

Welcome to our series on the values of liberalism.

In the last article, we presented our framework of the eight values of liberalism that unite liberals across all countries and cultures.

Today, we start with the core value of liberalism and its most important value: liberty. Many people have immediate associations with the word liberty. With what it means to live a free life. However, when you ask them about it, people seem to have a hard time explaining what exactly they mean when they talk about this feeling of liberty. On the one hand, this is great news for liberals: Everybody has an intuitive understanding of what it means to be free. On the other hand, however, if they cannot put this feeling in words, it also means that liberals have to do a better job at explaining liberty. Before we can dive into the meaning of liberty, we have to understand its position: At the top of our values list.

Liberty gives liberalism its name. It is its most essential value. That does not mean that liberals do not care about other values. They do as we will see in our other articles. but it means that in cases of clashes between values, liberals give priority to liberty. If we would have to make a choice between granting Cristiano Ronaldo the freedom to train every day to become the best footballer or restricting him so that we have more equally skilled football players, liberals opt for liberty. That does not mean that liberals do not care about equality. Often we can realize many political values at the same time. We can promote liberty and equality at the same time. However, when values conflict, we have to make choices. And liberals always choose liberty. Yet, there is nothing wrong with choosing otherwise. Your core value might be equality, nature, community, or faith. That's cool!

Liberals embrace diversity and pluralism of political choice and opinion. So, if you give priority to equality or to faith in such conflict cases, that's fine. You do not have to stop listening to this series, because what is unique about liberals is that they know about the importance of values and cherish them.

That means that only in a free society, people are allowed to choose their own values and think for themselves. In other words, you are free until there is unauthorized outside interference. This negative conception of liberty puts a strong emphasis on freedom of choice, non-interference, and the autonomy of the individual. It sees the absence of external constraints as a prerequisite for individual flourishing. However, some have thought that the absence of coercion is not enough. There is more to liberty. Something that a negative definition is not able to catch. Just think of a case where somebody is raised in severe poverty and without access to education. Is this person free in a meaningful sense? Well, nobody interferes with them, right? But nevertheless, we wouldn't label this person as "free". And that's how a positive conception of liberty evolved. An attempt to define liberty, not by the absence of something. But by the presence of certain things.

The British philosopher Isaiah Berlin thought that positive liberty uses the idea of self-mastery to define what it means to be free. In order to be truly free, we need to become masters of our very own destiny, autonomous agents that can choose their own paths, and authors of our very own stories, of our very own book of life. And you cannot become the author of your very own book of life if you cannot read or write or if you are too poor to be able to live through stories. But to become truly empowered self-authors, we might require mentoring, help, and assistance.

Positive liberty recognizes that education, the right social conditions, and sometimes financial support can be key to becoming masters of our own destiny. This concept, therefore, goes beyond negative liberty. And that leads to the fact that these two conceptions of liberty are sometimes portrayed as rival concepts, where we ought to pick sides. But that's not true. Both definitions of liberty recognize the key importance of liberty and free choice for human flourishing. Both give individuals ownership of their lives and choices. Both recognize independence from external constraints and outside interference. And both want to achieve the empowerment of individual human beings. Both have self-authorship and human flourishing at their heart.

No doubt, there can be tensions between the two conceptions of liberty. But that should not fool us into thinking that they have different goals. Their motivation is the same: Enabling individuals to take charge of their very own destinies. And this brings us to the second value in our list, the topic of individualism.

In the next article, we will explore why liberals see society the way they see it: namely through the lens of the individual.