The Moral Philosophy of Individualism: Its History and Relationship with Collectivism

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Recommended Citation
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The concept of individualism often carries with it negative connotations. Associated with selfishness and egotism, its principles are seen by many to be in opposition to social stability. Individualism is also seen as promoting competition among individuals. Contrary to this popular perception, however, is the assertion that individualism does not necessarily result in extreme selfishness nor does it always promote competition among members of society; indeed, in the marketplace competition is seen as beneficial. One can argue, in fact, that individualism is as much a description of social reality as it is a morality directing the behavior of individuals.

Some Definitions

Historically, individualism has been defined in a number of different ways; consequently, there tends to be a great deal of confusion surrounding its exact meaning. According to MacPherson, individualism refers to “a social theory or ideology assigning a higher moral value to the individual than to the community or society. It consequently advocates leaving individuals free to act as they think most conducive to their self-interest” (MacPherson 1989, p. 149). The concept is associated with the belief that every significant change undertaken in a society has its beginnings in the mind of an individual. The individual’s ideas create progressive changes in the short-run which in the long-run are consistent with the higher hopes of society (Miller 1962, p. 3).

While these definitions clarify the essence of individualism, understanding the philosophy entails a more complex analysis of the individual within society. This analysis not only regards the individual person as the most important social entity; it also considers individuals as they interact in society. A common misunderstanding is that individualism theorizes the existence of self-contained individuals. Individualism does not recognize individual interests as exclusively autonomous, apart from those of other individuals, and without consideration of any
larger whole. Instead, it recognizes that the nature of men and women is determined by their existence in society. Thus, it analyzes the individual in the context of society (Hayek 1972, p. 6).

Society, then, may be defined as an aggregate of autonomous but interacting individuals. This then leads to the idea of the public good, defined by Rousseau as the collected good of all separate individuals. Such being the case, collective interests are considered to be the sum of all individual interests, and the interests of autonomous individuals are recognized.

**Individualism – Past to Present**

The ideas which form the basis of individualism materialized through the centuries. These ideas developed in response to previous feudal societies and as an attempt to describe society as a natural system. Medieval societies did not recognize the autonomous individual or an individual’s rights.

As Europe progressed out of feudalism, the reconstruction of political authority freed people from the anonymity and insecurities of feudal society, providing the circumstances for a birth of individualism. As a philosophy, full-fledged individualism seems to have emerged first in England. Because England was a relatively less rigid society than the rest of Europe, it was a state in which it was easier for individuals to assert their demands successfully (Britannica 1973, p. 163).

In the mid-17th century the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes expressed the view that “society was simply a congeries of colliding atoms in unceasing motion” (MacPherson 1989, p. 150). Hobbes argued that people were like atoms, each separate and individual, acting in their own self-interest in response to, and as a part of, a larger whole. Hobbes was not only approaching the reality behind individual behavior, he was also approaching the essence of a natural society. He envisioned a society in which individuals, acting in their separate self-interests, would form a harmony when those interests were considered together. Hobbes was advocating a political structure which would facilitate individualism within society. His view was that the job of the state was to clear the way for capitalism. In this respect Hobbes provided a legitimation of the early capitalist state (MacPherson 1989, p. 133).

Expanding on these ideas was another English philosopher, John Locke (1632-1704). Locke argued that the rights of life, liberty, and property were natural rights for all people. These rights came before
any idea of an organized society. Thus, society’s role in respect to these rights was to protect them. The views of Locke were powerful support for the establishment of industrial capitalism in which freedom from government restraint was vital (McAdams et al 1989, p. 5).

In the 18th century Scottish economist Adam Smith proposed that individuals pursuing their own self-interest would be a part of a natural system which would ultimately help society to the greatest extent. Smith advocated the doctrine of *laissez faire*, meaning government non-interference in the economy. Borrowed from the French physiocrats, the term *laissez faire* was based upon a belief in a harmony of individual wills. British statesman and philosopher Edmund Burke built upon these ideas when he recognized the system explained by Smith as a natural one. Capitalism, which incorporated the ideas of individualism, was seen as the simple and obvious system for mutual advantage. Burke equated the laws of commerce with the laws of nature and thus, by extension, with the laws of God (MacPherson, p. 150).

