



# INDIVIDUALISM: A VITAL OUTLOOK FOR MODERN GENERATION

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to examine some details of the values of individualism, with the aim to explain why these principles are so significant and simplify it to entirely explain all complex social phenomena. The researcher finds that the Western world is based, by and large, upon the dominant modern theory of free, equal and autonomous individuals in open and symmetrical competition in a free marketplace of commodities and ideas. Its fundamental assumption is the conception of the individual as an isolated entity separated from its own environment, living as a self-sufficient being. From this conception, what society is, how society works, is exclusively explained in terms of the behaviour of such individuals; ultimately, the individual is the cause and the only constituent of society.

This paper is organized around three general assumptions. The first is that some form of individualism – broadly conceived as the view that the individual human being is a maker of the world he/she inhabit has been a key factor in the philosophy and the life of the West since the Enlightenment.

The second assumption is that, since the last century, the 'individual' order of the modern Western world has met with challenges that have rendered its beliefs and doctrines problematic. Historical developments, social challenges, such as industrialization, have altered the philosophical foundations in which individual identity and responsibility are conceived. One needs to reflect anew on the status of the individual in our contemporary world. Hence, the third assumption is that the notion of individualism, which has played a central role in the formation of the post-Renaissance world, needs to be examined in the wake of some other perspectives namely by contrasting it with its antonym, the notion of collectivity.

Therefore, it can be suggested that methodological individualism, fictive (or abstract) individualism and the metaphysics of individualist social philosophy is reductionist. The first is primarily the reductionist claim that all complex social phenomena are ultimately to be explained in terms of the actions of individual agents; the second is akin to the Hobbesian thesis that we come into existence overnight fully formed like mushrooms; according to the third, the only entity that is real and exists in the (social) universe is the individual (human being), all other entities, such as the family or society in general are not real and do not exist, as these ultimately are nothing more than logical constructions out of the individual beings, which alone are real and exist. It would then be obvious why any analysis of collective behavior from an individualist stand-point is necessarily very restrictive. However, although individualism is the dominant social philosophy in modern Western thought, there are also other currents, such as collectivism (to which the researcher shall be making a briefly reference in the course of this paper), which is seen as the rival social philosophy to that of individualism.

## INDIVIDUALISM: A BRIEF HISTORICAL OUTLINE

From Weber's (1967, 222) point of view, the term "individualism" embraces the greatest heterogeneity of meanings. Weber advocated a far-ranging systematic inquiry into this term. Here, the researcher is limited only to the brief concepts of individuality, in relation to the historical phenomenon of individualism.

The complexity of such an approach is due to the fact that in accounting for the individuality of individuals, and the history of individualism, one does



not start with the logic of structural orders but with the evolution of social practices.

In the history of philosophy, the question of how to conceive individuality has a long scholastic tradition, and so even before the modern period, we have evidence of interest in this notion. In last two centuries, if we look at sociological theory, we can see that history is conceived as a process of increasing individualism, which has two different traditions. According to Luhmann one of them advocates that, "Growing social differentiation leads to increasingly generalised symbolic frame- works, which make it increasingly necessary to respectively situations, roles, and activities, which results in increasingly individual human beings." (1986, 313)

The other tradition conceives the individual as an emerging unit from social encounters. However, sociology does not have the last word about this. If we look at European intellectual history in general we can see a great number of attempts to define and promote individuality. By Descartes's time, medieval scholastic debate had settled that the individuality of the individual could not be defined by pointing to some special quality of the individual in counter-distinction to other qualities, and that it is not something given to an individual from the outside. An individual is the source of his/her own individuality; the concept of individuality therefore has to be defined by self-reference. In the seventeenth century, on the basis of a certain belief system, there was a tendency to associate individuality with libertinage or in the words of Luhmann, "with a fort esprit that defied religion." (1986, 315) One century later, religion was replaced by a new cult of sensitivity and friendship, and the individual was seen as a sociable person with a new way of looking at nature as well as society.

