Individualism Versus Individuality

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INDIVIDUALISM VERSUS INDIVIDUALITY

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In sober truth . . . . the general tendency of things throughout the world is to render mediocrity the ascendant power among mankind. In ancient history, in the Middle Ages, and in a diminishing degree through the long transition from feudality to the present time, the individual was a power in himself. . . . . At present individuals are lost in the crowd. . . . . The only power deserving the name is that of masses, and of governments while they make themselves the organ of the tendencies and instincts of masses. This is as true in the moral and social relations of private life as in public transactions. . . . . As the various social eminences which enabled persons entrenched on them to disregard the opinion of the multitude gradually become levelled . . . . there ceases to be any social support for nonconformity. . . . .

THESE words were written nearly a century ago by a famous individualist, John Stuart Mill, in the most interesting, though least quoted, chapter of his treatise *On Liberty*.[1] Since then there have been many protests against forces tending to weaken individuality in the modern world, but hardly any individualists have faced the possibility that their own creed may be one of these forces. Precisely that, however, is my thesis.

By individualism I mean the familiar body of thought which enjoyed a large measure of ascendancy from the French to the fascist revolutions and which, for my purposes, may be defined as belief in the greatest practicable freedom for all individuals, this freedom either being tempered by or entailing the equality of all men. Now it is a singular fact, I believe, that during the reign of individualism individuality has declined in forcefulness, variety, and perfection. At the very time when we, in particular, were proclaiming "Americanism" as the shining example of

[1] Everyman's ed., pp. 123 and 131. Cf. A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America, Part II* (London, 1840), III, 58 f.; IV, 198 f., 349.

individualism, European intellectuals were shuddering at it as the symbol of the standardization, deindividualization, of life.[2] Perhaps this is more than a coincidence.

Professed individualists have often cared little for individuality, and they were not necessarily inconsistent. One who, like Bentham, wished only to spread pleasure as thickly as possible on the bread of life might well dismiss individuality as an unjustifiable luxury. Yet the charge that individualism impairs individuality is more than a verbal paradox, because individuality is in fact widely cherished by thoughtful persons. Some indeed would make it the supreme principle of value.[3] If, as the present paper will assume, individuality is at least one of the cardinal values, then Bentham and, with him, the bulk of the humanitarian movement stand convicted of moral philistinism; and if individualism can be shown to be in effect, even where not by intention, a foe of individuality, it will to that extent be open to grave objection.

The issue has probably been obscured by the double meaning of "individual": the value-neutral sense[4] which makes the term applicable to all members of a species no doubt borrows glory from the distinctive sense—synonymous with "personality"—which we commonly apply only to some, and with varying force. If individualists, instead of pleading the virtues of "the individual," would plead those of "the specimen," the effect would be chilling to a degree.

Fortunately there is one thinker who has remedied the sloven-

[2] Cf. R. Müller-Freienfels, *Mysteries of the Soul* (London, 1929), pp. 235–92, and John Dewey's comments in *Individualism Old and New* (New York, 1930) (hereafter cited as *I.O.N.*), chap. ii. Dewey conveniently blames the standardization of modern life on the nondemocratic past and its cultural lag, plus intoxication with newly discovered machines. The present paper argues that individualism itself is partly repsonsible.

[3] Cf. Bosanquet, *The Principle of Individuality and Value* (London, 1912); Dewey, *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy* (New York, 1910), pp. 267 f.; J. Lowenberg, "The Remoteness of the Individual," in *The Problem of the Individual* ("University of California Publications in Philosophy," No. 20 [Berkeley, 1937]), p. 27.

[4] Aptly called "numerical individualism" by Müller-Freienfels, *Philosophie der Individualität* (2d ed.; Leipzig, 1923), p. 36.

liness of the individualist tradition on this point by placing individuality expressly in the foreground of his social philosophy. John Dewey has not only recognized, like Mill, the value of distinctive human quality and the tendency of modern life to submerge it; he has done what Mill strangely failed to attempt, namely, he has revised the whole philosophy of individualism in order to encourage the development of individuality and to circumvent the forces which oppose it—though with what success remains to be inquired. In addition, he has sought to free the moral essence of individualism from historic accretions which would render it incredible in the light of contemporary assumptions and impotent in the face of existing social realities. In focusing the discussion on his views, therefore, I shall be dealing with individualism at its best in this respect; and if my thesis can be established in this case, it will hold a fortiori for the rest.

