
UNIT 2: LIBERTY AS SELF DETERMINATION*

Structure

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this unit is to explain the meaning of liberty and self-determination. After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- Explain the meaning of liberty
- Understand various views on liberty
- Distinguish between liberty and self-determination

2.1 INTRODUCTION

From theoretical point of view, self-determination means that an individual possesses the right to freedom and must be able to determine all the choices of life while the state has no role or interference of any kind to shape those choices. But the choices made should not be harmful to others and people's liberties should not be violated. In other words, individual must be able to choose where and how to exercise the freedom in his own interests and the law of a democratic and liberal country should respect that autonomy of choice. From a moral point of view, self-determination means that an

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individual has full ownership over his life and body and no one including the state can interfere with the choices made by the individual. From a conceptual point of view, it means that the individual is responsible to plan life according to his/her own conscious decisions. Freedom to make a choice lends dignity to the individual. If a decision is imposed, it involves violation of individual rights, dignity and also autonomy. Even though the forced decision might yield better results, but the individual might not be able to recognize it as a part of his own life. Nominalism explains self-determination as individualistic. Nominalists believe that only individuals are the original reality and the state and its institutions are artificial constructs. The state is derived from individuals. Therefore, the individual is a sovereign over his choices.

2.2 VIEWS OF J .S MILL, T. H GREEN ON LIBERTY

According to J S Mill, the relationship between liberty and the individual is explained in following words. “The only part of the conduct of any one, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part, which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.” Mill emphasized the individual’s right to freedom. He differentiated between negative and positive liberty. Negative liberty, according to him, is an area where the state has no role of interference except in self-defense and the individual can exercise complete freedom in determining his own choices. Positive liberty is rational self-determination where the state interferes to grant the greatest amount of freedom to boost individual’s creative energies and for its self-development. In order to check the state’s interference and maximize the potential of individual, Mill also distinguishes between self-regarding actions and other-regarding actions. Self-regarding actions concern solely an individual, whereas, other-regarding action is inclusive of concerns of others. T H Green further developed the positive concept of liberty. He emphasized that an individual can determine his actions if the state plays a positive role in creating conditions under which he can exercise his moral freedom. For example; if an individual wants to help a wounded person on road, then he should be able to take the injured fearlessly to the hospital without the fear of police. Positive liberal scholars like L T Hobhouse and Harold Laski said that an individual can self-determine his actions, if the state secures the welfare of its people even if it has to limit the economic rights of the privileged few.

2.3 ISAIAH BERLIN’S TWO CONCEPTS OF LIBERTY

Published in 1958, in his work ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’, Berlin explains negative liberty as freedom from interference. It is freedom from what or whom. An individual is the best judge of his interests and he has the freedom to develop and carry out his work without any hurdle or coercion.

Positive liberty is an idea of self-mastery and rational control of life where an individual can self-determine his actions. The state has no role to play in it. It belongs to an individual's own will and the capacity to develop his own capabilities. For example; if an individual wants to improve his health, then smoking should be stopped. The state cannot do anything to force an individual to quit smoking. The individual himself should develop self-mastery or control his life so that his capacities are developed.

Berlin gives an example that if one cannot fly like an eagle or swim like a whale; one is by no means deprived of political liberty on this count. Similarly, if a man is too poor to afford something on which there is no legal ban- a loaf of bread, a journey round the world-he cannot complain that he has been deprived of political liberty.

In the moral sphere, Norman P. Barry in his 'An Introduction to Modern Political Theory' appreciated Berlin's view. He said that every individual possesses a higher self and a lower self. The former is an upholder of rational and genuine desires like being punctual, moral and clean. The latter consists of irrational desires like that for drugs, smoking, alcohol and violent behavior. So if a person is not free from his lower self, then he cannot enjoy liberty. So Berlin's view of self-mastery is basically controlling the lower self and being free. But in a material sphere, Berlin has possibly mis-understood positive liberty. Flying like an eagle or swimming like a whale has a natural limitation and the state has nothing to do with it. But if people go without food/bread then it's the duty of the state to fulfill basic necessities.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What is the concept of negative liberty propounded by Isaiah Berlin?

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2.4 NEO-LIBERAL VIEW

Neo-Liberalism also known as neo-classical liberalism was started in 1970s to revive economic liberalism. Its main proponents were Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan who wanted to increase economic growth and reduce the

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fiscal deficit of the government's budget. The aim was to cut down the role of government and enhance the role of the market. Minimum government became the underlying characteristic of neo-liberalism. Free market economists such as Friedrich Hayek and US economist Milton Friedman attacked the role of the government. Robert Nozick was committed to the 'night watchman' state.