The Principle of Individuation supposes two distinct problems: the causes of metaphysical individuation, and of epistemological individuation. Efforts to determine these problems presuppose an understanding of the nature of individuality. Individuality normally involved indivisibility, difference, division within species, identity through time, etc. According to Thomas Aquinas, individuation is matter under dimension, what he called 'materia signata' or 'designated matter'. However, philosophers such as Ockham and Suárez do not share the same point of view. From Ockham's point of view, individuals are individual essentially (*per se*) and therefore they do not undergo individuation. According to these conditions, there is no need for a metaphysical principle of individuation, or as Suárez argues, the principle of individuation is identified as the individual entity itself. It is not my aim to discuss all the problems

posed by these theories, but one can see the great complexity of the matter by this brief note alone.

In making a judgment, the individual would no longer depend on his/her social stratum but on realisation of his/her self-fulfillment. With Kant the individuality of the individual reaches a new intellectual level. Given the turn to the "transcendental", the facts of consciousness had to be evaluated by a kind of double standard: empirical and transcendental. As a result, the individual (not only the Cartesian mind) emerged as the subject, as subject of the world.

Experiencing the world, the individual could claim to have a source of certainty within him/herself. He/she could set out to achieve self-realisation in the world. The history of the individuality of the individual does not continue beyond this point or rather, it continues only as the history of individualism.

There are several different ways of understanding individualism, as there are different theories and kinds of individualism such as ethical individualism, possessive individualism, and methodological, which all show their great thematic complexities. A comprehensive definition of the term individualism is not easy to obtain. The Enlightenment, with its roots in liberalism, has become identified with the thesis that "the fact of living with others is not generally conceived as being necessary" (Tzvetan, 1996, 43). This presupposes that each of us is a purely autonomous individual, and that individuality, not community, is humankind's predicament. Every individual human being is morally autonomous and should be held fully responsible for his/her actions, when their actions impinge upon the well-being or rights of others. Only when human uniqueness and the right of autonomy are respected can each individual achieve a certain measure of self-actualisation or, in other words, to develop his/her individual potential to the fullest. As one can see, central to the idea of autonomy is the notion of self-governance. The human agent is regarded as an individual, by nature free, equal and independent, with authority to regulate his/her own behaviour.

In particular, an individual is autonomous (at the social level) to the degree to which he/she subjects the pressures and norms with which one is confronted to conscious and critical evaluation, and forms intentions and reaches practical decisions as the result of independent and rational reflection (Lukes, 1974, 52).

The term autonomy in ancient Greece was applied to the city-states and was, therefore, a political concept. Autonomous from *autos*, meaning self, and *nomos*, meaning law. In the modern period, Kant, who gave autonomy a central place in his philosophy extended the notion to persons. Wolff gives a sound



explanation of the Kantian notion of autonomy when he says that, "The responsible man is not capricious or anarchic, for he does acknowledge himself bound by moral constraints. But he insists that he alone is the judge of those constraints. He may listen to the advice of others, but he makes it his own by determining for himself whether it is good advice. He may learn from others his moral obligations, but only in the sense that a mathematician learns from other mathematicians. He does not learn in the sense that one learns from an explorer, by accepting as true his accounts of things one cannot see for oneself. Since the responsible man arrives at moral decisions, which he expresses, to himself in the form of imperatives, we may say that he gives laws to himself, or he is self-legislating. In short, he is autonomous."(1970, 13-14). Enlightenment thinkers have been accused of a preoccupation with individual rights, and with a striking lack of interest in the community, tradition, social practices, and culture as playing any role in individual development. MacIntyre writes: "According to the Enlightenment project, the individual moral agent is sovereign in his moral authority."(1981, 60). In his book, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* he reinforces his position when he says, "What the Enlightenment made us for the most part blind to and what we now need to recover is... a conception of rational enquiry as embodied in a tradition, a conception according to which standards of rational justification themselves emerge from and are a part of a history."(1988, 7).