The precise term “individualism” arose out of the European reaction to the French Revolution and to its apparent source, the thought of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was characterized by a new spirit of inquiry, of discovery, and of individual self-confidence and assertiveness. This change in attitudes allowed for the onset of individualism, yet at the time of the revolution, conservative thought condemned the interests and rights of the individual. Since individuals pass out of existence, conservatives argued that society requires that “the inclinations of its members should frequently be thwarted, their will controlled, and their passions brought into subjection” (MacPherson 1989, p. 150).

The French Revolution was thought to be proof that the ideas of the individual imperilled the stability of the commonwealth. In reality the ancient tyranny of kings had given way to the new tyranny of “the people” (Devane 1976, p. 170). John Stuart Mill addressed this idea in the 19th century. In *On Liberty*, Mill wrote:

> Protection against the magistrate is not enough; there needs to be protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling, against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them. (Mill 1859, p. 1)

Mill recognized that tyranny can come from sources other than just government; it can foment within and among individuals. Perhaps it
was for this reason that he expressed the principle of individualism as a competition, each one for himself or herself and against all the rest. The basis of Mill's belief is the opposition of interests. Everyone is required to find his or her place by struggle, by either punishing others or being punished back by them. Mill described the existing individualism as, "arming one human being against another, making the good of each depend upon evil to others" (MacPherson 1989, p. 150).

Mill's individualism is a fierce one. In the 20th century, Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek and American economist Milton Friedman have also presented somewhat extreme ideas which could be considered an economic manifestation of modern day individualism. Hayek has been a vocal advocate of the free market and especially market competition. "What such a competitive process can accomplish," Hayek argues, "is the discovery of possibilities and preferences that no one had realized hitherto" (Garrison and Kirzner 1989, p. 123). With his strong faith in market forces, Hayek has been so extreme as to advocate the dismantling of progressive taxation and the withering away of state education. He has also proposed the abandonment of economic planning.

While Hayek has supported individualism through the free market, Friedman has supported individualism through the political system. Although recognizing the importance of governments in achieving freedom, Friedman has questioned whether governments can operate their economies successfully. Criticizing social services as economically inefficient, he has also objected to the coercion of individuals which results from government action. He has even argued in favor of a negative income tax which would give money directly to the poor. Friedman feels this tax would be efficient since individuals, not the state, would decide how it would be spent (Lukes 1973, p. 93). The poor, in a sense, would be more empowered to be individuals.

Friedman and Hayek are both in support of extreme laissez-faire policies. They want government only for the protection and promotion of competition and the price mechanism. By advocating this type of limited government, they are advocating that individualism be achieved through the socio-economic system. They demand that government provide a framework within which competition and the price mechanism should be protected and promoted (Lukes 1973, p. 93).

**Collectivism and Individualism**

Another theoretical path to individualism was proposed by Karl Marx in the 19th century. Marx believed that:
the collective control of the economy was simply a necessary means to an end which was ultra-individualistic, that is, to a flowering of individuality which would be possible when capitalism with its alienation of labor has been surpassed. (MacPherson, p. 150)

Marx felt that capitalism destroyed individuality through its exploitation of the proletariat. He believed that bourgeois society caused its members to become dependent and lose individuality. For this reason he believed that individualism could best be achieved through collectivism. Marx was not alone in his support of collectivism. Later collectivists, notably Lenin and Stalin, deviated from the ideas of Marx in what some view as a perversion of Marx’s vision. They saw the individual as insignificant in relation to the entire society (McCormick 1990, pp. 36-41).

An earlier example of this reasoning is that expressed by Walter Ullmann. In his book, The Individual and Society in the Middle Ages, Ullmann insisted that society absorbed the individual. He stressed that individuals were allotted specific functions which were to be pursued for the good of all. In Ullmann’s view, society was “one whole and indivisible, and within it the individual was no more than just a part” (Lukes 1973, p. 46). Ullmann uses this logic to justify collectivism. According to Lukes, Ullmann understood the collectivist ideal to mean: “The individual was so infinitesimally small a part that his interest could easily be sacrificed at the altar of the public good, at the altar of society itself…” (1973, p. 46).

