CHAPTER 1

Ely’s Progressive Individualism

In his self-understanding, Ely is an individualist who seeks the development of every member of society. His individualism is *progressive* in the sense that he would have the state assist in the positive development of all by means of reformed property and contract relations, and he would have men reshape their individual moral goals so that, especially in the case of the talented few, they might become directly responsible for the elevation of the lower classes of society. Ely’s notion of progressive individualism is *teleological*: it aims at a progressive goal of the comprehensive and maximal individual development of all. And, as subsequent chapters demonstrate, it provides the organizing moral principle and goal by which his other ideas can be understood and integrated. As I will show in this chapter, there are some theoretical difficulties with Ely’s notion of individualism, particularly with regard to his view of the natural rights individualism he would supplant and with regard to his plans to elevate the common man and morally reorient the talented few.

Scholars differ over whether Ely is an individualist. One group sees him as a collectivist who subordinates the individual to society or the state. Within this group, different scholars emphasize different aspects of Ely’s thought. Some argue that Ely sees man as radically dependent on and formed by society. For example, David Noble notes that Ely was taught by his German professors that “man was absolutely dependent on his society, that the individual was created by society. Ethics must take into account, then, this fact of the reality of society and the dependence of man upon it for his personality . . . . Ethics must be social not individual.”¹ David Anderson likewise argues that Ely makes the individual radically dependent on society. For Ely, “individuals are the particularization of the social forces around them, and . . . the social order is the generalization of the present social forces.”² In a discussion of the issue of taxation, Steven Cord and Robert Andelson claim that for Ely,
“the individual has no rights apart from society.”

Sidney Milkis and Jerome Mileur argue that

[p]rogressives celebrated the moral possibility inherent in the growth of human power over nature, that by transcending old limits, human beings might more closely approach the ideal. History, Richard Ely urged, had been virtually transformed; the expansion of knowledge had taken humanity beyond the limits of purely biological evolution. Society, not the individual, was now the primary unit in the process.

Other scholars from this group focus on Ely’s statism. Jesse Gilbert and Ellen Baker second Noble’s view of Ely’s professors: they were “statist.” Gilbert and Baker argue that Ely absorbed their views while in Germany, and that when he came back to America, he “championed a collective form of democracy.”

Eugene Lowe writes that for Ely, “[o]nly the state . . . could effect systematic reform”; only it “transcended human divisions.” Jean Quandt shares this general view: “In Ely’s eyes, government was the God-given instrument through which we had to work . . . . [H]e thought of government as God’s main instrument of redemption.” In her view, Ely “divinize[d] the state.” Still other scholars see in Ely’s thought an organic view of human society. Ely’s contemporary Sydney Webb bestows what he regards as high praise on Ely in a personal letter to him: “All your social reforms are based it seems to me on Collectivism, and so I agree with them.” Benjamin Rader has a similar view: “Ely tended to see [society] as a single unity in which all individuals were part of an organism.”

James Dombrowski notes Ely’s view that society is an “organism.” Following Nicolai Bukharin, he interprets this to mean that for Ely, “the poor and servant classes were permanent and essential factors in society,” fated to be subordinate to the ruling class. However, Dombrowski does not take into account Ely’s subordination of each to all. In particular, he does not explain Ely’s desire to have the “ruling class” serve the lower classes. But more generally, none of these scholars adequately accounts for Ely’s great goal of the maximal individual development of each member of society. One might say that Ely’s collectivism, statism, and organic view of society are, paradoxically, in the service of his individualism. Because we should understand him as defined more by his goal than by the means he would use to attain that goal, we must see him as more individualist than these scholars allow.

A second group of scholars differs quite sharply with the assessment that Ely is a collectivist. They argue that Ely is really an individualist, that his collectivism is either highly qualified or nonexistent. Within this group, one set sees Ely as rejecting an organic view of society. Mark Pittenger believes