In MacIntyre's view, an understanding of oneself can only be attained in the context of the community. Thus while individualists think in terms of the priority of the self over its aims, collectivists regard this distinction and this priority as artificial, even impossible. These underline a long debate between individualists and collectivists. the researcher here, able to give but the briefest account of the differences between the two theoretical standpoints through an emphasis on individualism.

In a broad sense, individualism is that tendency to underline individual liberty, as against external authority, and individual activity, as against associated activity. In all forms of individualism, the emphasis is on the importance of the self, and especially the notion of self-development with no restraint or help from without. Individualism is scarcely a principle; it exhibits too many facets and is too general to be called a theory, but it is probably best described as a tendency or an attitude, the tendency or the attitude of centering on the idea that the individual human being is a maker of the world he/she inhabits. This tendency or attitude has played a key role in the formation of the post-Renaissance world.

Individualism holds that the individual is the primary unit of reality and the ultimate standard of value. The individual is the primary possessor of rights. (Its corollary is that activities of the state ought to be confined to the protection of those rights). Individualism dissociates the "free" individual from the matrix of social relations and norms that in fact make agency, freedom, and even self-consciousness possible. This view does not deny that speaking from the point of view of common sense societies exist or that people benefit from living in them, but, philosophically speaking, it regards society as a mere collection of individuals, not something over and above them.

Individualists see people dealing primarily with individual reality; every individual human being is an end in him/herself. No individual should be sacrificed for the sake of another; this is the reason why they consider the individual as the unit of achievement. While not denying that one individual's development depends on others, individualism points out that one's achievement always goes beyond what has already been done; this means that the individual in its own achievement always triggers off something new and not in society especially understood as a whole. Individualism is called individualism not because it exhorts the individual to seek life apart from others, but because it asserts that the individual, and not the group, is the primary constituent of society.

In contrast to the propositions of individualism, collectivism maintains that the group is an entity in its own right, a thing that can act upon people.<sup>5</sup> One can summarise the collectivist approach in the following three propositions:

- (a) The social whole is more than the sum of its parts.
- (b) The behaviour or functioning of the parts is significantly influenced by the social whole.
- (c) The behaviour of individuals can only be understood in terms of their macroscopic world, the correctives, forces and purposes which are *sui generis* and which apply to the social system as a whole, within which individuals are situated and positioned.

The first proposition is an affirmation of the idea that society is more than a simple aggregation of autonomous individuals. This presupposes that societies have an order and a structure in itself that makes them more than just groups of independently acting individuals. This simple conviction underlines the undeniable importance of history and traditions of a social group in giving it union and its own special characteristics.

The second proposition reinforces the importance of social rules and ethical norms of behaviour which (methodological) individualism denies. One can say that the social has inevitably a



great influence upon the individual, that cultural factors are reflected in the individual although without entirely determining individual behaviour.

As Baumman says: "To the autonomous society, significations (also the meanings of "being moral") do not appear groundless, though they are blatantly devoid of "foundations" in the sense implied by ethical philosophers; they are "founded" all right, but their foundations are made of the same stuff as the significations they found. They are also, the sediments of an ongoing process of self-creation (1995, 19-20)".

According to Kim: "Collectivism is defined by explicit and firm group boundaries: It is considered to be more than the mere sum of individual characteristics. In collectivist societies, one of the most important differentiations made about individuals is whether a person is part of an in-group or an out-group. He say that the Collectivist cultures emphasize a 'we' versus 'they' distinction. Therefore, the stress on collectivist interests, accords, and duties typically applies only to the in-group and usually does not expands to out-groups.

The third proposition has been the subject of a great critique by individualists. Nevertheless, what collectivists stress is the fact that individual behaviour cannot be entirely explained without reference to social conditions. While collectivism sees us being influenced by the group, individualism underscores the idea that other individuals influence the individual. While collectivism considers individuals building on the ideas and achievements of society, individualism stresses the ideas and achievements of individuals. However, it is important to note that the force with which the social is seen as influencing or determining the behaviour of the individual is not the same amongst all collectivists. It is not my aim to discuss here all the nuances between the various collectivist points of view. What the collectivists tend to emphasize is the priority of the social over the individual. They stress that human beings are a social product, rather than that society is the product of human beings.

