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LIBERTY IN LIBERAL THOUGHT – PAST AND PRESENT*

Abstract. The article presents history of liberty in the past and contemporary liberal thought. This article argues that the founders of liberalism went a long way to define precisely the phenomenon of liberty. In more recent times they tried to separate liberty from metaphysics and morality with reference to the ideals of democracy. However, they confused the cult of equality with the liberty to show that the truth always must be at liberty's service. Liberty, however, should be understood as an ability to fulfil person's rights. Until it happens, liberalism will conceal the historic and present-time demons.

Keywords: liberty; liberalism; Christian thought; freedom; truth; John Locke; John S. Mill

1. Introduction: Initial terminology. 2. Truth and liberty in Christian thought. 3. Classic and modern liberalism. 4. Between the state of nature and the state of war. 5. John S. Mill's enthusiasm for freedom and hostility to metaphysics. 6. A liberal space of friendly approval. 7. Conclusions.

1. INTRODUCTION: INITIAL TERMINOLOGY

The title of this text poses many difficulties, both methodological and substantive. It is impossible to operate with intellectual freedom in the rhizome, to use Deleuze's terminology, which is formed from the various understandings of liberty and liberalism. It should also be remembered that these terms are often used as words of praise and condemnation in political struggle, which does not encourage semantic precision and research objectivity¹. I therefore

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1 See: A. Ryan, *Liberalizm*, in: *Przewodnik po współczesnej filozofii politycznej*, eds. R. E. Goddin, P. Pettit, transl. C. Cieśliński, M. Poręba, Warszawa 1998, 381.

limit my research description to just one issue, namely, the recognition of how liberal thought used to function in the past, and how it is understood today. For I assume that liberty belongs to the central concepts of human experience (this is, after all, what constitutes a person), however, in a liberal vision of the world it has taken on a clearly primary character, becoming a “supreme value”, which determines the achievement of both personal happiness and social harmony and peace. Nevertheless, the understanding of liberty divides the individual supporters of liberalism and even leads to a kind of ideological struggle, although this fact is not apparent from a broad interpretative viewpoint. More radical views in this regard can only be brought forward through a more detailed look.

I also have to reiterate that the concept of liberty belongs to the sphere of spontaneous human experience and is sometimes inherent to such terms as a person, act of decision or awareness. It becomes controversial and contentious when it is occasionally used as a tool to create a specific anthropological, political and even economic vision. All we need is to note the different contexts in which the concept of liberty is applied by Christian thinkers and Marxist ideologues, for example. After all, it remains the main determinant of the world view that is formed and professed in both, albeit the consequences of liberty in the aforementioned approaches can be quite opposite, and even mutually exclusive. It is therefore not surprising that according to a widespread idea expressed in the literature on the subject, it is impossible to provide a satisfactory definition of liberalism, since as a primarily political term, it is an “essentially contested concept”. Thus, if we define liberalism as a doctrine that convinces us that individual liberty – in accordance with the tradition of the European Enlightenment – is the highest political value, and that institutions and practices should be judged by their effectiveness in promoting this liberty, it will be a concise statement, but one that does not exempt us from further discussion². For there will remain the question of liberty itself, its types, scope of application, the ontic and social

2 Ibid, 382.

status of the individual etc. The dilemmas of the concept of liberty will continue to remain dilemmas. Nevertheless, it is worth agreeing that liberalism has been an integral part of Western political discourse for three centuries and that it has managed to defeat its main enemies – absolute monarchy, fascism and communism. It has also managed to maintain its own identity in confrontation with its leading criticisms: conservatism and socialism. Since this is the reality of the situation, we should consider its possible consequences, invoking Christian reflection as a verification horizon.

2. TRUTH AND FREEDOM IN CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

The root of the Hebrew term “truth” derives from the word *aman*, which means relying on someone strong. The truth is the property of something that is sustainable and that can be relied upon. Such is the merciful God: always faithful, truthful. People, on the other hand, try to be faithful to God and God’s law, faithful to the covenant made on Mount Sinai, and they are also aware that one must be loyal and noble in interpersonal relations, because that fosters loyalty to God. The biblical concept of truth is therefore not based on consideration of human relationships with the world, but is directly concerned with religious experience. The truth in the Bible is also seen as a synonym for wisdom and the mystery of God.