F A Hayek in his work, *Constitution of Liberty* argued that a 'man possesses liberty or freedom when he is not subjected to coercion by the arbitrary will of another'. He described that individual freedom is not political freedom, inner freedom and freedom as power. In a politically free society, people can choose their governments, can participate in legislation and have a control over administration. But this may not lead to individual freedom. A democratic government may have restrictions and an autocratic government can be relatively free. He further said that individual freedom is not inner freedom. An individual might be guided by his actions or will rather than be coerced by others. But that does not mean that the society is free to allow rational discourse of actions. Finally, individual freedom should not be confused with freedom as power. Freedom of power signifies our power to act according to our wishes and desires. An individual may have the effective power to get things done that he might not be able to do legally, but that nowhere signifies that a society is free in its actions.

According to Hayek, an individual will be able to self-determine if there exists 'freedom from constraints of the state'. He argued to minimize the coercive actions of the state as it is not an instrument of distributive justice. Liberty and equality are an anti-thesis of each other. A state cannot coerce society that has different talents and skills to be equal, as it will create further inequality. Hayek was so passionate about freedom that he even denied equal freedom for all. He asserted that 'it is better that some should be free than none and better that many should have full freedom than that all should have a limited freedom'. Therefore, the state should positively promote competition and ensure minimum income to all but not coerce the society to be equal in all respects. Milton Friedman in his work, *Capitalism and Freedom* underlined that a capitalist and competitive society can sustain conditions of freedom where an individual can self-determine his actions and thoughts. The state should only supplement the market and do work that cannot be handled by the latter or is too costly to bear the cost by the market. He too negated the concept of equality as it impinges on the liberty of individual to self-determine.

In his 1974 work titled *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, Robert Nozick stated that an individual can enjoy the liberty of self-determination only if the state performs limited functions, that of the protection of property rights. It is not the duty of the state to engage in redistributive transfers, as the inequalities that exist at the time of production should not be corrected at the time of distribution. An individual who has acquired goods through three sources,

that is, first, application of their selves- bodies, brains etc, second, through acquiring natural world resources like land, water resources or minerals and third, by applying themselves to the natural world resulting in agricultural or industrial products. On all these sources, an individual has rightful entitlement unless he voluntarily transfers to others. Nozick explains that if an individual has invented a medicine of rare disease, he can demand a price for it. But if there is only one water body in a desert, then no one should be allowed to monopolize it. Here, the state should work as a dominant protective association to secure liberty of every individual.

2.5 MARXIST CONCEPTION OF FREEDOM

The Marxist concept of freedom is different from the liberal individualist view. Marxists do not view the individual as an atomistic and isolated unit. The natural need of co-existence brings an individual into relations with others and therefore, a civil and political society comes into being. The socio economic conditions prevailing in society define the freedom to self-determine. Karl Marx says that the capitalist mode of production is an exploitative system as it deprives an individual of his freedom. He bases his theory on historical materialism saying that the economy has been the foundation of every society. He historically traces the development of society where earlier in ancient society, people were free and equal and they had access to goods to satisfy their basic needs. But as the society moved further and they acquired means of production like machinery, tools, resources, industries; a division was created. The society that came after ancient society was a feudalistic society where there were landlords who possessed lands and the landless serfs. After the feudal society, came the industrial society where the division was between the industry and capital owning bourgeoisie and the poor, wage earning proletariat. Marx says that an individual cannot enjoy freedom and self-determine his actions in feudal and capitalist society, because he does not have access to resources and feels alienated. Marx says that an individual gets alienated from his society, from family, from his environment and also from the product he makes, as he does not earn enough to buy the very same product. A capitalist sells the product at a higher rate appropriating the surplus value and giving lower wages to the proletariat. Marx says that an individual can attain freedom only if he revolts against the capitalist system of production. He gave an international call to the workers and said that ‘workers of all lands unite together; you have nothing to lose only worlds to gain’. So the fourth phase of society in which the workers will rule in politics will be the socialist phase where the exploitation will end and everyone will get according to his work. To achieve further equal and free society, workers will give away their power to create a communist society where no one will rule others and distribution of resources will be according to need.

