Liberalism and Atomistic Individualism

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1. A Fatal Flaw in Individualism?

Critics of classical liberalism assume that its radical individualist foundations are both necessary for its defense and its Achilles' heel. Radical individualism is the view that human individuals are, first and foremost, unique, particular beings with just one concern, namely, to advance their own goals. Critics of classical liberalism have said that its individuals are atomistic or asocial. Proponents of classical liberalism had often appeared to embrace an atomistic conception of the person because of their acceptance of the new science of classical mechanics. Hobbes admired mechanistic science so much that he visited Galileo in Italy to learn it from him. For Hobbes, human beings are just instances of matter-in-motion, only more complicated in their configuration than other things.

2. Flaws of So-called Hobbesian Individualism

Whether or not anyone actually held the arid individualist view that has come to be associated with Hobbes is not important. What is crucial to us are the liabilities which critics have ascribed to this view.

Atomism does not square with the individual histories of most human beings. They are born into families where they remain significantly dependent on other persons prior to any possible calculation of their own advantages. The idea that standards of good and bad are no more than tastes and preferences is offensive to the common sense idea that there are some things that are good and some that are bad and that they are not all a matter of taste or preference, attraction, or aversion. Furthermore, the assumption of subjective value that is closely linked with this sort of individualism left no standard by which human conduct could be subjected to criticism. All criticism is left groundless if the only thing that matters is whether people prefer or do not prefer something. Even bad logic becomes immune to criticism.
In ethics and politics, atomistic individualism goes against the grain. Many economists, for example, would say that the freedom of a classical liberal society is something they prefer. There is not much else to be said, since they take all values to be subjective.

But what if some of us, perhaps unwisely, do not prefer liberal freedom? What would be wrong with our reneging from liberal agreements even after we had expressed a preference for liberal norms? What of the supposed corrosive influence of all this influence that is said to undermine community bonds, loyalty, honesty, and decency, especially in the realm of commerce which in the modern age is all pervasive? To say that this would imply that we prefer the state of nature, with its risks and horrors, may be true, but what of it? Is there anything objectively, morally wrong with such a preference? Philosophers who champion such individualism, and the critics who decry them as representatives of the classical liberal ethos, deny that from this perspective any moral fault could be assigned to such persons.

Already in John Locke, intimations of a different kind of individualism are evident, however. This alternative conception of individualism is much more promising than its Hobbesian cousin. Indeed, it may have more than a fighting chance of being right. It can, at least, withstand the criticisms that are typically leveled against individualism.

3. Individualism Under Assault

Individualism has a bad reputation, “willingly sacrificing all other human values so as to cultivate . . . a particular group of virtues — notably independence, courage and honesty.”¹ By association, so does classical liberalism and its political economic system of capitalism. This gives collectivist political systems and economies a clear moral advantage. As Susan Mendus puts it, the “liberal commitment to independence — to achieving things on one’s own . . . is [factually] false . . . [and] morally impoverished.”²

The targeted version of individualism is embraced, more or less intact, by neo-classical and Austrian economists. Its basic premise is that all human behavior is motivated by a narrow, subjective self-interest or utility maximization. Having shown this form of individualism to be untenable, the system closely associated with it, namely, limited government that stresses the basic negative rights of individuals, is also taken to be discredited.

But the charges against individualism are open to serious criticism. For example, proponents of individualism need not embrace atomism, anti-social attitudes and policies, hedonism, or moral subjectivism. Nor need limited government or a constitution of natural rights rest on the arguably fabricated version of individualism that the critics usually target.

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