However, the concept of Christian truth can only be discovered in the Gospel. St. Paul replaced the Jewish expression “the truth of the law” with a much broader one, the “truth of the Gospel”. Therefore, truth in the Christian sense is not only an area recognized through intellectual experience. Nor is it a contemplation, as wished by Aristotle, of the most divine element in a human being – reason. This kind of action is only the beginning of the path to truth. It accepts God’s presence as the most reliable and loyal one, and is accompanied by the truth of real facts, truthfulness, faith and, above all, the identification of truth with the person of Jesus Christ (Jn 14:6). The truth of the Gospel is therefore best explained by God’s word, passed on by Christ and enlightened by the powers of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle

Paul clearly states that there is an inextricable link between the truth and Christ. Its continuation depends on the ability and willingness of believers to imitate the deeds of Jesus, especially in dramatic and martyrdom situations. Therefore, the climate of truth remains an essential element of human existence and indicates that, by knowing the truth and in discovering it, man transcends the natural world and thus manifests his liberty. In the words of St. Irenaeus, liberty is a right as ancient as the existence of the man to whom God proclaimed it. Its incredible complexity, however, came to light when it began to be analyzed. Nevertheless, the concept of *free choice* began to be raised in the discussions in reference to the philosophy of Aristotle, which has since been settled for good in the reflections of St. Paul, the Fathers of the Church, medieval philosophers, Trento theologians. It has also been adopted by contemporary authors.

The Christian concept of liberty will therefore denote an absolute absence of coercion, including by God's law. Every human being is entitled to liberty by virtue of being a person, a reasonable creature and this liberty manifests itself in the person's free will to choose. Liberty is a human fact. It reveals itself in the desire and cognition of a human being who chooses his or her own judgment, which leads to certain actions. For this reason, liberty always remains human-sized. It does not take on cosmic dimensions, because no one on Earth possesses that kind of consciousness. Every person chooses the kind of judgment they want (it does not have to be the best, the wisest or the most comfortable one). The moment of choice is common to all people. For nobody can make it for them. It is impossible to impose an obligation on another person to carry out *our own* acts of decision. After all, a person is the source of his or her actions. When we encounter an accidental and variously organized world, we constantly make decisions. Otherwise, life would have little meaning. Saint Augustine, one of the most courageous and wise men of the Church, wrote: *We can be compared to a harp, and the only important thing in a harp is its strings*. Decisions in human life (the small, everyday decisions and the big ones, influencing the whole of personal actions) are – like strings – what strengthens and expands

our creative abilities and simply creates our personality. Thus, we have a free choice in any event, for we cannot be forced by any specific good to choose it, as there is always a chance of achieving the infinite good. The existence of free will opens up a sphere of liberty (I choose *this or that*, because I want to).

All these remarks stem from realistic thinking, which does not create any constructions about the world, but tries to interpret its deepest content. Unfortunately, over the course of the centuries, this metaphysical realism has been pushed to the margins of the intellectual solutions proposed, and the supporters of liberalism even considered the abandonment metaphysics to be the so-called “good form”, although there has been no clarity on this issue either. In any case, we should bear in mind the Christian understanding of the truth that brings liberty while looking at all that has led to the deletion of the Enlightenment cultural project, which, after the criticism of Nietzsche and postmodern theorists like Rorty, seems at least intellectually silenced. Nevertheless, there is a growing conviction that the liberal world is simply better than all non-liberal views, and this is not just an expression of complacency in European culture. Thus, it is not – to quote Marcin Król – that if we had to choose between Christ and the truth, we would choose Christ, but rather that we are faced with a choice between truth and democracy, and we should choose democracy. This attitude accurately reflects the essence of all contemporary disputes about the shape of democracy, which are sometimes referred to in various terms: the dispute between liberals and communitarians, between neo-conservatives and neoliberals, between conservatives and libertarians, etc.³ Where are these choices and practices originating from? We will begin by asking these question to the participants of historical discussions.

