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DISTINCTIONS

Individualism vs. Collectivism

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The conflict between individualism and collectivism has played a central role in Western political thought since the French Revolution. However, the relationship between this distinction and other distinctions (e.g., liberal vs. integralist, right vs. left, capitalist vs. socialist, conservative vs. progressive) is fraught with complexity. There have been liberal collectivists and authoritarian individualists, as well as right-wing collectivists, left-wing individualists, socialists who are self-described individualists and others who are collectivists, and so too for capitalists, conservatives, and progressives. Some key thinkers have been embraced by both sides, including Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Edmund Burke, David Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and John Stuart Mill. Is there a simple, coherent distinction here, or merely random noise, useful only for unprincipled rhetoric?

The term "individual" first appears in the grammarians of late antiquity—in Porphyry's *Isagoge* of the late third century A.D. Porphyry writes: "*Individual* is said of one particular alone. Socrates is said to be individual." In the context of politics, it is clearly the human individual that matters. Individualism is a theory or worldview that gives some kind of priority to human individuals over groups, institutions, and shared practices; collectivism reverses this priority. But what sort of priority is in view? There are three possibilities: normative, epistemological, and ontological, corresponding to the three major branches of philosophy (value theory, epistemology, and metaphysics).

What would it mean to give *normative priority* to individuals? This might take the form of insisting that all value is value that is intrinsic to individuals,

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such as pleasure or pain, satisfaction or dissatisfaction of individual preferences or desires, or the impeded or unimpeded activity of individuals as such. Normative collectivism would insist, in contrast, on the priority of the common good, a good that pertains irreducibly to society as a whole (or to smaller groups of individuals)—a value that is not merely a function (summative or otherwise) of individual values. For example, collectivists might take social harmony or the effective functioning of certain social institutions as having value in and of themselves, a value that typically trumps considerations of individual pleasure or freedom. Normative priority might also take the form of the preferential assignment of rights or duties to individuals or collectives.

Normative priority could be taken in a wide or narrow sense. For example, individualists might claim that all value is fundamentally individual, or they might limit this claim to specifically legal or political value, leaving open the possibility that communal values dominate in the private, non-coercive spheres.

However, such normative priority (whether general or limited) inevitably raises deeper metaphysical questions. I have already tacitly engaged in metaphysical questions, in merely trying to define normative priority. In order to say that individual values trump collective ones, or vice versa, we must rely at least implicitly on some metaphysical theory about the constitution of individual and collective values. For example, are "collective" values merely the sum of fundamentally individual values? Or, conversely, are "individual" values merely the participation of individuals in some collective good? Either possibility would result in a collapse of the distinction between individualism and collectivism. To make sense of the very question of priority, we must address the question of whether or not there exist fundamentally or irreducibly individual or collective values, and this is a metaphysical question.

Let's turn instead to epistemological priority. One of the characteristic features of early modern philosophy was the transition to a radically individualistic epistemology, pioneered by René Descartes. In the early modern view, all questions of knowledge and reasonable belief depend entirely on the operation of the individual mind, along with individual faculties like sense perception and memory. Moderns rejected tradition, shared custom, and testimony as independent sources of knowledge. Hume, for example, argues that one can trust the testimony of another only on the basis of firsthand empirical knowledge of the other's reliability. In contrast, scholastics employed a collectivist epistemology, in which knowledge belongs primarily to a community and only secondarily to its members. On the scholastic view, knowledge is an irreducibly communal and historical enterprise, with tradition and custom playing an indispensable role.

Here again, we find ourselves driven into deeper metaphysical waters. Individualist epistemology makes sense only if thoughts, beliefs, evidence, and inference are irreducibly and fundamentally individual affairs, which implies that the human individual is, in his cognitive functioning, ontologically independent of any wider group or practice. Conversely, collectivist epistemology presupposes that groups can perform cognitive actions (entertain hypotheses, evaluate evidence, draw conclusions) that are more than the sum of individual actions.

