

INDIVIDUALISM—WITHIN HISTORY

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INDIVIDUALISM—THE “-ISM” INDICATES A DOCTRINAIRE, dogmatic, overboard commitment—has been so soundly and repeatedly defeated that one must ask: Why is it standing at all? It is a concept so intellectually defective and morally misguided, that one cannot but wonder: Why do people still hold onto this fool’s gold?

Possibly individualism feeds on its being a highly flattering view of human nature, certainly compared to most, if not all, other views. Individualism promises those who believe in it that they are free-standing agents, able to formulate their own conceptions of the good, pursue a life that is guided by reasonable deliberations, and render rational decisions in their self-interest. And, as bearers of inalienable rights, they have a long list of entitlements, but no inherent duties or obligations unless they choose to embrace them.

Compare such a view to any determinism—whether biological, ecological, or sociological—and the difference could not be more striking. In deterministic views, people are like marionettes who might believe that

they have a say over the course of their stars. The champion of determinism discloses the fools they are. Factors they do not understand, are not able to control, and cannot escape, determine their fate, set their ways, render their decisions, and make them march for some cause other than their own. People have at most but a small degree of freedom, whether they are aware of it or not. To speak of their rights or duties is not to recognize that they are free agents. Like ants rushing about, they are bound to be queens or workers, by their very nature.

Even the moderate communitarianism to which I subscribe, which recognizes the importance of rights and responsibilities, is much less flattering than any form of individualism. It recognizes that our selves are, to a significant extent, culturally and historically constituted. We are born into communities and cultures that initially form us, including our conceptions of the good and our “choosing” selves. As we grow up, we can labor to gain some measure of freedom of action, especially if we labor with other like-minded persons, rather than seeking to act as an Atlas, as a sheer individual. For those gullible enough or unable to face the constraints reality imposes, individualism is indeed a soothing daydream and lullaby.

Another reason individualism has more than nine lives is ideological. Since its inception it has served the new classes well, and through them the public at large. It still does in large parts of the world where liberty and rights are not well established. It has been working so long to roll back overbearing governments, opposing authoritarianism, totalitarianism, and religious fundamentalism, that it seems hard to recall that it is not a universally valid position for all times and for all societies. It is not above or out of history.

Nowadays, many in the West take the concept of the individual as self-evident, natural, and given. This is in sharp contrast to concepts such as community and society, which are often contested as ill-defined or even declared to be fictional.¹ Most people are unaware that what they

¹ Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1935) 8.

see as individuals are behaving bodies that can just as readily be thought of as members of groups of people guided by some shared bonds rather than merely by inner selves. Indeed, in earlier periods, people had no concept of self and saw themselves as an organic part of a tribe or community. Above all, the power to control one's acts was not presumed to lie mostly with the person but was in the hand of luck, nature, the monarch, the tribe, or some supernatural or magical force.

True, some limited recognitions of the individual and her importance can be found throughout much of written human history, in many cultures. However, the celebration of the individual as the sun, moon, and star of humanity—that is, individualism—is a far newer concept and is closely associated with the decline of the old regimes. As the control of feudal lords, kings, and churches weakened due to the rise of merchant, and later industrial, classes—the bourgeoisie—the stage was set for the appearance of an ideology that legitimated the removal of power from established authorities. The very notions of individual rights and individual autonomy were served up to restrain the powers that be—the government. Similarly, the rise of science and secular humanism served to roll back traditional religions, established churches, and their dogmas.

As new (or responsive) communitarian analysis recognizes, individualism played a significant role in the history of Western societies. It loosened the excessive bonds, oppressive structures, and largely monotheistic values of traditional, ascribed communities. I am not suggesting that individualism as an ideology was the only, or even the main, driving force. Economic, technological, and social processes played major roles in these developments, but individualism provided a major source of legitimation for these developments.

One need not travel back in history to see the ideological role of individualism at work. In large parts of the world where government and communities are still overbearing and/or religious fundamentalism is governing, individualism is still a major, if not the main, normative antidote. It justifies the drive for universal recognition of basic human rights; it favors liberty; it labors for the introduction of constitutional democracies; it legitimates the actions of supranational courts, such as the International Criminal Court; it justifies interventions in the inter-

nal affairs of independent nations, such as in Yugoslavia and Iraq; and it feeds oppositional forces and social change in numerous countries, especially in Asia and Africa.