3. CLASSICAL LIBERALISM AND MODERN LIBERALISM

Aware of the existence of different varieties of liberalism, I propose – so as not to lose the transparency of the lecture – to limit its semantic

³ M. Król, *Liberalizm strachu czy liberalizm odwagi*, Kraków 1996, 6–7.

scope to two, namely the classical and the modern version. The former should be associated primarily to the speech of the empiricist John Locke, whose views are often looked upon as pillars of modern liberal thought. Modern liberalism, on the other hand, would be an attitude threatening the achievements of classical liberals, and would refer to the proposals of the 19th century British empiricist John Stuart Mill and his supporters, who would even raise liberty to the nth power and be hostile towards metaphysics. However, the criterion by which I distinguish these types of liberalism is not a historical moment, but rather a vision of man, power and state. For a “modern liberal” could be a person that lived in the 18th century and opposed all forms of absolutism, mixing secular and religious authority or criticizing the legitimacy of resorting to freedom of conscience.

There is a good reason for reminding that the term “liberal” was first used as a political term in the context of the anticlerical actions carried out in Europe in the 19th century. At that time, the intention was to quarrel the Catholic Church with secular power and to deprive it of influence over the policies of Catholic countries. The underlying reasoning was in fact the argument in favour of religious tolerance and against any religious monopoly⁴. These cursory remarks clearly reveal that the issue of liberty is at the forefront of the discussions and is the *issue that tips the scales*. The titles of majority of works by authors belonging to the liberal circle contain the word liberty. This should be emphasized, because it was not obvious to all scholars in the times of Locke’s philosophical and political activity. Robert Filmer, author of the then popular book *Patriarcha, or The Natural Power of Kings* (1680) – an advocate of absolute monarchy, assumed that the divine prerogatives of kings should be defended and in this sense recognized the slavery that resulted from the existence of paternal power. In his opinion, the typically scholastic beliefs that people are free by nature and by birth should be regarded as misleading and deceitful. In the beginning, God gave the royal power to Adam in Eden, from whom it was inherited by his heirs, until it finally passed on various kings of modern times. As

4 A. Ryan, *Liberalizm*, op. cit., 391.

a result, he desire for liberty should be regarded as a typically impious feeling. Therefore, in his opinion, political power does not come from a social contract, let alone from any awareness of the public good, but from the authority that a father has over children. Kings are the heirs of Adam, or at least they should be considered as such; the natural rights of a king are the same as those of a father; by nature, sons are never free from parental authority, even when the son is an adult and the parent is dependent on him⁵. It follows from the above that society as such cannot actually exist, because there is only a patriarchal family, just as there is no state but only a household.

This kind of interpretative perspective had been abandoned by Locke, although he formed his own views by accepting God's interference in the human history and life of each individual. As a believer, he understands a human being in a theological way. He accepts as natural and necessary the providential arrangements by which people discover their place in the hierarchy of creatures, get to know God and use and comply with the laws of nature granted by the Creator. According to him, non-compliance should be punished. The fact that the laws of nature are binding does not depend on their existence, but on man's dependence on God. An important role is played here by reason, which is fully in line with Revelation and allows liberty to operate, so to speak. For without liberty, reason would be completely useless, all the more so because liberty is a human natural state, that is to say, a state of complete liberty to act and to dispose of one's property and persons as they see fit, within the limits of the law of nature, without asking anyone for permission, without dependence on the will of another person⁶.

Therefore, liberty is not about doing what one wants to do regardless of existing norms, as Filmer wanted, but rather subjecting oneself to the law of nature, in the same way as human life in its primitive state. This is why, an individual in a civil state should not be afraid of

5 B. Russell, *Dzieje filozofii Zachodu i jej związki z rzeczywistością polityczno-społeczną od czasów najdawniejszych do dnia dzisiejszego*, transl. T. Baszniak, A. Lipszyc, M. Szczubiałka, Warszawa 2000, 706–712; N. Gładziuk, *Babel, Civitas* 5, (Studia z filozofii polityki), Warszawa 2001, 25–28.