Marx says that an individual can realize himself truly only in a communist

society. Neo-Marxists such as Herbert Marcuse in his work, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* blamed the consumerist society for depriving individual of their real freedom. He says that the mass media creates a false desire for trivial material goods, thus, diverting them from the genuine need of freedom. He says that an individual should be made aware of alienation to realize freedom. C.B. Macpherson in his work *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* says that capitalism emphasizes more on extractive power rather than developmental power. The capitalist system focuses on what profit can be derived/extracted out of an individual, rather than how the individual develops so that he can realize his freedom and determine his course of actions. He adds that society can achieve its freedom when developmental power gets developed and extractive power becomes nil. Antonio Gramsci says that coercive structures of society like the police, the army and the judiciary have given way to hegemonic structures like civil society, schools and literature. Domination and exploitation in society happens through control of the mind where the working class identifies its interests with the ruling class. So, Gramsci says that the exploited class can attain freedom when they produce counter hegemony to the ideas of ruling class.

2.6 JOHN RAWLS' CONCEPTION OF FREEDOM

John Rawls's work, *A Theory of Justice* is a starting point for all the contemporary philosophers. His is a purely procedural theory of justice and follows a deontological approach (an approach where goal is not determined). A positive and a social liberal, he states that an individual can be free and self-determine the course of actions, if the foundation of society is based on the principles of justice. He says that to determine the principles of justice, all the individuals should be placed behind a veil of ignorance. He calls this the original position which is similar to the state of nature. This veil hides the real position of an individual in society in terms that he is not aware of his status, wealth, health, resources, education, family, support system, strength, weaknesses, qualities etc. In this situation, an individual will have some primitive idea of human psychology and economics and have a sense of justice. According to Rawls, rational negotiators will demand maximum benefits for the least advantaged. So as the veil of ignorance will be removed and individuals will move out of their original position, it may happen that a person might have exceptional qualities and he might desire to have maximum freedom to pursue his dreams and ambitions. So any rational individual will first desire maximum liberty as the first principle of justice. The second principle of justice will be equality of opportunity as everyone in society will desire to have equal access to resources and opportunities in society without any discrimination or exploitation.

The third principle of justice will be the Difference Principle. When the veil of ignorance gets removed, in case, any individual is at a disadvantaged

position in society like differently abled, poor access to education, health then the state should give protection to that individual. Differential treatment by the state is permitted for the individual to realize his freedom fully. Rawls, therefore says that freedom to self-determine can be achieved when a society follows these three universal principles of justice. Communitarians, such as Michael Sandel criticize Rawls' theory of justice on the basis that his theory is based on the capitalist system and he has considered man to be an atom. Whereas Sandel says an individual is deeply embedded in his society and he is not isolated from his community. So equality of opportunity should be the first principle of justice rather than granting maximum liberty to individuals. Michael Walzer argues against the Rawlsian universal standards of justice. Walzer gives the concept of complex equality. He says that there are different principles of justice for different social institutions. Feminists have also leveled criticisms against Rawls saying that had women been party to the social contract, they would have given first preference to the difference principle. They also say that Rawls has kept the private sphere such as the family out of the social contract and concentrated only on the public sphere.

Therefore, Rawls in his next book, *Political Liberalism* stated that his three principles of justice are applicable only for liberal societies and are not universally applicable to all societies. Also, his principles cater to public spheres and not to private spheres. Another prominent critic of Rawls Theory of Justice has been Amartya Sen. He argues that there is no absolute theory of justice. Concepts exist in relativity. Instead of focusing on ideal justice, Sen said, one should focus on removing more manifest forms of injustice. He demands an actual life that people can lead rather than an ideal life. Ronald Dworkin proposes his Auction Theory to attain a free state. He says that resources should be distributed according to envy. Every individual has to pass the envy test. Whatever resources are at the disposal of community, individuals will get it according to their desires and envy so that they can put it to use for realizing a just society. And a just society will in turn create conditions for a liberal society. But if an individual fails the envy test which means that he is not able to recognize what resources will be useful for him, in that case, the state should provide with an insurance to rectify his mistake.

2.7 AMARTYA SEN'S CONCEPT OF LIBERTY

Amartya Sen upholds the capability approach for the realization of freedom. He says that provision of social infrastructure such as education, health, employment might not lead to a free individual. He adds that fulfilling the demands of people according to their needs will also not lead to freedom. Sen asserts that an individual can truly realize his freedom if he develops his capability. He advocated a capability based approach to attain liberty for self-determination. He explains that even if a government has provided with schools, teachers and infrastructure for the education of children but still if a child is unable to read, write or count, the provision of these social capitals

will become irrelevant. For a child to realize his freedom fully, he should develop his skills and capabilities so that he can grow and develop. If the child has developed his capability and can read and write, then that child will be free to write a book, read a novel, solve puzzles, study engineering or medical stream. But if no capabilities of the child are built, then the child will be deprived of all the above freedoms.

