

Myths of Individualism

By Tom G. Palmer

Tom Palmer is author of *Realizing Freedom: Libertarian Theory, History, and Practice*, among other works. In this essay he addresses the misconceptions of individualism common to communitarian critics of liberty.

It has recently been asserted that libertarians, or classical liberals, actually think that “individual agents are fully formed and their value preferences are in place prior to and outside of any society.” They “ignore robust social scientific evidence about the ill effects of isolation,” and, yet more shocking, they “actively oppose the notion of ‘shared values’ or the idea of ‘the common good.’ ” I am quoting from the 1995 presidential address of Professor Amitai Etzioni to the American Sociological Association (*American Sociological Review*, February 1996). As a frequent talk show guest and as editor of the journal *The Responsive Community*, Etzioni has come to some public prominence as a publicist for a political movement known as communitarianism.

Etzioni is hardly alone in making such charges. They come from both left and right. From the left, *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne Jr. argued in his book *Why Americans Hate Politics* that “the growing popularity of the libertarian cause suggested that many Americans had even given up on the possibility of a ‘common good,’ ” and in a recent essay in the *Washington Post Magazine*, that “the libertarian emphasis on the freewheeling individual seems to assume that individuals come into the world as fully formed adults who should be held responsible for their actions from the moment of birth.” From the right, the late Russell Kirk, in a vitriolic article titled “Libertarians: The Chirping Sectaries,” claimed that “the perennial libertarian, like Satan, can bear no authority, temporal or spiritual” and that “the libertarian does not venerate ancient beliefs and customs, or the natural world, or his country, or the immortal spark in his fellow men.”

More politely, Sen. Dan Coats (R-Ind.) and David Brooks of the *Weekly Standard* have excoriated libertarians for allegedly ignoring the value of community. Defending his proposal for more federal programs to “rebuild” community, Coats wrote that his bill is “self-consciously conservative, not purely libertarian. It recognizes, not only individual rights, but the contribution of groups rebuilding the social and moral infrastructure of their neighborhoods.” The implication is that individual rights are somehow incompatible with participation in groups or neighborhoods.

Such charges, which are coming with increasing frequency from those opposed to classical liberal ideals, are never substantiated by quotations from classical liberals; nor is any evidence offered that those who favor individual liberty and limited constitutional government actually think as charged by Etzioni and his echoes. Absurd charges often made and not rebutted can come to be accepted as truths, so it is imperative that Etzioni and other communitarian critics of individual liberty be called to account for their distortions.

ATOMISTIC INDIVIDUALISM

Let us examine the straw man of “atomistic individualism” that Etzioni, Dionne, Kirk, and others have set up. The philosophical roots of the charge have been set forth by communitarian critics of classical liberal individualism, such as the philosopher Charles Taylor and the political scientist Michael Sandel. For example, Taylor claims that, because libertarians believe in individual rights and abstract principles of justice, they believe in “the self-sufficiency of man alone, or, if you prefer, of the individual.” That is an updated version of an old attack on classical liberal individualism, according to which classical liberals posited “abstract individuals” as the basis for their views about justice.

Those claims are nonsense. No one believes that there are actually “abstract individuals,” for all individuals are necessarily concrete. Nor are there any truly “self-sufficient” individuals, as any reader of *The Wealth of Nations* would realize. Rather, classical liberals and libertarians argue that the *system of justice* should abstract from the concrete characteristics of individuals. Thus, when an individual comes before a court, her height, color, wealth, social standing, and religion are normally irrelevant to questions of justice. That is what equality before the law means; it does not mean that no one actually *has* a particular height, skin color, or religious belief. Abstraction is a mental process we use when trying to discern what is essential or relevant to a problem; it does not require a belief in abstract entities.

It is precisely because neither individuals nor small groups can be fully self-sufficient that cooperation is necessary to human survival and flourishing. And because that cooperation takes place among countless individuals unknown to each other, the rules governing that interaction are abstract in nature. Abstract rules, which establish in advance what we may expect of one another, make cooperation possible on a wide scale.

No reasonable person could possibly believe that individuals are fully formed outside society—in isolation, if you will. That would mean that no one could have had any parents, cousins, friends, personal heroes, or even neighbors. Obviously, all of us have been influenced by those around us. What libertarians assert is simply that differences among normal adults do not imply different fundamental rights.

SOURCES AND LIMITS OF OBLIGATIONS

Libertarianism is not at base a metaphysical theory about the primacy of the individual over the abstract, much less an absurd theory about “abstract individuals.” Nor is it an anomic rejection of traditions, as Kirk and some conservatives have charged. Rather, it is a political theory that emerged in response to the growth of unlimited state power; libertarianism draws its strength from a powerful fusion of a normative theory about the moral and political sources and limits of obligations and a positive theory explaining the sources of order. Each person has the right to be free, and free persons can produce order spontaneously, without a commanding power over them.