Dewey takes the abiding moral truth of individualism to be equal freedom and opportunity for all to participate "in the development of a shared culture."[5] Such participation means the enhancement of individuality, he holds; for individuality is not an initially complete datum to be protected against "society" but a quality to be developed through social intercourse so that the individuality of each contributes to that of all. "Originality and uniqueness are not opposed to social nurture; they are saved by it from eccentricity and escape."[6] Instead of weeping for pioneer days that are gone, he advocates the cultivation of a new type of individuality which can flourish today because it is consonant with the increasingly corporate character of modern life.

[5] *I.O.N.*, pp. 18, 34, 72.

[6] *I.O.N.*, p. 143; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 80 ff., 85 f., 167 ff.; *Democracy and Education* (New York, 1916) (hereafter cited as *D.E.*), pp. 101, 143, 356; *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York, 1920), pp. 193 f., 205 ff.; *The Public and Its Problems* (New York, 1927) (hereafter cited as *P.P.*), pp. 186 ff.; *Art as Experience* (New York, 1934) (hereafter cited as *A.E.*), p. 336; *Characters and Events* (New York, 1929) (hereafter cited as *C.E.*), II, 354 f.

Recognizing the distinctive, indeed aristocratic, nature of individuality, he proposes a democratic ideal which will outdo aristocracies in their own specialty: it will be "aristocracy carried to its limit," "distinction made universal."[7] He argues that lumping individuals into superior, middle, and inferior types or classes, whether on the basis of birth or intelligence tests, in effect neglects the individuality even of the superior, since a type is still a type; and that measuring individuality by degree of difference from the average at once breeds mediocrity in the majority, who are then simply "expected to be ordinary," and encourages eccentricity in the rest, thus spoiling true individuality all around.[8] Individuality is not external, comparative, quantitative; it is qualitative uniqueness. Therefore, the doctrine of equality should be reinterpreted to mean "incommensurability, the inapplicability of common and quantitative standards." To sum up, democratic individualism means faith "in uniquely distinctive qualities in each normal human being; faith in corresponding unique modes of activity that create new ends," and "a claim that every human being as an individual may be the best for some particular purpose and hence be the most fitted to rule, to lead, in that specific respect."[9]

There can be no question that this exceptionally sensitive individualism is intended to further individuality. To inquire whether it really does so, we must examine its conception of individuality and of the conditions which foster it.

One may as well admit at once that no definition of this elusive value is likely to seem quite satisfactory. Mere difference will not do, for many differences lack individuality; nor will extreme difference, for that is eccentricity; nor again will a vast, even infinite, number of differences suffice, for they might add up to triviality. Individuality *is* difference—with a difference.

[7] *C.E.*, II, 489 and 492.

[8] *C.E.*, II, 479 ff. and 489; *D.E.*, pp. 102 ff. and 202 f.

[9] *C.E.*, II, 491 and 489; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 489 f. and 854; *D.E.*, p. 142. References to individuality as uniqueness could be multiplied indefinitely.

Dewey's favorite terms, "distinctiveness," "uniqueness," and "incommensurability," are richer and less superficial in content; they suggest, as Bosanquet insisted,[10] that individuality must lie in what one is rather than in what one is not.

But "uniqueness" suffers from an ambiguity like that of "individual." There is an obvious and trivial sense in which everything is unique, as in Bishop Butler's famous dictum; this can hardly be the uniqueness we value. Indeed, the words "uniqueness" and "individuality" can apply to something universally present or only exceptionally so, an all-or-none principle or one that varies in degree, a gift or an achievement, something relational or nonrelational, continuous or discrete. Most if not all of these shades of meaning can be found in Dewey's own usage. For example, he writes that individuality consists in "unique connections in the whole," "a distinctive way of behaving in . . . . connection with other distinctive ways of acting," yet he describes "*all* perceived objects" as "individualized" in the sense of being discrete "wholes complete in themselves."[11] He has a perfect right to employ different meanings in different contexts. The problem is to decide which of these is the one of which we are in search.

The subtlety of Dewey's thought makes dogmatic interpretation extremely dangerous on this point. However, instead of analyzing dozens of passages, which space does not permit, I will risk the following generalizations about his essential position. The basic fact of experience is not discreteness *or* continuity, not finality *or* efficacy, but their inextricable union. Yet the trend of *intelligent* experience, whether in science, art, or associated living generally, is toward resolving discreteness

[10] *Op. cit.*, pp. 69 f.

