

Mid-Semester Exam: Social & Political Philosophy

Questions Answered:

Q1. You cannot experience liberty in an unequal society? Reflect on this statement through your reading on liberty and equality?

Q2. Is it right to force people to be free? Discuss this in the light of your reading of negative and positive liberty.

Q1. You cannot experience liberty in an unequal society? Reflect on this statement through your reading on liberty and equality?

The term Liberty is derived from the Latin word *liber*, which means the state of 'being free.' The concept of Liberty typically implies the absence of restraint on an individual, the absence of control in a society such that an individual is essentially free to do or think whatever they wish to. The term equality relates to the equal respect and treatment enjoyed by all individuals in a society. Equality also means fair access to opportunities for all or being identical or similar in terms of rights, freedom, or status. However, there are several instances and situations where individuals cannot enjoy this deserved equality in society. Several factors such as economic, gender, age, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, class, and religion can be identified for the same. Such inequalities and differences among people often act as a barrier or hindrance to an individual's actions, thinking, and choices, ultimately preventing them from exercising their Liberty and freedom. On such occasions, Liberty becomes tough to attain in an unequal society. In other words, it is safe to mention that the philosophies of Liberty and equality share a complementary, yet at the same time conflicting, relationship with one other. A widespread example that can help establish the association between Liberty and equality in society can be seen by taking the case of a diverse and mixed society such as that in India. Considering the huge population, scarcity of resources, and limited availability and accessibility of resources or opportunities per capita, it is very natural for inequalities to exist, which might curb individuals from conveniently meeting their desired objectives. These objectives might be related to education, career, and life. Thus, it becomes nearly impossible for every section of the society/population to experience Liberty by accessing their preferred choices or thinking

independently. Due to such existing inequalities, disadvantaged groups are often discriminated against, suppressed, and exploited, which in itself curtails their freedom and takes them further away from attaining Liberty. This exploitation prevents such individuals from exercising Liberty due to two reasons. For one, those in a position of privilege and dominance deny equal opportunities and choices to the exploited lot. And the second reason is that the exploited individuals themselves lose confidence and enthusiasm to exercise their Liberty due to constant subjection to discrimination. Therefore, Liberty in a society can only be ensured when inequalities among different sections of society can be reduced to the minimum. Any resource's democratic and equal distribution is essential for achieving Liberty in a true sense. For instance, hierarchy in society itself breeds unequal distribution of power amongst the people, and in such a scenario, true freedom is bound to be infringed upon, leading to the situation where the dominant community gets an opportunity to oppress the less privileged. Hence, society cannot experience Liberty in the background of inequality. However, consider a situation where resources, for example, the funds from a meager annual income in a family, are equally siphoned towards the food consumption of two siblings. Both siblings like to eat chicken burgers in their meals. The scarce income can either give one of them a chicken burger or can buy them both a vegetarian burger. This is a conflicting situation where equal distribution of resources has actually curbed the Liberty of one individual over the other. Hence, this case reflects a compromise between equality and Liberty. Modern-day societal practices are often structured such that the rich keep getting richer, and the poor become poorer; however, such actions can in no way help us reach our end goal of Liberty for all in society. One straightforward mechanism to counter discrimination, oppression, and other inequalities in a society could be to work towards uplifting the underprivileged in a way that ensures equal opportunities to them in the short run to achieve Liberty in the long run. The reservation system in India is a perfect example of such a mechanism that aims to achieve Liberty and freedom in its true sense for all in the long run. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was a strong advocate of the reservation system to ensure equality in terms of equal representation from all castes and classes in society since he believed that people could achieve true liberation only when they were treated equally. Unfortunately, due to several malpractices and loopholes, the reservation system perhaps could not utilize its true potential and yield the desired outcomes for society, which is, of course, beyond the scope of this essay. Many other prominent political thinkers and philosophers also believe that equality accompanies the

concept of Liberty. Thus, ideas of Liberty and equality go hand in hand in a society; the former cannot be completely achieved without the latter; as rightly stated in the text, without an equal opportunity to be liberated, neither equality nor Liberty can attain its purpose in totality.

Q2. Is it right to force people to be free? Discuss this in light of your reading of negative and positive liberty.

Liberty is an intriguing term and it has the potential to invoke contradictory/conflicting interpretations in different situations and by different people. Hence, it is worthwhile to argue whether it is right to enforce the idea of freedom on people. Free thinking of an individual or a group of individuals cannot be forced, however, the factor of self-restraint that comes from a sense of responsibility in essence may force the individual/s to suppress their free thoughts and restrict their actions to ensure positive outfall. The inference that follows and which I believe in, is that it is not right to force people to be free. This can be best exemplified by the case of a mother of an infant who is free to go for a movie and no one stopped her liberty of choice to do so. However, she resists her temptation to go for a movie in the best interest of her child, which essentially points towards the fact that it is a case of self-determined enforcement of freedom of choice of action. Can the choice exercised by the mother be categorized as freedom, or is it a case of lack of free choice caused by the situation?

The liberty concept has been categorized into positive and negative liberty by Isaiah Berlin. Focus of negative liberty is the freedom to act without taking into account the consequence or implication of the action. For instance a person 'A', by the virtue of his liberty considers the act of physical infliction of pain to individual 'B' as his freedom to do so. If I analyze this in terms of liberty, it is evident that although 'A' has the choice of exercising his freedom, the consequence of this action has a negative impact. This I consider as a drawback of negative liberty. I would also like to take the case of a friend who is an excellent painting artist, and he knows he is one of the best in it. Hence he can rationally exercise his free will to pursue it as his career as he is well informed about his choice. Here, it is clear that my friend has a valid rationale behind his freedom to choose. Further, the corollary to this freedom is that no one else (i.e. another individual) should decide what my friend chooses to make his life more purposeful. Here, it is

important to emphasize that the friend is relying on his capability and in the case where he was not capable of being a good musician, then this limitation cannot be considered as lack of his liberty. Marriages arranged by parents take into consideration the consent of the groom and the bride too, which would mean that they were already under obligation to marry and subsequently they had the liberty to choose their partner. Further, this choice is often a result of societal influence or obligations e.g. caste, religion, etc. This again makes our brains look at this situation perhaps tilted towards an imposition and not as complete liberty. Thus it would be logical to force people to be free to safeguard their freedom by keeping the obligations to a minimum for such decision making. Similarly, in the case of stubble burning by farmers, the society of the affected population has the right to force the government to exercise its freedom to formulate laws to stop the action that caused harm to the environment. However, in the process, this freedom exercised by the government has actually curtailed the liberty of the farmers to protect their own interests. Thus one may argue that forcing the government agencies to exercise their right to liberty and control the farmers actions is to an extent authoritarian. These apparently are the perils of positive liberty. Conclusively, I believe that it is not right to force people to be free. I do acknowledge that the inner superior self of an individual is trained enough to discriminate against the act of exercising liberty for a cause which will have an overall positive effect from that which will cause a negative impact. Maturity in a person leads to executing the choice of freedom in the right direction and restrains him from using his freedom for wrong deeds. Further, the act of exercising liberty to deter any action should not promote authoritarian behavior. Positive liberty signifies not forcing people to be free but allowing them the freedom to avail opportunities to achieve their goals.