6 J. Locke, *Dwa traktaty o rządzie*, transl. Z. Rau, Warszawa 1992, 165.

hostility and threats from fellow citizens, but primarily from those in power. Thus, this version of liberty consists in submission to the authority that received it by virtue of the people's consent. Some scholars suggest that what we are dealing with here is the concept of negative liberty that relieves all pressures and obligations and is only achieved through collective action as expressed in an act of social contract. However, the very concept of "negative liberty" and "positive liberty" comes from the writings of Isaiah Berlin. While lecturing a lecture at Oxford University in 1958, he stated that the above-mentioned terms are related to the answer to the following questions: "What is the area within which the subject – a person or group of persons – is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?" (negative liberty, i.e. liberty from ...) and "What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?" (positive liberty, i.e. the liberty to ... , to do something, to gain something, to achieve something, to transcend something)⁷. Therefore, if the above terminology was applied to the Locke's system (which is not agreed upon by all interpreters⁸), we would find that positive liberty is logically conditioned by the presence of negative liberty. No one can exercise their will when they are under absolute, arbitrary power. Nevertheless, this positive liberty seems essential if we are to achieve salvation, although we cannot enjoy it without the negative liberty.

These were the origins of the principles that make up political liberalism. Liberty viewed as an aspect of property is an undeniable right of every human being, inscribed in his or her natural behaviour and decisions. However, as Locke insisted, it should not be equated with discretion devoid of moral shades. For our liberty has a specific constraint, which is that, by and with liberty, we can and do fulfil our obligations to the Creator. Human beings are naturally subject only to God. Obviously, this does not only apply to the Christian God. Locke's God is not

7 I. Berlin, *Cztery eseje o wolności*, transl. H. Bartoszewicz et al., Warszawa 1994, 182.

8 This is what M. Król, for example, does in his work: *Historia myśli politycznej. Od Machiavellego po czasy współczesne*, Gdańsk 1998, 41.

a God, so to speak, defined by the confession of faith. The author of the *Letter Concerning Toleration* opposes the imposition of religious beliefs by political authorities. He leaves faith to the decisions of the individual conscience, although he strongly criticizes atheists and Catholics who place clerical power above secular. He is thus creating a clearly defined philosophy of tolerance, based on rational grounds. This was not a purely political doctrine. Its origins lie in the vision of human beings as a free and rational creature. Cognitive agnosticism, understood in a particular way, made it possible to prove that no truths should be imposed. Locke might have set forth the theory of a political system designed to implement the principles of tolerance since, in addition to developing epistemological issues, he announced four basic principles of the system: (1) human rights: to life, liberty and property, which are equally shared by all people; (2) the consent of the people; (3) the responsibility of the authorities; (4) religious toleration.

From the individualistic perspective, he proposed a thesis about the separation of Church and state viewing it as an opportunity to introduce toleration into concrete social life. He believed that the most important are the individual rights of human reason, which is sensitive to the natural and moral aspects of life. Thus, we are dealing with an understanding of freedom as an obligation. It has become, for a long time, a fundamental principle of that liberal trend, which remained close to conservative thought. Close not so much because of the view on how society should function, and not in terms of the hierarchy of values, but because of the approach to political change and the political temperament. It was only when the idea of liberty and, accordingly, the idea of a government that guarantees the exercise of liberty by the individual were completely disconnected from the moral attitude that liberalism showed a different face⁹, especially among the supporters of utilitarian tradition. But before we discuss that face of liberalism, let us take a look at the issue of war, which is currently being discussed with great vigour, and which is also linked to the issue of liberty.

⁹ Ibid, 41–42.