I conclude that the fundamental distinction is that between ontological individualism and collectivism. The dispute concerns the relevant ontological priority: are groups wholly "grounded in" human individuals, in such a way that groups are "nothing over and above" the individuals? Or, alternatively, are individuals and their properties wholly grounded in facts about larger groups, in such a way that individuals are nothing but nodes in extended social networks? Are individuals ontologically reducible to groups, or vice versa? Or are both equally fundamental, resulting in a form of individual-collective dualism?

Ontological priority has been an area of intense philosophical investigation over the last twenty years, beginning with Kit Fine's "Question of Realism" in 2001.[1] Here again, we can distinguish a spectrum of possibilities, from extreme priority to perfect parity. Let's focus just on individualism for the moment. There are at least five forms that ontological individualism could take. Before introducing the five forms, I need to introduce the ideas of a "narrowly individualist fact" and "narrowly collectivist fact." A fact is narrowly individualist if it is a fact about the psychology of the individual human being that includes no essential reference to social phenomena, i.e., to the individual's social environment, social practices and activities in which he participates, or social relations between the individual and other individuals. For example, facts about sensations or sense perception of physical states would be narrowly individualist, as would desires for sensations, feelings, or physical results. Thoughts or intentions that are directly about one's relationship with others or membership in social groups would not count as narrowly individualist. In contrast a fact is narrowly collectivist if it is a fact about social institutions, practices, and activities that makes no essential reference to the inner states of individual human beings. Some facts about macroeconomic phenomena or large-scale political or social trends might qualify. Given these ideas, we can describe a spectrum of forms of individualism and collectivism. Here are the forms of individualism—for the forms of collectivism, replace "individual" with "collective."

[1] Kit Fine, "Question of Realism," *Philosophers' Imprint,* no. 1 (2001):1-30; Jonathan Schaffer, "Grounding in the Image of Causation," *Philosophical Studies* 173, no. 1(2016):49-100.

1. *Eliminative individualism*. In the human domain, nothing exists in any sense except human individuals and their intrinsic states. Groups, institutions, and shared practices are mere fictions—possibly useful ideas without real world counterparts of any kind. No statement or thought involving such entities can be literally true.
2. *Conceptually reductive individualism*. Some thoughts or statements involving (non-trivially) collectivist concepts are true (and so some collective entities "exist," in a loose sense), but all concepts involving social collectives are *definable* in terms of narrowly individual traits and characteristics, and not vice versa. We can make sense of collectivist concepts only in individualist terms. Collectivist theories can be replaced (without loss) by theories stated entirely in individualistic terms. All genuine explanation can and should be expressed in individualist terms. Theoretical science can (in principle) be unified along purely individualist lines.
3. *Ontologically reductive individualism*. Some collectivist concepts are indefinable and theoretically indispensable, and some thoughts (non-trivially) involving such collectivist concepts are literally true of the world. However, there is nothing real in the world that corresponds to any collective entity: they do not exist in the fullest sense. Collectivist concepts do not "cut nature at its joints" (to use Plato's imagery from *Timaeus*)—they do not express the structure of reality (as in Theodore Sider's *Writing the Book of the World*). That which makes collectivist propositions and theories true (when they are true) consists entirely of narrowly individualist entities and facts.
4. *Grounding individualism*. There are collectivist entities and collectivist facts in the world, but these entities and facts are wholly grounded by human individuals and narrowly individualistic facts. Collectivist facts "supervene on" individualistic facts, in such a way that fixing the individualistic facts also fixes the collective ones: collectivist facts cannot vary without some variance at the individual level. All collective facts are explainable (asymmetrically) by the narrowly individualist facts—not explainable causally or historically, but constitutively.
5. *Substantial individualism*. There are metaphysically fundamental, ungrounded, and irreducibly collectivist facts in the world. Nonetheless, human individuals are substances (in the Aristotelian sense) and collective entities are not. The class of human individuals, as a natural kind of substance, shares an essence, and it is this essence that undergirds the

possibility of both individualist and collectivist facts. Any human individual can exist (as a human being) in the absence of any particular collective fact or entity, but all collective facts or entities are tied by their very nature to certain particular human beings (especially, those responsible for founding the collective group or institution). Collective entities are "accidents" of individual substances (to use the scholastic term).