## **TYPES OF INDIVIDUALISM: METHODOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM**

There are different forms of individualism, which may be distinguished. The researcher would like to give a brief account of some of them, before going on to concentrate on a more detailed examination of methodological individualism in this section (and, then, of abstract individualism in the next section). It is possible, at least, to identify several other forms of individualism, which would not be pursuing. First utilitarian individualism which emphasises that each individual pursues his/her life almost with his/her own

interests in mind. Second, romantic individualism, which defends that individuals are incommensurable and invaluable. Third, market individualism presupposes the belief in economic liberty, which advocates the minimum of state interference and the maximum of economic liberty with the aim to attaining efficiency. (This is the individualism defended by Hayek, underlined by the notion of "spontaneous order" to which I shall be returning later.) Fourth, juridical individualism states that the individual is considered as the creative source of law. Fifth, ethical individualism supposes that the individual conscience is the ultimate court of appeal for the validity of ethical norms. Sixth, sociological individualism privileges the multiplication and differentiation of social roles and the emancipation of the self from the social roles it performs. Seventh, epistemological individualism, which grants the individual as a knowing subject, separated from the object (which it must construct), mistrusting what "realty" presents to it, and searching to establish the conditions of true knowledge.

Individualism can be a process of characterisation, legitimisation, or explanation. Regarding the characterisation of institutions and social behavior, it is in this sense that we speak of sociological individualism, economic individualism, and juridical individualism. It could also be a process of legitimisation of institutions and norms and values, particularly political ones. This allows Macpherson (1962, 3) to discuss "possessive individualism" and the difficulties this poses in resolving the problem of political obligation, which it has itself, in part created. This "possessive individualism" is based on the conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his/her own capacities, owing nothing to society for them.

Finally, individualism can form the basis of a process of explanation. It can be a way of both posing problems and conceiving answers to questions of analysis. Methodological individualism, whose aim is to explain collective (macroscopic) behaviour and strategies, is quite distinct from the other approaches to individualism, because it is an attitude of the researcher, not of the object of study; it does not characterise the process studied, but the methodological approach itself. I shall now examine this method.

Hobbes, who was the first to articulate the principle of individualism, asserts that: "It is necessary that we know the things that are to be compound before we can know the whole compound" for "everything is best understood by its constitutive causes", the causes of the social compound residing in "men as if but even now sprung out of the earth, and suddenly, like mushrooms, come to full maturity



without all kinds of engagement to each other." (Lukes, 1973, 119)

Inspired by this Hobbesian approach, methodological individualists assert that the ultimate or final explanation of the more significant social phenomena must be given in terms of at least typical dispositions (including beliefs, attitudes, and wills) of the anonymous individuals involved. Individualists often seem to present this approach as self-evident. The question, which arises, is whether we should deal with macro social events and conditions as mere aggregates or configurations of the actions, attitudes, relations and circumstances of men or women who participate in, enjoy, or suffer them. The individualistic answer is, "yes" and this in turn serves as a refutation of the "planned society".

Watkins (1973), one of the most prominent recent advocates of methodological individualism, has presented it primarily as a theory of sociological or historical explanation. In formulating their material requirement, individualists often have in mind successful patterns of explanation in other branches of science. According to Watkins, the principle of methodological individualism is a correlate of the principle of mechanism in physics, which held triumphant sway from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. An especially prestigious example of the application of the mechanistic principle is the explanation of the solar system by reference to Newton's laws as well as the positions, masses, and moments of its component "individuals". Another example, often cited, is the explanation of the macro properties of a gas – its temperature, for example – as the result of the micro properties of its molecules. The best illustration of the same explanatory procedure in social science is afforded by classical economics, which regards macro states of the market as a result of the dispositions and consequent activities of individual sellers, buyers and consumers.