What of Dionne’s patently absurd characterization of libertarianism: “individuals come into the world as fully formed adults who should be held responsible for their

actions from the moment of birth”? Libertarians recognize the difference between adults and children, as well as differences between normal adults and adults who are insane or mentally hindered or retarded. Guardians are necessary for children and abnormal adults, because they cannot make responsible choices for themselves. But there is no obvious reason for holding that some normal adults are entitled to make choices for other normal adults, as paternalists of both left and right believe. Libertarians argue that no normal adult has the right to impose choices on other normal adults, except in abnormal circumstances, such as when one person finds another unconscious and administers medical assistance or calls an ambulance.

What distinguishes libertarianism from other views of political morality is principally its theory of *enforceable* obligations. Some obligations, such as the obligation to write a thank-you note to one's host after a dinner party, are not normally enforceable by force. Others, such as the obligation not to punch a disagreeable critic in the nose or to pay for a pair of shoes before walking out of the store in them, are. Obligations may be universal or particular. Individuals, whoever and wherever they may be (i.e., in abstraction from particular circumstances), have an enforceable obligation to all other persons: not to harm them in their lives, liberties, health, or possessions. In John Locke's terms, "Being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions." All individuals have the right that others not harm them in their enjoyment of those goods. The rights and the obligations are correlative and, being both universal and "negative" in character, are capable under normal circumstances of being enjoyed by all simultaneously. It is the *universality* of the human right not to be killed, injured, or robbed that is at the base of the libertarian view, and one need not posit an "abstract individual" to assert the universality of that right. It is his veneration, not his contempt, for the "immortal spark in his fellow men" that leads the libertarian to defend individual rights.

Those obligations are universal, but what about "particular" obligations? As I write this, I am sitting in a coffee house and have just ordered another coffee. I have freely undertaken the particular obligation to pay for the coffee: I have transferred a property right to a certain amount of my money to the owner of the coffee shop, and she has transferred the property right to the cup of coffee to me. Libertarians typically argue that particular obligations, at least under normal circumstances, must be created by consent; they cannot be unilaterally imposed by others. Equality of rights means that some people cannot simply impose obligations on others, for the moral agency and rights of those others would then be violated. Communitarians, on the other hand, argue that we all are born with many particular obligations, such as to give to this body of persons—called a state or, more nebulously, a nation, community, or folk—so much money, so much obedience, or even one's life. And they argue that those particular obligations can be coercively enforced. In fact, according to communitarians such as Taylor and Sandel, I am actually *constituted as a person*, not only by the facts of my upbringing and my experiences, but by a set of very particular unchosen obligations.

To repeat, communitarians maintain that we are constituted as persons by our particular obligations, and therefore those obligations cannot be a matter of choice. Yet that is a mere assertion and cannot substitute for an *argument* that one is obligated to others; it is no justification for coercion. One might well ask, If an individual is born with the obligation to obey, who is born with the right to command? If one wants a coherent theory of obligations, there must be someone, whether an

individual or a group, with the right to the fulfillment of the obligation. If I am constituted as a person by my obligation to obey, who is constituted as a person by the right to obedience? Such a theory of obligation may have been coherent in an age of God-kings, but it seems rather out of place in the modern world. To sum up, no reasonable person believes in the existence of abstract individuals, and the true dispute between libertarians and communitarians is not about individualism as such but about the source of particular obligations, whether imposed or freely assumed.

GROUPS AND COMMON GOODS

A theory of obligation focusing on individuals does *not* mean that there is no such “thing” as society or that we cannot speak meaningfully of groups. The fact that there are trees does not mean that we cannot speak of forests, after all. Society is not merely a collection of individuals, nor is it some “bigger or better” thing separate from them. Just as a building is not a pile of bricks but the bricks and the relationships among them, society is not a person, with his own rights, but many individuals and the complex set of relationships among them.

A moment’s reflection makes it clear that claims that libertarians reject “shared values” and the “common good” are incoherent. If libertarians share the value of liberty (at a minimum), then they cannot “actively oppose the notion of ‘shared values,’ ” and if libertarians believe that we will all be better off if we enjoy freedom, then they have not “given up on the possibility of ‘a common good,’ ” for a central part of their efforts is to assert what the common good is! In response to Kirk’s claim that libertarians reject tradition, let me point out that libertarians defend a tradition of liberty that is the fruit of thousands of years of human history. In addition, pure traditionalism is incoherent, for traditions may clash, and then one has no guide to right action. Generally, the statement that libertarians “reject tradition” is both tasteless and absurd. Libertarians follow religious traditions, family traditions, ethnic traditions, and social traditions such as courtesy and even respect for others, which is evidently not a tradition Kirk thought it necessary to maintain.