[11] *Human Nature and Conduct* (Modern Library ed.) (hereafter cited as *H.N.C.*), p. 331; *P.P.*, p. 188; *The Quest for Certainty* (New York, 1929) (hereafter cited as *Q.C.*), p. 234. Cf. *Experience and Nature* (1st ed.; Chicago, 1926) (hereafter cited as *E.N.*), pp. 19, 85, 215, 242 ff.; *Q.C.*, pp. 235 ff. and 240 f.; *Logic* (New York, 1938), pp. 68 and 122 f.; *A.E.*, pp. 24 and 166; *Philosophy and Civilization* (New York, 1931) (hereafter cited as *P.C.*), p. 293; and additional references in n. 5 above.

into continuity, toward utilizing individualities as agents of reconstruction, weaving their unique qualities into a web of mutual relationships. All men have individuality to begin with as a "distinctive opacity of bias and preference," but so far it is only a germ; its development, maturing, ripening, consists in making it a pervasive quality of relations with other men and things.[12] This shared individuality-in-continuity is the value we prize; enhancing true individuality and true community is one identical process.

Now it seems to me that this conception of individuality contains large elements of truth and is a desirable corrective for the abstract atomism that has characterized much of the individualist tradition. But I think it puts too exclusive an emphasis on continuity, for Dewey seems to regard the discrete aspect of individuality as a datum which will take care of itself and to make continuity the sole *Aufgabe*. Developed individuality implies the attainment of style, form, shape; shape implies definiteness; definiteness implies limitation—"the price of value," in Whitehead's phrase which sums up the tragedy of existence—and limitation implies exclusion. Therefore the growth of individuality is not simply a change in the direction of more continuity or mutuality; there is also a sense in which it is a transition from a continuity which is vagueness to a discontinuity which is precision: the germ of uniqueness assimilates or sloughs off all foreign matter until every feature of living and expression becomes through and through *one's own*, and though even perfected individuality by no means exists in a vacuum there is a sense in which the Gestalt principle of closure has been fulfilled, for such a person is somehow whole and complete, a sovereign actuality. This is an aspect of the intuition of value which haunted Nietzsche.[13] It is also—if we abstract from the theory

[12] *E.N.*, pp. 242–46; *I.O.N.*, pp. 167 ff.; *Q.C.*, pp. 236 f.; *D.E.*, pp. 352–57; *P.C.*, pp. 293–98; *A.E.*, pp. 335 f. and 348 f.; *C.E.*, II, 854 f. Cf. George P. Adams, "Individuality and Continuity," in *The Problem of the Individual*, pp. 186 f., 191, 200 f.

[13] Cf. the author's *What Nietzsche Means* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1941), pp. 42 f. and 200–204.

of the Absolute—substantially the moral ideal of so dissimilar a thinker as Bosanquet, when he writes that to be individual is to be self-contained, to embody a law of "relevant adjustment" which achieves "precisely determinate response," and that uniqueness is merely a corollary of the idea of individuality as organization, not its essence.[14] Indeed, Dewey himself has at least sketched the materials for such a view in his writings on aesthetics and "qualitative thought,"[15] but apparently he has not yet applied it to his social individualism.

A one-sided conception of individuality inevitably leads to an inadequate statement of its conditions, and this prompts the second main question we have to ask. As "liberty, equality, and fraternity" are a convenient résumé of classical individualism, so "intelligence, incommensurability, and participation" may be taken as the chief points in Dewey's revision.[16] Do these lead to a social order that is most conducive to individuality?

Consider equalitarianism. As Mill and many others have charged, there can be little doubt of its tendency in the past to level people down to a mediocre average. Hence one cannot too much admire the way in which Dewey turns the tables on aristocracy, charging it with submerging individualities in classes. His own version, correspondingly, is that "all are equal because all are incommensurable, infinite."[17] But is this not a Pyrrhic victory which destroys the meaning of inequality and equality at the same time? Unrestricted emphasis on uniqueness and incommensurability threatens to lead finally to a nominalism which is unable to make a significant judgment about anything.

