

Welcome back to our series on the values of liberalism.

In the past articles, we have explored the central value of liberalism: liberty. We have seen that liberals of all different shades and backgrounds unite behind the common goal of achieving self-mastery over one's very own life. In this article, we will now uncover another central value of liberalism: individualism. And this is a tricky one as liberals are often accused of something that we will call "false individualism" Let us start with the most basic way in which we can see society.

We could picture society as one big organism. This organism moves collectively and jointly achieves its goals. It is like a giant machine, where you can barely see the individual parts that move and navigate this machine. It is like these small individual parts do not really matter. In fact, if one of these parts let us start with the most basic way in which we can see society. We could picture society as one big organism. This organism moves collectively and jointly achieves its goals. It is like a giant machine, where you can barely see the individual parts that move and navigate this machine. It is like these small individual parts do not really matter. In fact, if one of these parts breaks, it is not a big problem as long as the overall machine keeps going.

This is the collectivist view of society. But this is not how liberals see the world. Liberals have a different approach. They do not start by looking at society as this one big organism, this big machine where individual parts do not matter. They start by looking deeper. They see and recognize those tiny parts that make up the engine of this machine. For liberals, these are not just tiny replaceable mechanical parts like those in a real engine. In a society, these parts are human

beings, They are individuals with their own destinies, dreams, and aspiration. And for liberals, these individuals matter! This means that in a liberal view of society, individuals are not just part of the whole they are the main focus.

John Rawls famously claimed that only liberals recognize what he called “the separateness of persons.” The fact that we all live our own distinct lives! He warned that any view of society that does not recognize this separateness and distinctness of individual human beings can lead to great dangers. Because the collectivist view does not only mean that you see society as one big whole. But also that you treat it as one big whole. Where you can sacrifice one part for the common good, for the overall good. And this could have disastrous consequences. And that’s why for liberals, the individual is the foundation. The individual is the starting point. It is the individual that enters society by entering into a social contract. It is that society is made up of individuals. Only lives through individuals. And only exists because of individuals. And not the other way round.

And so, liberals do not only take the individual as their starting point when thinking about society. They take the individual as the foundation of their theory. By recognizing their individual uniqueness, their value, and their humanity. And that’s why they go even one step further. Liberals think that those individuals are autonomous agents. They have their own life plans. Their own aspirations and dreams. They are authors of their very own book of life. And that they are fully capable of governing those plans and dreams themselves.

In more philosophical terms, liberals believe that human beings do have dignity. They are agents of themselves. And they deserve our respect. They should never be used as a mere means to somebody else’s ends. They are ends in themselves. But what does it mean to

recognize somebody as an end? What does it mean to give respect? Well, respect can take many forms. The first one is recognition. By recognizing that society is not one big organism; but an organism made up of individuals, individuals that matter, we already covered that step.

However, this might sound like cheap talk to you. And this is why liberals back this up. They do think individuals matter. And because of that, they give them rights. Rights will protect them against situations where the interests of the individual do not align with the will of the majority. A right to say “No, you can't do that to me.” And it is, therefore, the safeguard of minorities to protect them against the tyranny of the masses. And keep in mind, the tiniest minority is the individual. You might wonder who would be against such a nation of individualism. After all, all political ideologies have respect for human beings. However, only liberals have this metaphysical commitment to the individual. Because of how we see society. And this makes us the only true champions of rights! It was always liberals who were fighting for universal human rights.

And it was liberals who pushed for the most important document of our time, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Liberals agree that human beings are social animals. They need others to achieve their goals, they need family and friends, and they need a community to flourish. But for all of this, they need rights. Because rights are not only the recognition that one matters. It is rights that allow us to be social animals. Because without rights, there is no protection against others or against being sacrificed for the “common good” or the will of the majority. Being scared of others is not what makes us social. It would make us anti-social!

So, when somebody says that liberals do not care about society and only about themselves, you know by now that they have a wrong conception of individualism in mind.

Individualism is about how we see society. Liberals see society as made up of human beings. And those human beings matter. That's why we give them rights. To protect them.

We hope to see you in the next article where we will cover liberals' innate skepticism about power.