opportunities’. Since people differ in their needs and capacities and also in their efforts, they need different opportunities for their individual self-development, Friedrich Hayek and Keith <https://assignbuster.com/can-liberty-and-equality-be-reconciled-in-political-theory/>

Joseph (1979). Negative equality implies the absence of undue privileges. That is to say there should be no artificial grounds of discrimination, such as of religion, color, race, caste, wealth, sex, and many more. The underlying principle being that no talent should suffer from frustration for want of encouragement. It is still a challenge to provide a coherent defense of equality. This however requires separating out the various principles, and explaining what it is that is being equalized or equality is in danger of degenerating into a mere political slogan unless it is possible to answer the question 'equality of what?': is it income, or well being, the capacity to acquire certain goods, or something else?

Socialism is also one of the dominant ideologies of the modern world that favors equality than liberty. Socialists believe in a Common Ownership: this relates to the ownership of property in the community as opposed to individual ownership. The argument here is that by placing property in joint community ownership, the common good is promoted rather than the good of individuals. To them a positive view of freedom must be examined in a social context and therefore in the context of resources of a material kind. The right to read and write, for example, requires the provision of schooling if such a right is to be meaningful.

In the Socialist World Order all classes and private property are abolished. The means of production for instance, that is all land, machinery, factories and other productive resources must be under the democratic control of the people. Wage labor is unknown. All worked for the collective good and products are distributed according to the principle of " From all according to

their ability to all according to their need". They however, call this a good society.

Liberty and Equality are political concepts that strongly oppose each other, to be specific; between them there is what we call war of principles. For instance, Libertarians believes that Libertaria is the place where humankind should seek its future. This is because it is a society where people are truly free. They have the economic freedom to pursue their own ends in a market society. Indeed Libertaria is run exclusively on market lines. They do not believe in the good society as such, as market choices constantly fluctuate. Individuals must choose their own good life and the market is where they make their key decisions. On the other hand, Egalitarians believes that Egalitaria is the ideal place to which humankind should commit itself. It is the benchmark by which other societies can measure whether they are serving the aims which any good society should fulfill.

Individuals believe that market decisions produce what people want. In Libertaria all make market choices and all receive from the market that which is their due. They are free from both the stifling collectivity of Communitarian and from the fear of having to make sacrifices, a fear which haunts Utilitarian. While Egalitaria would be the good society because it would be one in which all citizens are treated as being of equal worth. It would have basic political liberties, equality of opportunity and the rule of law, all of which are constitutionally guaranteed. It would also be dedicated to ensuring that these basic rights are of equal worth to their possessors (Lukes, 1993: 34).

Libertaria has freedom of speech, of movement, of thought and of association. The rule of law prevails and there is no torture. They have a minimal state which oversees the system of free exchange, the courts, contractual disputes, the armed forces and the police. They realize that the state can build up its own interests which can conflict with those of private individuals. They therefore, keep its role to an absolute minimum. Freedom is their watchword and freedom to choose is prized above all else. On the other hand, the citizens of Egalitaria would be filled with a basic abhorrence of injustice and would strive to overcome any involuntary disadvantage whether such disadvantages are the result of religion, class, gender, ethnicity or whatever. Egalitaria would not tolerate the gross inequalities which characterize some of the communities within Communitarian. Rights in Egalitaria would be universal, not subject to the dictates of history, culture and tradition.

Considering the above argument it seems like each ideology is giving no space to the enjoyment of the other ideology, or in simple terms we can say that it is hard for liberty and equality to go together, however, in practice these terms are mutually reinforcing each other. It is also very hard to find a society that is purely libertarian or that is purely Egalitarian, this means that in libertarian the possibility of finding some element of equality is there, same applies to the egalitarian, there are some sort of liberties though to the slightest degree. Therefore, there are some instances where liberty and equality move together with a common goal for instance the promotion of welfare of the people.

It is also of great important that liberty and equality should work hand in hand, just because they act as watch dog to each other, for instance, the relationship that is between them is that like of three arms of government executive, parliamentary and judiciary. The problem with establishing the realm of liberty is that there are a bewildering number of grounds upon which freedom can be upheld. In much liberal political thought freedom is closely related to the notion of rights. However, as many political theorists employ a value-free or social-scientific understanding of such terms, they are quite prepared to accept that certain freedoms such as the freedom to murder should be constrained. In that sense, liberty or license distinction merely begs the question: which freedoms are we willing to approve, and which ones are we justified in curtailing?