There are, therefore, eleven different positions: five versions of individualism, five of collectivism, and a single position of dualism, which denies any priority of individuals over collectives or collectives over individuals. It might be helpful to consider an analogy. There are a corresponding eleven positions on the mind/body problem, with eliminative materialists and idealists at the two extremes and mind/body dualists in the middle. An eliminative materialist is one who thinks that really there are only material bodies, with minds as at best useful fictions. This view is represented in contemporary philosophy by philosophers like Patricia Churchland or Daniel Dennett. Eliminative idealists, at the other extreme, take only minds to be real and treat bodies as useful fictions. The British idealist J. M. E. McTaggart might have qualified.

Next, we find analytic reductionists, or analytic behaviorists and functionalists (B. F. Skinner, David K. Lewis), who think that mental states can be defined in terms of physical inputs and behaviors, and analytic phenomenalists (George Berkeley, John Stuart Mill), who think physical terms can be defined in terms of sensory impressions.

Ontological reductionists give up any claim about definitions of concepts, but insist that the world's "truthmakers" consist entirely of bodies (or of minds). The ancient materialist Democritus was probably an ontologically reductive materialist ("there is nothing but atoms and the void").

Many modern-day "physicalists" would embrace a still more moderate position, insisting only that the physical realm is the fundamental one, in terms of which all mental phenomena must be ultimately explained or grounded. On this view, minds are real but not part of the basic structure of reality. Kantian idealists are best described as grounding idealists, with material bodies as fully real but ultimately explained in mental terms.

The most moderate form of materialism (substantial materialism) includes the position of some modern neo-Aristotelians (like William Jaworski) and British philosophers P. F. Strawson and David Wiggins, who insist that all minds are necessarily physical substances, denying the possibility of immaterial thought, while accepting that some mental properties of these physical substances are metaphysically fundamental. Panpsychists like David Chalmers or Galen

Strawson and Leibniz could be taken to be substantial idealists, with all of the world's substances being primarily mental in nature.

Mind/body dualism would include both substance dualists (like René Descartes) and classical Aristotelians, who admit the existence of both mindless bodies and bodiless minds (angels or celestial intelligences).

Let's return to the spectrum of individualist and collectivist theories. I have heard a few economists endorse something like eliminative individualism, but it is virtually unheard of among philosophers, as is its counterpart, eliminative collectivism.

Conceptually reductive individualism was at one time quite popular. Thomas Hobbes, for example, seems committed to the view that all social phenomena can be defined in individualistic terms (in terms of the proclivities, aversions, and thought-processes of individuals). This view came under heavy fire during the course of the twentieth century, with nearly all philosophers of the social sciences giving up on the conceptual reduction of the social sciences to individualistic psychology. Roy Bhaskar's critical realism and Anthony Giddens's theory of structuration pushed hard against the idea of analytic reduction to individual states. Non-circular definitions in individualistic terms of such social phenomena as money or authority seems prima facie impossible. On the collectivist side of the ledger, only French structuralists and post-structuralists have attempted to define individualist concepts (like sensory experience, pleasure, or desire) in a wholesale manner in collectivist terms.

Let's look at each philosophical position in turn, beginning with the four viable forms of individualism.

Individualisms

As I mentioned, Hobbes is a paradigm of the conceptually reductive individualist. Classical economists like John Stuart Mill, the Austrian school of economics (Menger, von Mises, Hayek), and sociologists following Max Weber similarly envisioned an ultimate reduction of the social sciences to individualist psychology. For example, in neo-classical economics, individual utility is defined over "states" of the worlds, with "states" so defined as to exclude any interest in the behavior or attitudes of others as such. For the equilibrium theorems of neo-classical economics to work, the states over which both individual utility and probability are defined must themselves be specifiable in a way that is wholly independent of the choices or actions of the agents

involved. My individual "demand" for shoes, for example, must be specifiable in a way that is independent of the number and quality of shoes worn or desired by others. This seems a highly unrealistic assumption. As René Girard has argued in this theory of mimetic desire, an individual's desire for something is highly sensitive to the perceived desires of others.

Karl Popper objected to conceptually reductive individualism, on the grounds that man's social environment is not entirely the product of prior conscious intention and action by individuals. To think otherwise is to indulge in Hobbesian or Rousseauan fantasies about a pre-social state of nature, in which human beings were, despite the absence of language, capable of rational deliberation and choice.