There seem to be fundamental problems with this approach. What is created by collectivism is a sort of artificial society without an identity and pervaded by hypocrisy. It lacks an identity because its members lose individuality. Such societies inhibit the pursuit of self-interest while also denying freedoms to the individual. They tend to be pervaded with hypocrisy because of the logical inconsistency created by their definition of society. While freely speaking of individuality they forget the actual individual. What is forgotten is that the identity of society is abstract in relation to the individual. Society in fact has no identity outside of the individuals that make it up. Only individuals have identities. In declaring that individual interests can easily be sacrificed for the public good, advocates of collectivism imply that individuals must sacrifice themselves for other individuals. In other words, individual rights should be sacrificed for the sake of other individuals (McAdams et al. 1989, p. 9).
Advocating subordination of individual rights to the interests of society seems not only to degrade the existence of the individual, but also what is perceived to be the social good. A society which is free is a collection of individuals able to pursue their own personal interests. This does not mean that the personal interests of those within society have to be in opposition; on the contrary, these interests may usually be in harmony. However, when considering an opposition of interests, no government or society should have the absolute authority of placing the interests of some above the interests of certain others. To speak of the "social interest" invites philosophical skepticism and runs counter to the interests of certain individuals.

An Analysis of Individualism

Within unrestricting political institutions, human beings will generally behave according to their self-interest. Even actions which are in opposition to an individual's good are decided upon by that person. According to Mill, although an individual's actions may not be in his best interest, the state has no moral authority to decide what that person's best interest is. Thus, the state has no authority to take away individual freedom by defining the individual's best interest.

It is true that individuals lack perfect wisdom. In this respect they do not always know what is really in their self-interest. However, the individual generally knows his or her self-interest better than the state or society does. From the perspective of Smith and Burke, altruist-collectivist societies, by organizing in opposition to individual self-interest, were in opposition to the reality of individual behavior. As a result such societies were also in defiance of nature. Smith and Burke described the nature of society from a pragmatic standpoint. They argued that the unrestricted system involved a society of self-interested individuals unrestrained by government for the most part.

It goes without saying, however, that freedom for individuals must involve at least some societal restraints. Rousseau articulated this idea when he defined natural, moral, and civil liberty. According to Rousseau, natural liberty is what we have when we are subject to no restraint; moral liberty is what we achieve when we follow the rules which an impartial benevolence would urge upon us; and civil liberty is what we enjoy when we are citizens participating in the creation of the laws we obey. In other words there are different aspects of freedom; it is not simply the absence of restraint (Ryan 1989, p. 190).

Although governments are a creation of men and women, and thereby unnatural, they are a necessary evil to ensure individual free-
dom in society. Even Friedman recognizes that capitalism, while necessary for freedom, is not sufficient by itself to guarantee freedom. It must be accompanied with a set of values and political institutions favorable for freedom (Friedman 1977, p. 239).

Conclusion

There are no free lunches in society. If collectivist values were to be pursued, they would necessarily involve the violation of the rights of others. In other words, the freedom of some individuals suffers by considering societal values as rights. Within collectivist societies the individual is regarded as subordinate to social goals. By asserting that society as an abstract entity is entitled to these rights, a collective forces the individual to be self-less, taking away individual freedom.

Individualism only requires freedom for individuals so they may act according to their own self-interests. Encouraging a realistic acknowledgment of human action in a free environment, it also describes that behavior in the context of society. In this way individualism is as much a description of social reality as it is a proponent for a specific human behavior.

Since the natural rights of life, liberty, and property came before any organized society, society's role with respect to these rights should be to protect them. Thus, the role of government should be to protect natural rights. This can be done by promoting individualism through a framework of market capitalism. This framework will allow freedom for individual self-interest and thus, society as a whole.
References