One can say that three fundamental propositions are at the basis of methodological individualism:

- (a) Only individuals have interests and aims;
- (b) Only the actions of the individuals are able to form the social system, and bring about changes to it;
- (c) Only the dispositions, beliefs, resources and interrelations of individuals are the basis of all explanations of large scale sociological phenomena.

The first two propositions are related to the nature of social reality, which is based on the individualist insistence on the priority of individual actors over the social whole. The first proposition underlines the fact that only individuals have interests and aims; it presupposes that any collective entity, institution or society, cannot possess its own distinct purpose or aim. The second proposition presupposes

that collectivities, institutions or social life is the result of intended or unintended actions and decisions of individuals. The third proposition is concerned with the programme of research, which refers to the reductionist thesis that all social explanation must be ultimately expressible in terms of facts about individual humans. Methodological individualism is a reductive methodology. As such it is pervasively pre-supposed and used throughout all the sciences.

If one wants to summarise these propositions one can say that they contain two related claims. The first claim says that social theories could be reducible to individual theories, and the second advocates that an adequate explanation of social phenomena must only refer to individuals, their relations, and their dispositions (Kincaid, 1986, 493).

Reduction in the social sciences is usually presented as a consequence of propositions (a) and (b) mentioned earlier. Only people have aims and purposes; as a consequence the social system is merely the outcome of the sum of the actions of such individuals. How adequate or sound is this approach? Critics have not been slow to point out that it is not easy to eliminate social predicates and express a social theory only in individualistic terms. For instance, Rutherford has pointed out four reasons as the basis of this difficulty: "First, social terms such as "class" or "bureaucracy" do not define a single particular set of individual relations, states, and beliefs. Second, individual actions take their meaning from their surrounding context, and these contexts usually involve social institutions and norms, which must also be described individually. Third, there is the related problem raised by descriptions of behaviour that utilize the notion of social roles. ... Fourth, these arguments can be given a historical dimension."(1996, 34-35). The quotation attests to the implausibility of successfully completing the reductionist programme. It is not possible to explain the individual's present behaviour without any reference to the existing institutions or collectivities in which he/she is situated. The institutions or collectivities may be explained as the result of the actions of individuals in the past; however, those past actions can only, in turn, be explained by mentioning the set of institutions or collectivities that existed at that time.

From the point of view of methodological individualism, as Bhargava explains, "(all) social scientific explanations are arguments in which statements about particular social phenomena are deducible from a set of initial conditions and laws about individuals and their properties. ... This states that all particular social phenomena have to be explained deductive-homologically in terms of individuals and their properties." (1992, 23).



Such a claim that completely adequate explanation of collective phenomena must be given only on the basis of the behaviour of the individual and his/her strategies is implausible. As Rutherford argues: “individualist explanation only requires the explanation of every particular social event or entity on a case-by-case basis rather than the explanation of kinds of social events or types of social entities.” (1996, 35).

Such explanations are a consequence of the “supereminence thesis” which states that ultimately what determines the totality of social facts is the totality of individual facts, whatever the complexity and reciprocity that exist in the relations between social entities and individuals. Even if these explanations are a consequence of the “supereminence thesis”, it is difficult to accept these explanations as completely adequate. It appears difficult to justify that completely adequate explanations could only be done in individualistic terms. Even when it is possible to achieve theoretical reductions, it is more difficult, if not impossible, to achieve the same reductions in practice.

What this model holds is that what society is, how society works, is exclusively explained in terms of the behaviour of the individuals, and ultimately, the individual is the cause and the only constituent of society. This model does not lead us to a deeper understanding concerning human agency, namely how an agent ought to behave towards other agents and also the exchanges between the agents and their material environment. On this basis, the notion of responsibility remains only individual responsibility, which explains the difficulty within such a framework of attributing collective or corporate responsibility.