We can see a transition from conceptually reductive to ontologically reductive individualism in the work of Friedrich Hayek, perhaps under the influence of Karl Popper. Hayek argued that all social facts are partly constituted by the social theories of individuals. The concepts of social science cannot be defined in a non-circular way in terms of individualist psychology, but it is nonetheless true that reality consists only of human individuals and their thoughts. Hayek took for granted that human thought and intentionality is a narrowly individualist phenomenon.

This individualist assumption about thought is expressed most fully by René Descartes. My ideas and their contents or meanings exist in complete independence of my social environment. They may have been caused by contact with others, but their existence and intrinsic natures does not in any sense depend *now* on concurrent social facts. Descartes achieves this autonomy by first proposing a radical dichotomy between a person's mind and his body. The two are distinct substances, with only extrinsic, causal interaction between the two. Nothing about an individual's experience or thought is even partly constituted by facts about his body. This mind/body dichotomy has the immediate by-product of separating individuals from their social as well as their physical environment, since all social connections have physical mediation.

This assumption of the ontological autonomy of individual thought dominates Western philosophy from Descartes until the middle of the twentieth century. It then suffers powerful attacks from a number of quarters: Wittgenstein's attack on the possibility of a "private" language, the semantic "externalism" of Saul Kripke, Keith Donnellan, Hilary Putnam, and Tyler Burge, and the concept of a shared "lifeworld" of Heidegger and Habermas. Hegel's historical and social construction of individual phenomenology (in *The Phenomenology of Spirit,* 1807) paved the way for these anti-individualist critiques, as did still earlier theories of the irreducibly social nature of language

and thought by such figures as Johann Georg Hamann and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Although John Locke is ordinarily thought of as an individualist, the story is somewhat more complicated, since Locke explicitly rejects the substance dualism of Descartes. Instead, Locke conceives of the individual person as a kind of stream of consciousness, conceptually but perhaps not ontologically independent of the functioning of the body. Personal identity (persistence through time) is not for Locke any kind of persistence of a mental entity: it is rather a "forensic" notion, anchored in the psychological and causal continuity of the flow of consciousness. Locke thus opens the door to ontological collectivism, even if he never walks through the doorway.

Eliminative and reductive individualisms seem to fit best either with utilitarianism or with forms of liberalism or libertarianism that emphasize individual autonomy. In each case, it is the welfare or the free agency of the individual human being that is the bottom line for evaluating any social arrangement. Human beings cannot be essentially social or political, since the human essence can incorporate only real entities and properties. Hence, social arrangements are absolutely instrumental in nature, and the idea of an irreducibly common good disappears.

The next position, grounding individualism, is the most common position in contemporary analytic philosophy. It also characterizes the views of Emile Durkheim and of the neo-Marxist Jon Elster. This position is closely associated with its materialist counterpart, grounding materialism or "physicalism." Contemporary philosophers Philip Pettit, Kai Spiekermann, and Christian List defend such a view in a way that is explicitly dependent on a prior commitment to physicalism. Ironically, individualism of a kind can be supported by either extreme mind/body dualism or by a moderate form of materialism, the "Cartesian physicalism" that replaces Descartes's thinking substance with the central nervous system.

Although social phenomena in this view are real, they are asymmetrically dependent on and explainable by individual phenomena, precisely because all mental phenomena are dependent on and explainable by facts about the central nervous systems of individual human beings. Even if some of the content of individual thought is irreducibly social (as Wittgenstein, Kripke, and others have argued), we can make the distinction advocated by Jerry Fodor between *broad* and *narrow* content (*A Theory of Content and Other Essays*, 1990). Broad content depends on the thinker's physical and social environment, while narrow content depends only on the contemporaneous and intrinsic state of the thinker's nervous system. All broad content (and, correspondingly, all social phenomena)

can be ultimately explained, in this view, in terms of individual psychology and physical facts of the environment.

