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# Liberalism, the Only True Humanism

*Pascal Salin*

## Abstract

Liberalism is often criticized because it is said that it is concerned only by economic problems (and not more general human problems) and because it is in favor of selfishness. This is wrong and, in fact, liberalism is, on the contrary, the necessary consequence of a universal and valid conception of ethics. The foundation of liberalism consists in the fact that everyone must be respectful of the legitimate rights of any person (as regards, for instance, his body, his mind, and his legitimate property rights). Therefore, it implies that one ought to be respectful of another person either if this person is generous or if he is selfish (one is not obliged to be selfish, but one has the right to be selfish). Thus, liberalism is founded on the fundamental universal ethics and it is respectful of the individual conceptions of personal ethics. It is not in favor of selfishness, but in favor of individualism. This is why it must be said that liberalism is the only humanistic approach of social problems. However, many people consider that it is ethically justified to impose a redistribution policy to decrease so-called “social inequalities.” But, so doing, a state is not respectful of the legitimate property rights of those who are obliged by legal constraint to pay taxes. A voluntary distribution of resources from individuals who give part of their legitimate resources to other individuals is ethically justified. But it is not the case whenever this transfer of resources is made by using coercion. And it must be added that it has negative consequences. Those who benefit from the redistribution policy are less induced to make productive efforts. And those who have to pay the taxes are also less induced to develop their productive activities. Therefore, the production of resources is diminished by the redistribution policy and all the members of a society (for instance a country) suffer from this non-ethical policy.

**Keywords:** liberalism, ethics, individual rights, redistribution policy

## 1. Introduction

The discredit from which liberalism suffers in our time, in many countries, is an astonishing and appalling phenomenon. In reality, this discredit is based on caricatures of liberalism, complacently spread by those who have an interest in fighting it or who are unaware – sometimes voluntarily – of what is the true liberalism. Thus, it is claimed that liberalism is supporting rich people against poor people, that it gives human beings the sole objective of seeking material benefits, that it advocates selfishness, etc. Nothing could be further from the truth, and that is why all those who love the truth should be concerned about learning more about liberalism [1]. Unfortunately, all people have very rarely the opportunity to make this intellectual re-examination, and I am struck, for example, by the fact that all young people who

discover by chance a correct explanation of what liberalism is are amazed by its intellectual coherence and the solidity of its ethical foundation.

## **2. Liberalism, ethics, individual rights and redistribution policy**

Liberalism consists into developing ideas based on individual behavior and individual aims to analyze or to promote the working of a society. And this is why liberalism must be considered as a true humanism, since humanism means a way of thinking or acting coherently with what human beings are. And humanism can be considered as the foundation of ethics since ethical actions and thoughts imply to be respectful of the very nature of human beings.

Indeed, liberalism is both a method of analysis and an ethic. It is a method of analysis because it consists in thinking – and this should be obvious – that we can only understand the functioning of a society by having a realistic vision of what a human being is, of his deep nature, of his behavior. A society is not a kind of great machine, but a collection of men and women who have – each of them – their own individuality, but who interact one with the other and are therefore, from this point of view, necessarily in solidarity with each other. Just to give an illustration of the problem, economists quite often develop analyses of what is called “macro-economics.” But they possibly define discretionary concepts – such as “national income” – which may not have any link with individual behaviors. Thus they may deduct economic proposals which are not respectful of individual behaviors and aims so that they may not be efficient and, above all, they may not be coherent with ethics. To avoid such errors, many intellectuals are in favor of what is called praxeology, that is, the science of human action. Such is the case, in particular, of Ludwig von Mises in his book, *Human action*, [2] and more generally of the so-called Austrian economic theory (initially developed by Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek [3, 4]). They rightly consider that it is necessary to begin any social analysis by using realistic assumptions about the behavior of individuals.

As regards liberal ethics [5] it implies that there is a universal duty to be respectful of everyone’s legitimate rights. Of course, each of us also has his or her own personal moral principles regarding how to behave with others. These personal morals are highly respectable, provided, however, that they are not incompatible with the universal ethic of respect for the legitimate rights of others.