4. BETWEEN THE STATE OF NATURE AND THE STATE OF WAR

In Locke's words, a state of war is a state of enmity and destruction. It therefore seems reasonable and fair that, under the law of nature, we are entitled to destroy whoever threatens to kill us, for the same natural reasons why a *wolf* or a *lion* is killed¹⁰. Thus, when a person tries to force their absolute power upon another, they enter into the *state of war*. This should be understood as announcing an attempt on the person's life. No wonder, then, that there is a clear boundary between the *state of nature* (where people, guided by reason, still live together without judicial power) and a *state of war*, where force is used or threatened to be used against a person, and there is no common superior on earth to appeal to for relief. However, the state of war may continue until the society adopts positive laws with a judicial authority. And even when they have been formally adopted, they can be, and occasionally are, violated, sometimes by those who have been called upon to bring justice. Then the state of war continues. The very avoidance of this *state of war* is an important reason for creating societies and a political state. Locke had confidence in the legitimate authority derived from the agreement, more than in the law (at the level of political or civil society, of course), although he believed that the law was helpful in pursuing the most important human objective, which is to strive for unspecified excellence. However, in all kinds of difficulties of communal coexistence, the ultimate judge of the status of human liberty is, and must be, a conscience referred to God, the "Supreme Judge of all people"¹¹.

It follows from the above that liberalism, at its earliest stage of development, referred to typically metaphysical reasoning. However, it abandoned the Aristotle's tradition of treating the individual as a "cell" of the social organism and agreed to accept the emancipated ego, a man whose identity is determined in the very act of creation and not in relation to others. Unlike Thomas Hobbes, he believed that a man does not

¹⁰ J. Locke, *Dwa traktaty o rządzie*, op. cit., 174.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 178.

achieve happiness in solitary activity, but turns to other people. In order for there to be a society, there is no need for an agreement; this is determined by “needs and convenience”. The agreement, on the other hand, determines the emergence of a system of voluntary subordination, characteristic of a political society, which represents another stage of social development¹². I therefore disagree with those who suggest that Locke absolutized the concept of liberty¹³. Rather, he saw its limits and associated liberty to the concept of rational necessity, as did the Stoics and Cicero. Liberty is where there are rules that preclude arbitrariness, albeit the fact that he ties goodness to pleasure and evil to suffering may encourage a different interpretation to the above. And that is what has happened in later years. As I mentioned, utilitarianists in particular have found their own roots in Locke’s views. I would like to quote at least the main theses of one of the most important among them. I mean John Stuart Mill, the son of the Orthodox utilitarian James Mill.

5. JOHN MILL’S ENTHUSIASM FOR FREEDOM AND HOSTILITY TOWARDS METAPHYSICS

Unfortunately, similarly as in the case of Locke, Mill’s views on liberty are not easy to discern. For they are not only entangled in inconsistencies and understatements within their own system, but nowadays they continue to expand the space of open dispute. However, his beliefs are not only invoked by liberals of all types (led by Berlin). Mill’s deliberations fascinate many contemporary pragmatists and so-called postmodernists as well. Why? The English philosopher’s writings originated from the idea of a widespread crisis, which clearly affected civilization at the time. The foundations of the emerging democracy, the change of social and religious customs, the emergence of technical innovations on a mass scale – all this prompted questions about the place of man and his liberty in this new cultural paradigm. In his

12 S. Filipowicz, *Historia myśli polityczno-prawnej*, Gdańsk 2001, 216.

13 Such a view is presented by S. Kowalczyk in his work: *Liberalizm i jego filozofia*, Katowice 1995, 132.

famous essay *On Liberty*, he wrote: “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”¹⁴.

Liberty has therefore achieved the status of an absolute, in the sense that it has been equated with autcreation and authenticity. Whatever we do (apart from inflicting harm on other people) is permitted and creative. No barriers should prevent the realization of one’s own vision of identity. Each individual has the right to “be himself or herself”; there are no hidden or shameful spheres of life of any kind that would usually be hidden under the surface of social conventions. Therefore, the fight against even the smallest manifestations of tyranny in life, especially the tyranny of customs, deserves support and promotion. Liberty of conscience, thought and speech, liberty of association, individual preferences of all sorts – these are the foundations that sustain existence and all forms of state. No one in a position of power (or actually no one at all) may interfere in the personal affairs of individuals, because such interference is, as usual, wrong and inappropriate¹⁵. Every person has his or her own original way of behaving, which is sensitive to the pressure of the patterns. It should not be confined in a straitjacket of natural identity. It should rather evolve, depending not only on the social situation, but also on personal desires.