However, the dominance of such physicalism may be nearing its end. Nearly a decade ago, George Bealer and I edited a volume entitled *The Waning of Materialism* (2010), in which we assembled a battery of state-of-the-art objections to physicalism, based on the qualitative aspect of experience ("qualia"), the self-referential nature of intentionality, human agency, and personal unity and identity. In the years since, the physicalist consensus has weakened further, thanks to powerful arguments developed by David Chalmers, Brian Cutter, Tomas Bogardus, Alexander Pruss, and others. As physicalism declines, the case for grounding individualism crumbles. In the emerging view, mental and physical facts are equally fundamental ("equiprimordial," to use Heidegger's term). Since human thought is, at least in part, essentially social in nature, the new view undermines the accepted basis for fundamental individualism.

Grounding individualism is compatible with a wide range of normative political views. There is some room for a conception of the common good, since social structures are real (even if not fundamentally so). However, human beings cannot be (on this view) essentially social or political, since the essence of a kind of thing must be part of the fundamental structure of things, and *ex hypothesi* social facts are excluded. The essence of an individual human being cannot, on this view, involve any facts about others. Hence, it seems that the common good can itself only be an instrumental good, or good only because (and insofar as) it is valued by human individuals. Similarly, knowledge would have to be fundamentally an individual and not a social product.

The most moderate form of individualism is *substantial* individualism. This is the view of Aristotle and his many followers, including scholastic thinkers like Thomas Aquinas. While accepting that collective and individual facts are equally fundamental, Aristotelians nonetheless insist that only human individuals are substances. Within the human domain, only individual human beings belong to a natural kind with a true essence or self-contained nature. The very possibility of collective entities and social phenomena is wholly rooted in this individual nature, the nature of a social or political animal. Political states and other social institutions and practices have only natures *secundum quid*: incomplete natures that make sense only by reference to individual human beings as participants.

From a political point of view, substantial individualism is quite sufficient as a metaphysical basis for individual natural rights. In addition, substantial individualists can make sense of the great value of individual liberty, since (as

Frank Meyer argued) a well-ordered and virtuous society requires that individuals be given sufficient opportunity to develop wisdom and virtue through exercising free choice. At the same time, Aristotelians can embrace the concept of the common good, i.e., value that belongs to society as such, and not merely as an aggregate of individual values. They can, and often do, insist on the priority of the common good over any "private" good, where a private good is a good that pertains only to the individual or to some smaller subset of the political whole. Although the common good is not a sum of individual goods, it forms nonetheless the most important component of the happiness of each citizen, since each citizen is by nature a social animal. The common good is a non-exclusionary, indivisible good: by pursuing it together, we each benefit equally. Since human beings are naturally rational and deliberative, the common good consists in social and political justice, a system in which each receives his due, and in which coercion is replaced, wherever possible, by free discussion and mutual consent.

Collectivisms

The modern history of collectivism begins with the reaction to the French Revolution in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. In fact, the term "individualism" began as a pejorative label applied by reactionaries (beginning with Joseph de Maistre) to the Revolution. However, the most extreme forms of collectivism, eliminative and conceptually or ontologically reductive, do not appear until the post-modernism of the mid-twentieth century. Post-modernism has its roots in Freud and in French structuralism and post-structuralism (Saussere, Lévi-Strauss, Althusser, Lacan), which challenged the idea of the autonomous, rational self. In the hands of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, the individual self largely disappears, being replaced by transient and historically constructed nodes in a fundamental social network. Foucault's work was largely a reaction to the hyper-individualism of Jean-Paul Sartre, for whom each individual human being is a discrete knot of "non-being" within an otherwise-continuous field of unconscious being-in-itself.

In principle, one could be a collectivist and yet hold that there is a fixed and eternal human nature, instantiated not by individual human beings, but by human collectivities (perhaps, the *polis* or state). However, modern collectivists tend to be historicists and nominalists, denying that any human entity realizes a fixed nature of any kind. Everything human is historically contingent, all the way down. This leads to a fundamental incoherency at a

practical and moral level, since such historicists cannot appeal to an ideal of Justice that transcends the historical process, and hence they are unable to stand in judgment of any particular development. As G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis argued, we cannot talk of moral "progress" without a transcendent standard by which to orient our moral axes.

