

FIVE VIEWS OF INDIVIDUAL LIBERTY

Robert Milton Underwood, Jr.

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Expression of individual liberty to the absolute fullest is not always practicable if it includes the unrestrained ability to cause harm to others. There must therefore be a balance between individual freedom and rules for all societies, but the perfect mix of those two factors is arguable. What that balance must be has historically been one of the primary questions of human society, especially since each country and each era tends to see it differently. Five views examined are Burkean conservatism, democratic ideology, liberalism, socialism and anarchism.

Burkean Conservatism. Edmund Burke believed that men had a right to personal freedom to do what they pleased, as long as that freedom did not infringe on the right of all others to do the same. Conservatives recognize that people are different, and it is okay for some to have more than others due to their successes. Burke believed that liberty *was* power when men acted together as an organic unit. He wrote that a government is “a contrivance of human wisdom” (51). We should therefore conserve the wisdom of tradition, especially if that system was based on religious ideals (84). Burke did not mind a monarchical system, especially since it provided a proven and consistent social structure from strong leaders, not from average citizens.

Burke thought instigating a revolution to force change makes people become hardened and express a “ferocious dissolution in manners” (32). Liberty should be secured carefully and with patience. He recommended that change not come about too forcefully, nor too easily. Rather, a probationary period is wise to see if the changes demanded are indeed composed of “rare merit” (Burke 43). The importance of a probationary period is that the *many* should not necessarily be the voice of *all*, since many problems can arise if the majority is wrong.

Democratic Ideology. Thomas Paine wrote that what had happened with both the

American and French Revolutions was a “renovation of the natural order of things, a system of principles as universal as truth” (114). He thought that the rights of men were so universal and natural that they must come first, above all else.

Paine thought that governments arise either *out* of the people, or *over* the people. He didn't care for England's monarchical system because it held power *over* the people. Paine's view of democracy held that all men are born free and equal, and they have the right to liberty, property, security, and resistance of oppression (80). His view was that civil rights came from natural rights, forming a collective of rules and laws that value the individual.

Like Burke, Paine believed that an individual's personal liberty meant having the power to do whatever does not injure another. But they differed on what should be done if rights are breached. In contrast to Burke's recommendation of restraint, Paine thought that if men's rights are violated, then they must move “with full vigor, or not at all” (17). The fact that people get hurt or killed must simply be acknowledged as the price to be paid to protect individual rights.

In a democracy, the limits of political liberty are determinable only by law, but any government in place should not be able to get too big, nor have arbitrary power. The form of government that is best suited for protecting the rights of the individual is one that is formed democratically by election and representation.

Paine did not think that religion should be an integral part of the structure of government. While he appreciated religion for its ethical values, he realized that persecution was too often a feature of systems that were based on religion rather than those based on individual liberty. Freedom is valuing *people* above principles or ideals (Paine 19).

Liberalism. John Stuart Mill wrote that the appropriate region of liberty begins with the freedom of thought. From freedom of thought comes freedom of opinion and the freedom to

create a life of one's own choosing. When individuals have these freedoms then combinations of individuals will get together to form integrous groups. He also believed that whenever possible it should be left up to individuals to direct the course of events.

Mill wrote that while opinions are more free than actions, they are still not totally free since some opinions might instigate criminal acts in others. The best type of freedom is that in which an individual can become the best person possible by using their mental faculties of observation, reason, and judgment to accomplish worthwhile goals. Individuals might not realize greatness, and they may even be faulty. But Mill made a distinction between individual faults and individual immoralities (81). Society has the right to keep the latter in check with laws. Social means (e.g., avoidance; ostracism) can effectively manage the former.

Mill insisted that individual freedom is a *must*, and no one should be allowed give it up, even willingly (e.g., to be a slave). Therefore, the government should be allowed to watch closely those situations where one has a degree of control over another, including contractual arrangements. Besides punishing transgressions, Mill thought that the government should also have the right to prevent actions where criminality is the likely outcome.

To maintain freedoms for the liberal, it is necessary to have a system in which dissenting opinion is not only allowed, but valued. People learn from the exchange of ideas. Mill believed that popular opinions rarely reveal the entire truth of a matter, and to get to the whole truth means that dissenting voices must be heard.

Socialism. "Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life" (Marx and Engels 247). They meant to convey that society should not be structured based on idealism, but rather on realism. Socialism developed as a result of problems associated with industrial capitalism. The welfare of the individual became secondary to competition and corporate

interests. Too few had little hope of ever experiencing what it meant to live a free life full of liberty and options because the concentration of wealth was so unevenly distributed.

Engels wrote that “nature is the proof of dialectics” in that its processes were self evident and followed logical courses of change (85). He described how socialism is the necessary outcome of the natural struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The conflict between these two groups is not just the conflict of differing philosophies. Since the mode of production of the bourgeoisie is capitalism, it is a conflict manifested objectively outside of us. Much of what the bourgeoisie owned was earned from the efforts of the worker. Socialism is, in Engels’s view, merely a reflex in the mind of those who suffer from capitalism—the working class.

Engels’s way of organizing the socialism ideal included direct social appropriation to extend and maintain production, and “direct individual appropriation as means of subsistence and enjoyment” (105). By doing this, “the proletariat seizes political power and turns the means of production into state property” (106). This action of collective ownership as a means to eliminate unequal economic power effectively removes any resentment held by the proletariat.

Oscar Wilde’s viewpoint of socialism was that an individual could not be fully free if continuously obligated to others. It is for that reason that he believed that for the individual, socialism’s cooperation was better than competition. He believed that cooperation will “give a (human life) its proper basis and proper environment” (Wilde 3). The environment of cooperation is best for allowing individualism to develop, and it is the type of individualism that grows naturally when no one is concerned with competition and property ownership.

Anarchism. The philosophy of anarchism can be summed up in the single word of “liberty.” That word is comprehensive, and includes the idea that there should be no barriers at all placed on “human progression (or) thought” (Parsons 171). Anarchism places emphasis on

personal autonomy and mankind's nature as a rational being, and believes that "whether as a group or as individuals, people should directly run society" (Bookchin).

Decentralization and self management is at the heart of anarchist philosophy. Anarchists believe that no authoritative body should constrain how an individual thinks or how an individual acts. If punishments are necessary, then they should be carried out by societal members, not by any central enforcement authority.

George Woodcock quoted nineteenth-century libertarian Joseph Proudhon when he wrote, "... the sovereignty of the will yields to the sovereignty of reason ... As man seeks justice in equality, so society seeks order in anarchy" (119). Two important points were made. First, that if left alone by authority, an individual's own reasoning will rationally determine what is right. Secondly, being equal with others (in opportunity) is the essence of fairness. They realize that some may have more wealth than others, but such is to be expected as each person evolves and transacts differently. There is a natural law of balance operating within society and the equation of that balance does not include authority. Anarchists believe that since humans are naturally social, individuals will use their mental faculties both individually and with cooperative groups to solve the problems of society. Anarchists don't reject the idea of organization, but they do reject a central authority which they see as one of "artificial continuity" (Woodcock 122).

Conclusion. Despite various views discussed on personal liberty, all views value it. Each viewpoint reflects how society as a collective whole views and values itself. The viewpoints vary in degree of the extent of personal liberty that should be allowed on a continuum ranging from restrained liberty to absolute individual freedom. Once the view of individual freedom is understood and accepted, a society may more fully appreciate its individual members.

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