The libertarian case for individual liberty, which has been so distorted by communitarian critics, is simple and reasonable. It is obvious that different individuals require different things to live good, healthy, and virtuous lives. Despite their common nature, people are materially and numerically individuated, and we have needs that differ. So, how far does our common good extend?

Karl Marx, an early and especially brilliant and biting communitarian critic of libertarianism, asserted that civil society is based on a “decomposition of man” such that man’s “essence is no longer in community but in difference”; under socialism, in contrast, man would realize his nature as a “species being.” Accordingly, socialists believe that collective provision of everything is appropriate; in a truly socialized state, we would all enjoy the same common good and conflict simply would not occur. Communitarians are typically much more cautious, but despite a lot of talk they rarely tell us much about what our common good might be. The communitarian philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, for instance, in his influential book *After Virtue*, insists for 219 pages that there is a “good life for man” that must be pursued in common and then rather lamely concludes that “the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man.”

A familiar claim is that providing retirement security through the state is an element of the common good, for it “brings all of us together.” But who is included in “all of us”? Actuarial data show that African-American males who have paid the same taxes into the Social Security system as have Caucasian males over their working lives stand to get back about half as much. Further, more black than white males will die before they receive a single penny, meaning all of their money has gone to benefit others and none of their “investments” are available to their families. In other words, they are being robbed for the benefit of nonblack retirees. Are African-American males part of the “all of us” who are enjoying a common good, or are they victims of the “common good” of others? (As readers of this magazine should know, all would be better off under a privatized system, which leads libertarians to assert the common good of freedom to choose among retirement systems.) All too often, claims about the “common good” serve as covers for quite selfish attempts to secure private goods; as the classical liberal Austrian novelist Robert Musil noted in his great work *The Man without Qualities*, “Nowadays only criminals dare to harm others without philosophy.”

Libertarians recognize the inevitable pluralism of the modern world and for that reason assert that individual liberty is at least part of the common good. They also understand the absolute necessity of cooperation for the attainment of one’s ends; a solitary individual could never actually *be* “self-sufficient,” which is precisely why we must have rules—governing property and contracts, for example—to make peaceful cooperation possible and we institute government to enforce those rules. The common good is a system of justice that allows all to live together in harmony and peace; a common good more extensive than that tends to be, not a common good for “all of us,” but a common good for some of us at the expense of others of us. (There is another sense, understood by every parent, to the term “self-sufficiency.” Parents normally desire that their children acquire the virtue of “pulling their own weight” and not subsisting as scroungers, layabouts, moochers, or parasites. That is a necessary condition of self-respect; Taylor and other critics of libertarianism often confuse the virtue of self-sufficiency with the impossible condition of never relying on or cooperating with others.)

The issue of the common good is related to the beliefs of communitarians regarding the personality or the separate existence of groups. Both are part and parcel of a fundamentally unscientific and irrational view of politics that tends to personalize institutions and groups, such as the state or nation or society. Instead of enriching political science and avoiding the alleged naiveté of libertarian individualism, as communitarians claim, however, the personification thesis obscures matters and prevents us from asking the interesting questions with which scientific inquiry begins. No one ever put the matter quite as well as the classical liberal historian Parker T. Moon of Columbia University in his study of 19th-century European imperialism, *Imperialism and World Politics*:

Language often obscures truth. More than is ordinarily realized, our eyes are blinded to the facts of international relations by tricks of the tongue. When one uses the simple monosyllable “France” one thinks of France as a unit, an entity. When to avoid awkward repetition we use a personal pronoun in referring to a country—when for example we say “France sent *her* troops to conquer Tunis”—we impute not only unity but personality to the country. The very words conceal the facts and make international relations a glamorous drama in which personalized nations are

the actors, and all too easily we forget the flesh-and-blood men and women who are the true actors. How different it would be if we had no such word as “France,” and had to say instead—thirty-eight million men, women and children of very diversified interests and beliefs, inhabiting 218,000 square miles of territory! Then we should more accurately describe the Tunis expedition in some such way as this: “A few of these thirty-eight million persons sent thirty thousand others to conquer Tunis.” This way of putting the fact immediately suggests a question, or rather a series of questions. Who are the “few”? Why did they send the thirty thousand to Tunis? And why did these obey?

Group personification obscures, rather than illuminates, important political questions. Those questions, centering mostly around the explanation of complex political phenomena and moral responsibility, simply cannot be addressed within the confines of group personification, which drapes a cloak of mysticism around the actions of policymakers, thus allowing some to use “philosophy”—and mystical philosophy, at that—to harm others.

Libertarians are separated from communitarians by differences on important issues, notably whether coercion is necessary to maintain community, solidarity, friendship, love, and the other things that make life worth living and that can be enjoyed only in common with others. Those differences cannot be swept away a priori; their resolution is not furthered by shameless distortion, absurd characterizations, or petty name-calling.

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