2.8 FEMINIST CONCEPTION OF FREEDOM

Feminists state that true freedom can be realized in a society when social and economic opportunities are extended to women. They argue that women are disadvantaged because of the difference in their biology. They further state that social, economic and political role of women are not natural. It's the society that has confined the role of women to household work and men to the economic sphere.

The central themes on which feminism revolves are:

- a. Public and private divide
- b. Patriarchy
- c. Sex and Gender
- d. Equality and Difference

Feminists talk about breaking the public and private divide to grant liberty to all irrespective of biological sex. They say that politics is traditionally solely confined to public life such as political parties or government. But, even private life such as family and relationships are a political sphere. Betty Freidan remarked that 'All personal is political'. Freedom will be realized when the politics of everyday life is governed on the principles of justice and fairness. Household work and other domestic responsibilities need to be fairly distributed rather than solely burdening a woman with it. Breaking down of public and private sphere will also mean transferring of responsibilities to the state and with attendant provision of generous welfare to women and providing support in the form of crèches and nursery schools. Feminists have also attacked patriarchal society that has deprived women of their real freedom. In a male dominated society, it's the brother, father or husband who decide for women. Women cannot determine their real selves, as a man's decision is considered supreme. Feminists elaborate on the sex and gender classification. Sex is a biological difference between a male and a female whereas gender is a social construct. It means that the role of a man and a woman is defined by the society. It's the society that says that woman should take care of her family, household and her relationships. It's the society that defines that a woman should be polite, beautiful, should dress up in pink and red colors and play with dolls or the kitchen set. Simon De Bouvoir said that 'a woman is made, not born'. Whereas it's the society that also defines that men should not cry, they should be rough and tough,

should wear black and possess aggressive traits. Engendering of women and men has oppressed both the sexes. There are difference feminists who say that celebrating the difference in a woman will make her realize her freedom. They emphasize that women need not be ‘male identified’. Rather they can celebrate their different traits of being caring, warm, protective, child bearing and enjoy womanhood. Different traditions within feminism describe how women can achieve freedom. Liberal feminists focus on equal political rights and equality in the public sphere. Socialist feminists talk about removal of social and economic inequality so that freedom can be granted to women. Radical feminists emphasize abolition of family life and refusal to bear and rear children. New Feminism is inclusive of black feminism that underlines the rights of black women and lesbian feminism that talks about freedom of sexual rights.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What is Feminist conception of freedom?

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2.9 CONSERVATIVE VIEW OF LIBERTY

Conservatism basically means ‘to conserve’. Conservatives highlight that individuals can achieve liberty to self-determine if the order and discipline is maintained in society. Conservatives believe that humans are imperfect and order and discipline can be attained in society if traditions are followed, organic society is maintained, hierarchy and authority are respected, and property is protected. The importance of traditions such as values, practices and institutions amongst conservatives can be gauged from the fact that these traditions have survived the test of time and have been passed on from one generation to the next. They are the accumulated wisdoms of the past. Edmund Burke described society as a partnership between ‘those who are living, those who are dead and those who are to be born’. Traditions are also significant as they give a sense of identity, security and belongingness and generate social cohesion. On the other hand, conservatives are scared of change, as it is a journey into the unknown that can lead to instability

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and disorder in society. There has been a little change in the basic ideas of conservatism. Edmund Burke, a conservative scholar believed in change in order to conserve. He said change is the law of nature and one should accommodate change so that traditions remain sustained but the change should not create disorder in society.