Indeed, whether one uses the size of the territories covered or the billions of people involved, most of the world still benefits from individualism. The main reason for this last statement requires elaboration because in it lies the reason individualism, which had such a liberating force in Western history and still does elsewhere, has become a detrimental force in the West, especially for American society.

To put it succinctly and in very simple terms, the excesses of individualism (even if unrecognized or unacknowledged) pose little threat in places where individuals are not free and their rights are not well respected. Here, to worry about this “-ism” is akin to fretting about gridlock where there are no cars. It is quite a different matter when one adds cars to roads already overcrowded.

There is a strong tendency to assume that if individualism champions the individual, then its critics, communitarians, must champion the community. They must extol social order instead of liberty, duties instead of rights. Granted that communitarians vary, like all philosophical camps, responsive communitarianism must be understood nonetheless as seeking a synthesis between individualism and communal collectivism, a carefully crafted balance between liberty and social order, rights and responsibilities. It is a synthesis that takes the “-ism” but not the “individual” out of “individualism.”²

One can assess whether a given society, during a specific historical period, deviates toward collectivism or individualism. In societies that tilt heavily in the first direction, individualism is not a problem because it serves as a corrective. But in those societies most prone to atomization, where the social order has been undermined and self-centeredness is

² See Amitai Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Society* (New York: Basic, 1996).

rampant, to promote individualism is to add fuel to the fire. Thus, while a major dose of individualism would not hurt Japan, it undermined Reagan's America. Ergo, individualism should not be considered a universally valid theory, morality, or ideology, but must be seen within its historical and sociological context. This is the case not only because of its exaggerated, one-sided nature, but also because of its champions' utter disregard for the damage it causes when it is considered a universal approach, when it is applied where individuals are already cut off from their social moorings, their sense of identity, and the social bases for being free.

Mountains of data, recently reviewed and augmented by Robert Putnam and Francis Fukuyama, show that when there is little or no community, people suffer physically (e.g., are more prone to have major illnesses) and psychologically (e.g., are more prone to be depressed).³ Moreover, communities reinforce our moral commitments and provide a measure of voluntary social order, greatly curtailing the state's need to provide it through its often coercive resources.

Ironically, it is communities that can secure the basic well-being (broadly understood to include psychological fortitude) of individuals, supply the source of essential identities, and provide the social bonds that make us relatively free agents and rational individuals. As Erich Fromm argues in his *Escape from Freedom*, and as numerous studies of crowd behavior have shown, isolated people tend to become irrational, impulsive, and open to demagogical appeals and totalitarian movements.⁴ In contrast, as Tocqueville and the enormous literature on civil society holds, people who are well woven into communities (including families and voluntary associations) are able to resist pressures by governments and demagogues. They are much more likely to have the psychological

³ See Robert D. Putnam, "Health and Happiness," chap. 20 in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); and Francis Fukuyama, *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1999).

⁴ See Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1941); and Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (London: Unwin, 1908).

integrity that individuals need in order to be able to participate in reasoned deliberations, to make rational choices, to act on judgment rather than impulse, and to act as relatively free agents.⁵

This is especially obvious when we consider our condition as children; without those who cared for us, we would not have developed into “individuals,” but instead would have crawled on all fours and barked, inarticulately and aggressively snarling at each other.⁶ Even as mature adults we require continued bonding with others to sustain attributes associated with what liberals consider civic virtues (e.g., thinking critically) and communitarians consider social virtues (e.g., caring for others), as studies of the numerous ill effects of social isolation have shown.⁷ Social bonding also sustains our ability to be reasonable and facilitates the development of our initial moral compass.