Does this mean that Mill has lost the moral dimension of liberty? Probably not, because he stressed the value of European rationalism. He tried to reconcile the seemingly contradictory beliefs, namely the need to save the absolute dimension of liberal decisions with their call for the observance of moral imperatives. He seems to reiterate Socrates’ idea of natural sensitivity of people to the good, who (as long as they are sensitive) will not want to do evil. He also did not forget the role of law, which, in a way, upholds the chance for liberty, so that it is not annihilated by someone else’s arbitrariness. He was

¹⁴ J. S. Mill, *O wolności*, transl. A. Kurlandzka, Warszawa 1999, 26–27.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 100.

aware, however, that the ideals he preached could be ignored. After all, there are people who are completely indifferent to the values of good or democracy and there is nothing we can do about this. In fact, the pursuit of the truth is probably something noble, but essentially unattainable. For the absolute truth is either difficult to obtain or does not exist at all. Therefore, we should not be surprised that many post-modern writers, such as the American pragmatist R. Rorty and his followers, like to repeat Mill's words. However, Mill did not give in to skepticism or religious emotion. He believed in the power of democratic self-government, presuming that it is democracy that makes possible the equivalence of what is mercenary, personally useful, with what is altruistic, responsive to the needs of others. It also highlights the value of pluralism on which Europe's global success is based, which, however, is beginning to fade away and is dangerously close to the "Chinese ideal of making all people alike"¹⁶. What, then, does the liberalism that refers to the legacy of Mill propose? It wishes for happiness for as many people as possible, the happiness as each of them imagines it¹⁷, which would be possible if a perfect social organization could be built. It remains obvious, however, that this thesis is clearly utopian in nature.

6. A LIBERAL SPACE OF FRIENDLY APPROVAL

Contemporary post-modernists believe that the traditional liberal understanding of liberty and liberalism itself has lost its importance. Entangled in metaphysical contexts, it is unable to follow the rapidly changing society, which is convinced that it is no longer appropriate to talk about the objectivity of the world, but only about pluralistically scattered textual elements, integrated not by the power of subjectivity, which had been refuted, but by the power of texts and metaphors, forcing a constant effort of interpretation, reinterpretation, deconstruction. And since there is no real world, there can be no cognitive certainty. For

¹⁶ Ibid, 88.

¹⁷ M. Król, *Historia myśli politycznej*, op. cit., 147.

example, philosophy and science (within their own competence) with claims for a final explanation of everything as well as religion and world views referring to fixed moral norms, have no *raison d'être*. Radical pluralism, individualism, the reduction of truth (with a capital t) to the level of the “small truth” of a particular community group, a “fractal”, “viral”, “elusive” truth, as Jean Baudrillard puts it, its inclusion in the changing contexts of various social discourses, as well as the praise of diversity, local concreteness, liberty, justice or solidarity, have all resulted in a loss of connection with a reality that is independent of human cognitive capacity. But there is still liberty at the foundation of all life's references, which is standing on top of the axiological ladder, as well as the issue of justice. This is the position taken by Berlin, Rorty and Rawls, although each of them formulates liberalist ideals differently. They also argue that only liberty understood in a negative way is worth defending, because it denies society the right to impose any ideals on an individual. This view was referred to as liberalism of fear, or liberalism neutral towards the world of values. In order to avoid the pressure of totalitarianism, which is always a possibility, ideologies must be rejected and all axiology in politics must be abandoned. Therefore, it is necessary to accept a vision of a society in which all views are treated as equal and equally true, a society that is united only by a democratic-liberal consensus¹⁸.