It may be said that liberal values are Christian values or at least are fully compatible with them. It is Christianity which has enabled the emergence of individual freedom in the Western world and which has, moreover, enabled economic take-off and enabled countless masses to escape from poverty. With Christianity, as with liberalism, a human being is not just a cog in the great social machine, but a person who deserves respect as such.

Liberalism and Christianity share a common basis in terms of universal values. But, of course, within this general framework each can develop its own moral concepts. Thus, Christianity considers altruism as a virtue. But this is not incompatible with liberalism. Indeed, a liberal must be intransigent with the universal duty to respect the rights of others, but he does not claim to suggest a particular conduct to human beings, for example, to suggest – or, even less, to impose – altruistic or selfish behavior toward this or that person or category of persons. He considers that this is a matter of personal responsibility and that it is his duty to respect such personal ethics as long as it does not contradict the universal duty to be respectful of the rights of others. That is why it is absurd to say that liberalism supports selfishness. Based on an absolute respect for individuals, liberalism refrains from making judgments about the conduct and opinions of individuals unless they infringe the legitimate rights of

others. Thus, it will consider a person's generous behavior to be perfectly respectable. But it will challenge the State's claim to redistribute resources through the use of coercion, which in itself constitutes an infringement of the freedom and rights of individuals. Solidarity is worthy of respect when it is voluntary; it is not worthy of respect when it is compulsory. In the latter case, moreover, it is all the less not a moral value since in reality, it is most often used as a means for politicians to serve their own personal interests: They obtain votes in elections by distributing the resources they have taken by force from certain taxpayers. And this is all the more questionable since many people bear the burden of taxes without knowing it.

By giving to itself a virtual monopoly in the exercise of solidarity, the State destroys natural solidarity. It destroys the incentives to work, save, innovate, and undertake in order to create resources (since it takes a large part of the fruits of all efforts), which undermines the prosperity of all and harms the poorest in particular. At the same time, however, it destroys the propensity of individuals to act generously, as they are led to see this role as being played by the State.

This shows how wrong it is to claim that liberalism is attached to material values, that it defends the rich against the poor, the powerful against the oppressed. It is, on the contrary, state interventionism which, by depriving individuals of the full exercise of their freedom, provokes a war of all against all. As the famous French economist [6] put it so well at the beginning of the nineteenth century, "The State is the great fiction through which everyone tries to live at the expense of everyone else." It should therefore come as no surprise if, in a country like France, one has the feeling that most citizens are embittered, demanding, and frustrated: their fate now depends only marginally on their own efforts and sense of responsibility, it depends on what the State will take from them and give to them in this war of all against all.

What a contrast with what would be a perfectly liberal society based on the freedom of each individual and therefore on individual responsibility! Such a society, totally respectful of the rights of each person, would be peaceful and prosperous. It would allow everyone to live according to his own moral principles, his own goals, and his own decisions. Could we not then trust human beings to build, through their interactions, the peaceful society that each of us deeply desires within our society? And should we not be surprised that citizens hand over so many decisions concerning their lives to men and women who are not chosen for their sense of ethics or, for that matter, for their skills, but more often than not for the promises they make and who are financed by the catching of resources which they did not create and which therefore do not belong to them? It should not be surprising, moreover, that in this immoral world built by statesmen, we find all sorts of corruption scandals and illicit enrichment throughout the world. These are obviously the same people who go to war against liberalism because it threatens their privileges and their spoliations. They do not hesitate to disguise reality and present liberalism as something it is not. In this terribly politicized world in which we find ourselves unfortunately, the confusion of ideas reaches an incredible level. One comes to reproach so-called liberal policies (which are not liberal) for the failures due to state interventionism. As Marine Le Pen – the head of a nationalist extreme-right political party in France – has said, one even comes to claim that liberalism is totalitarianism, even though it is and always has been the only real enemy of totalitarianism!

Should not the trust we place in human beings and in their extraordinary capacities lead us to hope that all these confusions, lies, and the resulting disasters will be dispelled and that, as free beings, they will be able to live in a harmonious and peaceful society?