This individualist approach concerning the understanding of the relationship between individuals and society is far from being eradicated from social philosophy. Hayek’s social philosophy (much in vogue in Britain in the 1980s) is underpinned by this individualistic point of view. He writes: “There is no other way toward an understanding of social phenomena but through our understanding of individual actions directed toward other people and guided by their expected behavior.” (1948, 6).

It describes the general order of society, which Hayek explains through the theory of “spontaneous order”. In a pluralistic free society the general spontaneous order is catallaxy, not taxis<sup>7</sup> (the order produced by an explicit plan). Under catallaxy, society is open to growth, and the rule of law obtains. The notion of spontaneous order is an ideal type of social organisation developed around a free competitive market. Hayek does not describe how “things” actually happen; indeed it is a theoretical reconstruction. This theoretical reconstruction and the rule formation patterns emerge unintentionally from casual human

interactions in the various spheres of social interdependence.

From the Hayekian point of view, forces outside the system can raise a created order, or order may be created from within, as equilibrium is generated by the interactions of elements, whose natures impel them towards stable formations. A spontaneous order is formed spontaneously given the existence of particular elements in a certain environment. According to this view, the social order itself, as well as language, law should be understood as spontaneous order. In viewing society in this way, Hayek emphasises that it is not a product of human design or (direct) intention. Even if it is the result of human intention (indirect), it evolves without anyone controlling its development.

Spontaneous order is the secondary result of the regularities produced by the working of systems of uncreated rules. The system of uncreated rules is something more than a mere instrument for the display of rationality, insofar as it is constitutive of social practices, shared meanings, common understanding, and personal identity. They are not conceived of as instruments towards any goal. However, they are the indispensable presupposition for any aim to be reached; they meaningfully define the spheres of social activity. As Hayek asserts: “Rules are a device for coping with our constitutional ignorance ... The function of rules of conduct is a means for overcoming the obstacle presented by our ignorance of the particular facts, which must determine the overall order” (1973, 76).

Hayek distinguishes two kinds of order: made order or taxis and grown order or cosmos. The first one is an exogenous order or an artificial one and the second one is an endogenous or a spontaneous order. He sees catallaxy as a “self-equilibrating system of production, distribution and exchange.” (1960).

This theory is grounded on his notion of anthropological ignorance and it has a great connection with the notion of liberty. According to Hayek, liberty lies in the impossibility of properly calculating or ascertaining the consequences of actions. In other words, liberty coincides with social indeterminacy from the point of view of ignorant individuals. In the Constitution of Liberty, Hayek upholds the theory of the abstractness of the human mind. He maintains that cognitive processes follow abstract schemata and do not yield empirical generalisations. Therefore, he establishes two kinds of priorities: the priority of the schemata oriented and the priority of rule-governed behaviour in practical life. If we cannot create rules, how can we work efficiently? Moreover, Hayek argues that: “We are able to understand one another and get along with one another, are able to act successfully on our plans because most of the time members of our civilisation conform to unconscious



patterns of conduct, show a regularity in their action that is not the result of command and coercion, often not even of any conscious adherence to known rules, but of firmly established habits and traditions. The general observance of these conventions is a necessary condition of the orderliness of the world in which we live, of our being able to find out our way in it though we do not know their significance and may not even be consciously aware of their existence."(1960, 62). According to this view, the rules of conduct are not simply regulative rules of behaviour. Indeed, they are constitutive rules defining the variety of possible interactions in the various domains of human action; they supply the agents with the means of understanding and communication and allow social co-ordination.

As the researcher previously mentioned, Hayek's individualism is founded on his social theory, the theory of spontaneous order.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

What I have tried to underline in the preceding reflections is the fact that the focus of individualism is undoubtedly on the individual, which constitutes the basic entity in the ontological furniture of the social universe as well as the methodological bottom line in the explanation of social phenomena.

It would follow from the above account of individualism, both methodological and fictive/abstract, that only individual responsibility makes sense and that collective responsibility is absurd and/or unintelligible. From the philosophy of individualism I have tried to make clear, all along this paper, how deeply seated the individualistic view is, embedded in our western social thought until today.

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