One may overlook individualism’s sycophantic nature, disregard its misplaced universalistic ambitions, even its ahistorical and decontextualized nature, but one cannot make light of the fact that it is *morally damaging* in well established, liberal democracies. One may ask if thoughts can ever be damaging; after all, the premise of our strong commitment to free speech is that only acts, not words, can hurt us. However, one can fully support the idea that allowing unlimited speech is a much preferred alternative to censorship, to the government restraining speech, while also recognizing that throughout human his-

⁵ I write “relatively” because even under these conditions people can only approximate the liberal ideal, and not very closely, but they certainly cannot do so outside particular relations. See Amitai Etzioni, *The Moral Dimension: Toward a New Economics* (New York: Free, 1988) part I.

⁶ See Susan Curtiss, *Genie: A Psycholinguistic Study of a Modern-Day “Wild Child”* (New York: Academic, 1977); Jean Marc Gaspard Itard, *The Wild Boy of Aveyron*, trans. George and Muriel Humphrey (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962); Harlan Lane and Richard Pillard, *The Wild Boy of Burundi: A Study of an Outcast Child* (New York: Random House, 1978); J. A. L. Singh and R. M. Zingg, *Wolf-Children and Feral Man* (London: Harper, 1942); and Douglas Candland, *Feral Children and Clever Animals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁷ See Putnam, “Health and Happiness”; and Leo Srole, Thomas S. Langner, Stanley I. Michael, Marvin Opler, and Thomas A. C. Rennie, *Mental Health in the Metropolis: The Midtown Manhattan Study* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962).

tory much damage has been done through ideological fanaticism and rigidness. Thus, even if one does not favor suppressing individualism where it is most damaging, one need not deny that it can inflict considerable human costs. Moreover, just as the best way to protect free speech is to correct its excesses by counter-speech, so individualism is best corrected by counter-speech, and communitarianism may rise to the challenge.

One brief example illustrates the ill effects of individualism. Economists tend to assume that people will “free ride” *if* they think that they can get away with it. That is, they will slough off, not work, and pocket the benefits of others’ work, if they work in a group and it is hard to determine how much work each member does. In a famous experiment carried out by Gerald Marwell and Ruth Ames, most participants did not free ride, but students in economics did. Other data similarly suggests that although people are not naturally selfish, they can be so made if enough individualism is drummed into them.

Individualists argue that their ideology does not promote selfishness, that the focus on self-interest is fully compatible with benefit for all others, as any textbook in neoclassical economics is all too happy to elaborate and extol. Much has been written about how poorly such a theory accounts for basic economic facts. But even if it explained to perfection the workings of the free market (another illusion), it would provide a very damaging theory of society. Society requires a measure of social commitment to shared values and bonds, a concern for one’s fellow human beings. Such commitments, already waning, are further undermined as millions of students are taught each year that a “rational” person would try to free ride when he could get away with it, and that the notion that it is better to give than to receive is “irrational,” along with other such self-centered, hedonistic lessons.

Individualism leads to arrogance where humility is called for. It presumes, indeed preaches, that if we merely put our mind to it, think things through, plan well, conduct open and rational deliberations, then we can move mountains, solve problems, and make the world around us work to our purpose. Overlooked are the tragic limits of our capacity to understand and to act. We have a hard time coping with the

basic facts that our movements forward cause major counter-currents (for instance, the destruction of the environment) and that there are billions of us but only a finite pile of resources. Generally when one of us consumes, there is less left for others—Adam Smith notwithstanding. In the market individual acts do not necessarily complement each other but often conflict, depriving some while enriching others. Ergo, we need to be committed to community, to common goals, to elementary justice, and to restraining ourselves from focusing solely on our own success while depriving all others.

Arrogant individualism led us first to make nature our instrument, putty to our plans to increase production. We then turned this activist orientation on our inner selves, as we tried to reconstruct our psyches in line with one psychoanalytical theory or another. We are now about to face the most challenging and potentially devastating result of this lack of humility, as we turn to re-engineer our bodies and genetic codes in line with individual tastes and designs. The coming revolution propelled by biological engineering will push to its limits, and beyond, the gnawing lag between our technical and economic developments (“for the sake of individuals”) and our moral capacity to come to terms with the social and ethical issues posed by these developments. If nothing else, biological engineering may force us to realize that the era of individuals seeking to maximize themselves for themselves must come to an end. The reintroduction of a strong measure of caring and sharing, of concern for community, is vastly overdue.