Some forms of Marxism are best thought of as a somewhat more moderate version of collectivism: grounding collectivism, or something close to it. On this view, it is society as a whole, or whole classes within society, that constitute the most fundamental level of reality. Individual thought and behavior can be entirely explained by and grounded in collective phenomena. This is especially apt as a description of the "vulgar" Marxism of *Das Kapital* and of Friedrich Engels. The early, more humanistic Marx of the 1844 Manuscript is probably better described as a substantial collectivist, or even an individual-collective dualist. The vulgar Marxist view contradicts our ordinary experience at a deep level. Marxism denies the reality of my agency, i.e., of individual free will. It also must deny the causal power of contact by individual minds with abstract, Platonic truths. It must reject individual insight as a real factor for explanation. Consequently, vulgar Marxism has no room for individual natural rights for recognition of the value of the intellectual freedom of the individual.

The paradigm of the substantial collectivist is, I think, Hegel. For Hegel, it is the collective Spirit that is the ultimate bearer of all mental properties, and the entity whose nature or essence is the ground for all explanation. Nonetheless, Hegel does not deny the reality or even the fundamental reality of the individual self as such. Individual lives are irreducible and fundamentally real aspects of the life of the Spirit.

Hegelian substantial collectivism is compatible with classical liberalism, that is, with a real commitment to individual rights, the free market, and limited government. Unlike vulgar Marxism, Hegelians are able to recognize the fundamental reality and importance of the individual human life. However, Hegelians are liable to a form of historicist relativism, since the fixed nature of Spirit is the nature of an entity that evolves in history through distinct development phases, each with its own set of norms and standards.

The weakest point of Hegel's theory is his implausible claim that it is *Geist* (Spirit) and not individual human beings that have an intelligible nature in terms of which we can explain social phenomena. Despite great efforts over the last 150 years, there is no Hegelian science of Spirit.

Dualism

The British and American idealists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including F. H. Bradley, T. H. Green, Bernard Bosanquet, and Josiah Royce, are best thought of as individual-collective dualists, although they might also be classified as substantial individualists. Their primary concern was to reject the reductive and grounding individualisms of the modern period. The Anglo-American idealists emphasized two key ideas:

- When one is a member of society, one internalizes the common goals or ends of the various social practices one participates in. This results (potentially) in an internal fragmentation through the plurality of competing ends, both private and public.
- One's effective unity as an individual depends on one's giving priority to one's role as citizen, obeying the laws, fulfilling one's assigned duties, supporting the established constitution. It is the political practice (the State) that unifies and coordinates all other practices.

The first point is fatal to all forms of reductive individualism, whether conceptual or ontological. As David-Hillel Ruben has argued persuasively in *The Metaphysics of the Social World* (1985), there is simply no autonomously individualist domain of reality to which the social could be reduced, given the penetration of social practices into the practical reasoning of the individual. By the same token, grounding individualism must also be rejected. This leaves substantial individualism as the only viable form—and, indeed, the idealists did not seem by and large to be interested in challenging an Aristotelian conception of the individual and the polis. The exception may be F. H. Bradley, whose metaphysics seems to require that only the Absolute could count as a substance (which would put Bradley outside our scheme entirely, since the Absolute is neither individual nor collective).

The idealist's second point underscores the close connection between the common good and individual happiness. It is only by making political justice one's paramount aim that one can attain the unity and integrity essential to individual happiness. From a Christian point of view, the idealist program seems to leave no room for a supernatural end—although that charge might also be laid against substantial individualists like Aristotle.

Conclusion

Once we correctly distinguish the various forms of individualism and collectivism, many confusions about the political valency of these ideas disappear. We can see that the more extreme forms of collectivism have strongly totalitarian and relativistic implications, while more moderate forms may avoid them. Similarly, some forms of individualism may require strict liberalism of a progressive, anti-traditional sort, while others can co-exist with both an appreciation for the common good and for the value of the individual human life. The tendency of modern science and philosophy has been toward one of the more moderate forms of individualism (fundamental or substantial), although the more radical alternative of eliminative or reductive collectivism remains in play, as does the anti-traditional individualism of the grounding sort, as embodied in contemporary affirmations (e.g., transgenderism) of radical individual autonomy.