However many people believe that there are so-called inequalities between the members of a society (for instance the members of a country) and that it is the important role of a State to decide a redistribution policy. It is understandable that

some people find it difficult to accept large differences in incomes and living conditions, and the fight against inequality therefore seems sympathetic. But beyond feelings, what is called “inequalities” must be rigorously analyzed. In a country, there is not one big central distributor who would have created all the wealth and who could distribute it in an egalitarian way. There is a multitude of individuals who create their wealth thanks to their efforts of work, savings, entrepreneurial risk-taking, etc. What characterizes a human society is not inequality, but diversity. All human beings are different and the wealth they create is unequal because they differ in age, talents, abilities to make efforts, life choices, etc. However, all members of a society are “united,” for example, because we cannot have prosperous employees if we discourage their employers by overloading them with exorbitant taxes.

At some point in time the situations of all individuals are obviously diverse (“unequal”). But these relative situations change and it is important to give everyone a chance. It is interesting to note, for example, that according to many studies in the United States a significant proportion of those who have high incomes at one point in time have much lower incomes a few years later. On the contrary, there is a significant progress for those with low incomes.

The feeling of solidarity exists in the hearts of human beings and there have always been private initiatives to take care of the weakest people. This voluntary solidarity has a moral basis: those who practice it sacrifice resources they have created to help others. This has nothing to do with the so-called compulsory “solidarity” practiced by representatives of the State and public organizations, which is done with the money of individuals (even if some have a sincere desire to help others). And one can always suspect that they are pursuing personal goals: getting votes in elections. This is why, for example, in most countries, an income tax has progressive rates: politicians do not lose much electoral support by taxing a small number of high-income people heavily in the name of fighting inequality. But in fact they are hurting everyone. Indeed, in a free society, those with high incomes are the ones who create the most wealth through their talent, their productive efforts, and their ability to take risks. They create jobs, and they introduce technical progress which increases everyone’s purchasing power. But if they are too much taxed, they are discouraged from making efforts or they go into exile, depriving their country of opportunities for growth, which is detrimental to everyone. And it would be better if, by reducing this policy of fighting inequality, one could finally see a strong growth, a rapid increase in wages and full employment. The important thing is that everyone should be able to become richer, especially the poorest people, whatever is the evolution of “inequalities.”

Many people – and specially politicians – claim to be in favor of “social justice.” But it is important to analyze what is meant by “social justice” and the remarks made above can help to develop such an analysis. There are two very different definitions of “social justice.” The first one is concerned by what could be called “universal ethics,” namely being respectful of individual rights. On the other hand, the specific and personal ethics of each individual is inspiring the second definition of “social justice”: it consists in comparing the actual situation of individuals and to decide subjectively that some specific differences are fair or not. This second definition is the most widely accepted one and usually, when speaking of “social justice” people care mainly about the monetary incomes of individuals. According to a personal judgment – more or less shared by a great number of people – one considers that the differences between individual incomes must be more or less diminished. Now, some more characteristics of both definitions must be clarified in order to have a rigorous analysis of this problem.

Let us first consider the first definition of social justice. We just mentioned that it means that individual rights are respected by everyone. But it is not sufficient to

care about respecting rights, since individual rights have to be ethically founded for a situation respectful of rights to be ethically justified. In fact, let us assume that there is a society in which most properties have been got by stealing them; it is obvious that, in such a case, there is no justification for respecting property rights! This means that it is important to determine in which cases property rights are legitimate.

The basic principle of ethics consists in claiming that individuals are free, which means that they are not subject to the constraint of other people, that is, they are the owners of themselves. But one is not his own owner if ever he is not the owner of the goods and services he is creating by using his mind and his physical activities. Therefore, it must be considered that legitimate property rights are those which are obtained by acts of creation (and obviously, by exchanging goods and services which have been created by partners in exchange).