7. CONCLUSIONS

In the light of the above considerations, liberalism has come a long way in clarifying the phenomenon of liberty. The closer (in a temporal sense) it got to the present day, the more it abandoned the bond of liberty with metaphysics and morality, and linked it to the ideas of democracy, which, although devoid of any signs of perfection, brings the best forms of governance and makes human liberty a reality in the fullest sense. However, liberty has always been of the utmost importance, although it has become a “self-designed liberty” for various demo-liberals, permissives and libertines. In such a perspective, one

¹⁸ Ibid, 246.

lives “beyond good and evil”, accepting every possible difference. This is no longer about toleration in the sense recognized by Locke, but rather about, say, repressive tolerance where a person treats their private aversions as public sins, and hides and conceals them. This process culminates in false humanism, according to which man is subject only to the laws that he himself establishes. In such a project, liberty assumes the characteristics of omnipotence. Hence the dogmatic battle for abolitionist and pro-abortionist legislation. However, it is not clear why the sovereign, free decisions of a stock market entrepreneur should have irreversible consequences (e.g. bankruptcy), and the strictly moral decisions, such as erotic or criminal decisions, should be subject to the “tolerance” of reversibility¹⁹.

Some scholars have argued that liberalism has not at all been formed in the space of a continuous intellectual tradition. In their view, Locke’s liberalism has little to do with Mill’s liberalism, and it is wrong to consider their views as moments within an uninterrupted historical process. The rallying point here would not be the concept of liberty, but the idea of civil society²⁰. It is possible. Nowadays, however, it is imperative to understand and to apply firm criticism to this liberty which, having lost the need for responsibility, has become an alienated liberty and a threat to the harmonious functioning of society. Contemporary liberal thinking confuses the cult of equality with liberty, and by emphasizing the difference between individuals and groups, it makes clear what was already obvious to the ancients – that truth (achievable in human cognitive effort) remains at the service of liberty. In this way, the truly understood and experienced liberty is lost when we live in a sphere of falsified truth. Isaiah Berlin somewhat expressed the consciousness of contemporary liberals when he wrote: “The conviction that there must be definitive, objective solutions to all normative problems and a truth that can be proved or directly intuitively grasped, that it is basically possible to discover a harmonious

19 P. Bartuła, *Nowoczesna destrukcja liberalizmu*, in: *Liberalizm u schyłku XX wieku*, ed. J. Miklaszewska, Kraków 1999, 275.

20 J. Gray, *Po liberalizmie. Eseje wybrane*, transl. P. Maciejko, P. Rymarczyk, Warszawa 2002, 46.

pattern that reconciles all values and that we should aim for this one goal; that we can reveal some central principle that shapes this vision that, once discovered, will guide our lives – an old and almost universally shared belief ... seems unreasonable, it must sometimes lead to theoretical absurdities and barbaric consequences in practice”²¹.

Thus, as shown by the Berlin’ message, liberalism has a primary task: to prevent life from being taken over by traditional, by implication, especially Christian, barbaric ways of exercising the gift of liberty. But where does this vision lead to? Firstly, global culture is afflicted by the venomous “Americanism” – a destiny that took many people overseas to worship materialistic hedonism as an incentive to work. As predicted by Daniel Bell²², today this destiny is shattered, Americanism has worn thin, and only the hedonism remains. Secondly, it invites – after acknowledging liberal social disasters – that we start again from the outset, and develop a liberal tradition in such a way that it adapts itself to the changing reality. This is perhaps an important characteristic of any kind of liberalism.

Naturally, people can and should change themselves and society within certain limits, but the knowledge of their own power must be accompanied by the awareness of its limitations. This is the oldest and most enduring truth about human condition if it is to remain human. However, it is necessary to include the conviction that the human ability to know the truth and act in liberty, exercised through the righteous will (*recta voluntas*), is fulfilled as a result of the Creator’s gift. And liberty itself should be understood as the art of prudent and responsible realization of a person’s good²³. That is why the importance of personal acts of decision is worth emphasizing, since these are a synthesis of cognition and love and allow us to be free, of course to earthly proportions, which means that our liberty should be based on conscious action that calls for noble compromis-

21 Cit. follow: D. Bell, *Kulturowe sprzeczności kapitalizmu*, transl. S. Amsterdamski, Warszawa 1994, 315–316.

22 Ibid, 318.

23 See more broadly: A. Maryniarczyk, *Człowiek – istota otwarta na prawdę i dobro*, *Człowiek w Kulturze* (1998)11, 200–201.

es and mutual restrictions. If that were the case, then even liberalism should not wake up the hidden demons of the past and present.

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