Alternative means of distinguishing between liberty and license was proposed by J. S. Mill. As libertarian who believed that individual freedom was the basis of moral self-development, Mill proposed that individuals should enjoy the greatest possible realm of liberty. However, Mill also recognized that unrestrained liberty could become oppressive, objectionable, morally corrupt and even tyrannical. In on Liberty (1859) 1972) Mill proposed a clear distinction between self-regarding actions and other-regarding actions, suggesting that each individual should exercise sovereign control over his or her own body or life. The only justification for constraining the individual, Mill argued, was in the event of 'harm' being done to others. Mill emphasizes that liberty becomes license not only when the rights of another are violated, or when harm is done to others, but when liberty is unequally

shared out. In this sense equality is seen as standing block to the existence of license.

Equality is a multi-dimensional concept. Diverse opinions are put forth in locating the exact relationship between these two concepts. Writers like De Tocqueville and Lord Acton hold the view that liberty and equality are opposed to each other as they are antagonistic. The desire to have equality destroys the possibility of having full liberty. Achievement of equality demands positive state action. Equality needs a ' positive state' and liberty needs a ' Negative State'. The Elite theory of Democracy is against the principle of equality. But on the other hand writers like Maitland, Rousseau, Barker, Laski and others, hold the view that they are complementary to each other, in the sense that they both play an important part in human life, fulfilling separate but complementary.

Since the principles of liberty and equality are ideals capable of being mutually realizable, one answer to the continuing debate regarding each principle's precedence would be the check of each principle on the excesses of the other. A just society might hold itself to the standard that, while difficult to reconcile, it is still most desirable to strive to strike a balance between upholding the belief in the inherent equality of all individuals, and the protecting the right to liberty for all its members. L. T. Hothouse opined that liberty without equality is a high-sounding phrase with squalid results. Liberty lies in equality. Liberty without equality degenerates into license and equality without liberty lapses into uniformity. To Prof. Barker " Equality in all its forms, must always be subject and instrumental to the free development of capacity; but if it be pressed to the length of uniformity; if uniformity be <https://assignbuster.com/can-liberty-and-equality-be-reconciled-in-political-theory/>

made to thwart the free development of capacity, the subject becomes the master, and the world is turned topsy-turvy.”

Liberty unites men but equality criticizes the social hierarchy and contributes towards the stability of the community ((1931) 1969) R. H. Tawney.

Therefore liberty would be hollow without some measure of equality and equality would be meaningless without liberty. In this age of democracy where voting is a powerful weapon in the hands of the electorate economic equality is most essential condition because the economically powerful person will use his economic resources to gain political power. Political equality will be a mockery in the absence of economic equality.

As per above argument it is hard to say that liberty and equality can be reconciled or not, in the sense that these terms are supported by different ideologies but which are reinforcing each other. So to say that they can be reconciled is forgetting that the terms are founded on different ideologies and on the same point to say that they cannot be reconciled is also forgetting that these terms are mutually reinforcing each other, hence making this question very contested one.

Who determine that excessive use of liberties leads into license? What yard stick do they use to determine harm to others? And what is harm? It is good to know that what is harm to me cannot be harm to others and vice-versa. For instance, a society that is comprised of well-off and worse-off, come together and agree that they should be following the principle of “ to each according to ability” can another man from a distance society come and say that the well-off in this particular society are harming the worse-off? This

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cannot be possible since what he calls it harm cannot be harm to others. In this case the worse-off choose to do what they can manage to, according to the level of their economic status, therefore, it is not harm to them, because they have decided to follow it based on their will and rationality.

And again, who determine that excessive use of equality leads to uniformity?

What is uniformity? What yard stick do they use to measure uniformity? In every time we talk of equality we must also note that there are some forms of inequality. What is equality to a particular society cannot be equality to the other, since society perceives things in different way all together. The issue of inequality will not come to an end since they were there before, they are here today and possibly they will be there tomorrow. What a just society would do is to come up with measures or initiative to overcome them. For instance legitimate inequality, affirmative action and positive discrimination where the society comprised of well-off and worse-off come to a consensus that they should accept the status of inequality and that they will be following a principle of "to each according to needy", but the end result should be greater to the worse-off so that they should little by little cover the gap that is there between them. On the other hand this makes sure that talents, skills and ability are not hindered. Therefore, one cannot come and say, this is uniformity since what is uniformity to him cannot be uniformity to others.

It is good to reflect on these questions and acknowledge that what is liberty or equality to the state cannot be liberty or equality to individuals or the collectives group and vice-versa. What was liberty or equality yesterday cannot be liberty or equality today. These things keeps on changing based <https://assignbuster.com/can-liberty-and-equality-be-reconciled-in-political-theory/>

on circumstances that people as a nation are going through. Therefore, liberty and equality are continuously changing depending on time and who uses them.

Finally, based on argument above its very tricky and challenging to say that liberty and equality can be reconciled or not. However, beauty lies in the hands of the beholder; even though, there are no general examples that can be sighted to show that liberty and equality can be reconciled, but there is a room for reconciliation since they are complementary. Therefore, liberty and equality have a common end, the promotion of the value of the personality and the free development of its capacities. No one of these can be enjoyed in isolation.

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