An organic society is vital for conservatives. Organicism means that conservatives look upon society as an organism. An organism is always considered as a whole or a collection of parts. Each organ is dependent on one another and cannot function in isolation. For example; the brain has a function only if it is a part of a body. Brain, liver, kidneys outside body have no function. Similarly, they believe that human beings are dependent and security seeking creatures. They cannot exist outside the social groups. And they are always part of one or such groups such as family, friends, work, local community. Therefore, freedom for them is accepting social obligations and doing one's duty. For example; if parents guide a child, then they are not limiting freedom of child, rather, they are doing their duty for her development. Conservatives emphasize hierarchy and authority for the sustenance of an ordered society. They believe that society is naturally hierarchical and socially graded. Inequality is natural and equality is a myth. Just as the brain, kidney and other organs in a body perform different functions, similarly, various classes and groups in a society have different roles to play. The working class might not be able to enjoy the same benefits and living standards as their employers but the working class does not have a large responsibility of effectively running the organization, increasing profits, paying the salary of every employee, supervision and monitoring, and growth of company. The employee only has to do her designated work. Therefore, authority is important for providing leadership, maintaining discipline and guaranteeing existence of company. Authority develops from natural necessity. For example; if the sports coach is instructing a player about healthy diet, the time he should sleep, the fitness regime he should follow, and mental strength he should develop through meditation and so on. Such authority can be imposed 'from above' only and this guidance cannot arise 'from below' as the players do not possess the required knowledge and experience. Therefore, hierarchy and authority further develop an individual and he is further able to utilize this for his self-determination. For conservatives, liberty can be achieved if the property rights of an individual are protected. They believe that property is earned through merit, hard work and by those who possess talent. It has a range of psychological and social advantages. It is a source of protection, gives a sense of confidence and assurance to fall back in the times of a crisis. Therefore, property owners will respect each other's property and will work towards maintaining order and discipline in society. Disorder and instability will impact or damage their property and the owners will not want society to go astray. For conservatives, liberty as self-determination can be realized in an ordered society.

Lastly, conservatives reasons that why traditions, organicism in society, hierarchy and authority and property should be protected in society. They

say that humans are imperfect. They are psychologically limited and are dependent creatures. They lack experience and knowledge and are scared of isolation and instability. So every individual seeks protection and security in life and they get naturally drawn towards a stable and secure environment in which they are able to realize their freedom to self determine. Without stability and order in society, even the slightest freedom is taken away.

2.10 POST-MODERN CONCEPT OF LIBERTY

Post-modernists say that individuals will be able to realize freedom if they are able to reject the established system of knowledge and information and assert their own knowledge. Post-modernists believe that knowledge is partial and local. Every society has its own truth. There is no universal truth. There exists a complex power knowledge system where a certain truth is created to favor a particular section of society. The dominant sections of society do not allow a certain thought or views to come in society as it is against them. Post-modernists ask for rejection of the hierarchy of ideas and they also reject political and social hierarchies. They are anti-foundationalist in that there are no universal moral and political principles. Universality of ideas is an act of arrogance. Therefore, post-modernists say that every individual or society should create their own truth or search and establish their own truth. And that is when individuals will have the liberty to self determine. The German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche advocated nihilism. He rejected all moral and political principles and said the truth is fiction. He said that people create their own world and make their own values. Jean Francis Lyotard defined post-modernity as ‘an incredulity towards meta-narratives’. He said that all creeds and ideologies are to be viewed skeptically. Michael Foucault, a French philosopher, said that knowledge is power. He believed that truth is a social construct. And a powerful section of society creates their own truth to perpetuate and sustain their vested interests and rule in society. He analyzed different branches of knowledge as ‘archaeologies’ emphasizing need to have discourse and debate to excavate truths of every society. Jacques Derrida talks about deconstruction. He says that there are no fixed meanings of concepts, languages and statements. He appreciated difference. He said that every society has a different truth. And there is a need to deconstruct text so as to unravel the truth of every society. Deconstructing a text means to raise questions about the texts and expose the complications and contradictions in it which might also be unknown to the author. Richard Rorty, a US philosopher has stated that there exists no objective, transcendental standpoint from which beliefs can be judged. He believed that philosophy is nothing more than a conversation.

2.11 LET US SUM UP

Liberty is a very important principle in political philosophy. Though liberty and freedom are used interchangeably but for many freedom refers to a

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situation and liberty symbolizes a state of mind. Various scholars have defined liberty to self determine. Liberals have defined it as rational self-determination where the state intervenes to provide conditions where an individual can develop. T.H. Green says that individual can self-determine if the state provides moral freedom. The Marxists, on the other hand argue that an individual can not enjoy freedom and self-determination in a capitalist society and he needs to revolt against capitalist system of production to attain them. Amartya Sen's idea of liberty focuses on building capabilities of an individual while the feminists demand equality between male and female.

2.12 REFERENCES

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2.13 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) Your answer should highlight following points
 - Negative liberty is freedom from interference
 - An individual is the best judge of his interests
 - He should have the freedom to develop his interests without any coercion

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) Your answer should highlight following points
 - A society will have true freedom when women have equal opportunities, like men
 - Break public-private divide
 - Elaborate classification between sex and gender