Thus, the first definition of social justice can potentially be accepted by everyone all over the world (at least if people agree about the legitimacy of property rights). But, as regards the second definition of social justice – namely a comparison of the standard of life of individuals in a society – each individual has a different definition of what he considers as socially fair. There is therefore a very important problem, namely the coherence between these different opinions. As, very likely, all individuals have different opinions about “solidarity” there cannot be an “universal” criterion of what should be considered as “social justice,” that is, the fair distribution of resources. It is then assumed that social justice in the distribution of incomes can be defined by a majority of votes in a democratic system. Nowadays, when speaking of social justice one implicitly means redistributive activities (social policy), which refers to the second meaning of social justice. It is implicitly assumed that social justice implies a reduction of inequalities. In the term “equality” or “inequality,” there is an implicit value judgment. This is why one considers the reduction of inequality as being a morally justified policy.

Libertarians are frequently critical of egalitarian policies so that it is often claimed that they promote selfishness, and that liberalism must be challenged for ethical reasons. But human beings are characterized by their diversity and this is why one should, on the one hand, talk about diversity rather than inequality and, on the other hand, be respectful of this diversity inherent to human nature. The term of inequality would be justified if the fate of all individuals – and in particular their standard of living – was determined by a central authority owning all resources and able to “distribute” them more or less “equally.” But it is not the case – fortunately – in a free society and that is why the expression “income redistribution” is totally misleading.

However, contrary to what is often claimed, liberalism is not supporting the freedom of anyone to do anything, but the freedom to act while respecting the legitimate rights of others. This freedom to act implies the freedom to implement one’s own personal ethics, but only if it is legitimate and if it is respectful of universal ethics. It is the case if someone who holds legitimate property rights on certain resources uses a portion of these resources to help another person; his acts are then in accordance with his personal morality without being damaging to universal morality. This behavior is totally moral and respectable. But someone who steals goods to a person to give his loot to another person – because his personal morality induces him to help the latter – violates the property rights of the first person and therefore universal morality.

Now, it is exactly the same with “inequalities policies”: Statesmen (politicians and bureaucrats) levy, thanks to coercion, resources from some people (known as citizens) to give them to others. In doing so, they undermine universal morality and therefore we must accept the idea that a policy aiming at the reduction of “inequalities” is

immoral in principle. Although statesmen are using their monopoly of legal constraint so that this coercion is legal, it is however immoral since it is an attack on legitimate property rights (and this is why one must consider as a moral duty to cut taxes as much as possible). It may be that, in doing thus, some statesmen try to implement their own personal morality, but anyhow they infringe universal morality. On the other hand, it is well known that, so doing, they often pursue personal goals. Thus, to be elected or re-elected, they transfer resources to a large number of voters at the expense of a minority. As we already said, it is for this reason that the progressive tax – immoral and unequal by nature – does exist. And the fact that politicians are elected by a majority of voters do not give them legitimacy since one can always find a majority to violate the legitimate rights of a minority as far as the exercise of legal constraint is possible.

Furthermore, equality is defined arbitrarily from a single criterion, namely income at some point of time. However the objectives of individuals are varied (they do not concern only monetary income), their age is different and therefore their experience and their capital (which are the sources of their incomes). Let us imagine that all individuals be identical, there would, however, be an inequality in incomes according to the age of each person.

Of course, some are victims of physical or mental disabilities and human history shows that charity has always existed in such cases. This charity, decided personally by each individual, is extremely respectable, unlike so-called public charity (which, moreover, is vitiated by prospects concerning elections and which therefore leads to new inequalities between those who thus come to power – claiming to take in charge poverty – and those who must undergo public choices).

Frédéric Bastiat has been a member of the French Parliament and he sat on the benches of the left. Left members of the Parliament applauded him when he advocated economic freedom to improve the life standard of the poorest people. Is that inconceivable in the present period? Improving the life standard of everyone, especially the most vulnerable, is possible and desirable. But we must take the means to do so. Liberalism is the best mean.

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## **Author details**

Pascal Salin

Mont Pèlerin Society, University Paris-Dauphine, France

\*Address all correspondence to: [pascal.salin@gmail.com](mailto:pascal.salin@gmail.com)

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