Classical equalitarianism was based on an assumption that all men are in some sense equal or infinite in value. The doctrine

[14] *Op. cit.*, pp. 40, 52, 59, 71, 96 ff., 318 ff.

[15] *P.C.*, pp. 96 and 103; *A.E.*, pp. 24, 134, 157; *Q.C.*, p. 235.

[16] Dewey's most explicit statement of this parallel (*C.E.*, II, 850–55) interprets liberty as contingency, but this is only one aspect of his mature philosophy of freedom, and the one least relevant here.

[17] *C.E.*, II, 491.

of incommensurability is Dewey's natural rendition of this view, for it is a special case of the general principle underlying his value theory, namely, that "consummatory" values are essentially unique, immediate, ineffable, and incomparable, all value judgments being therefore about instrumental values only. Now I agree that there is a sheer qualitative immediacy in all experience which no comparison can exhaust; but it does not therefore follow that comparison is illegitimate when used without arrogance. We frequently make such comparisons with respect to consummatory values, as when father observes, "The coffee is worse this morning." And if such comparisons are invalid I cannot see, despite Dewey's great pains in dealing with this point,[18] how judgments about instrumental values are in better case, since these so clearly depend upon the values to which they are instrumental.

But let us waive the ultimate question of value theory, which is too big to be treated fairly here. Dewey's own conception of individuality in any case implies that individualities are comparable in at least one respect, for he believes that individuality is developed, and development implies earlier and later stages or degrees. So human specimens may be as incommensurable as you please: we still may affirm that some develop their incommensurabilities more than others and are therefore *unequal* in *actualized* individuality. And is it not plausible to assume that they differ even in their potentialities for such development? Some newborn babes have astonishing individuality of expression, while others are undistinguished lumps of flesh. Further, men differ not only in completeness of individualization but also

[18] *Theory of Valuation* ("International Encyclopedia of Unified Science," Vol. II, No. 4 [Chicago, 1939]), pp. 45 ff. Cf. H. W. Schneider, "A Note on Dewey's Theory of Valuation," *Journal of Philosophy*, XXXVI, 491; Sidney Hook, *Reason, Social Myths, and Democracy* (New York, 1940), pp. 7 f. and 29. The crux of the matter seems to be that Dewey would avoid a vicious regress by taking refuge in the finitude of "problematic situations": that judgment of preference is true which leads to a successful solution of the problem. Unfortunately, there are better and worse "solutions" for most problems, and to choose among them we must compare them qua consummatory. This objection is independent of any assumption about the objectivity of values.

in "personal size"[19] to be individualized. I conclude, therefore, that incommensurability fails to justify social equalitarianism beyond the point of admitting that every son of Adam has a touch of infinity about him which it were sheer callousness to ignore. But that is compatible with radical aristocracy.

In practice Dewey is, of course, concerned with equality of opportunity rather than of rights, and if equality means incommensurability the problem becomes one of securing "unique opportunities and differential manifestations."[20] Apparently this is to be obtained through a maximum of responsive fluidity[21] in all social arrangements, which will allow each person to find his own unique modes of expression, as if society itself were one vast "progressive" school. No doubt many features of our civilization, like many features of the old-fashioned school, are thoughtlessly and needlessly repressive of spontaneity; but the conclusion seems inescapable that to move in the direction of complete fluidity is to move in the direction of formlessness. Can individuality best take shape in a society which has no shape? Dewey himself thinks not,[22] but to admit this is to admit that social responsiveness must be sacrificed in part for social integration, and therefore that if "distinctiveness" is to develop best it cannot be "made universal." Here the neglect of exclusiveness in the very meaning of individuality revenges itself in the misconception of its conditions.

[19] Cf. a similar distinction between perfection and greatness in art (*A.E.*, p. 171); contrast *C.E.*, II, 491.

[20] *C.E.*, II, 491.

[21] The fluidity of an individualistic society is well stated in F. J. Turner's classic description of frontier individualism, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1921), pp. 306 f.

[22] *I.O.N.*, chap. iv and *passim; Liberalism and Social Action* (New York, 1935) (hereafter cited as *L.S.A.*), chap. ii. On the general thesis of this paragraph cf. the somewhat parallel argument in W. E. Hocking, *The Lasting Elements of Individualism* (New Haven, 1937), pp. 74 ff. I do not suggest that Dewey has ever *advocated* a totally formless society, only that he has until recently emphasized flexibility to the neglect of form and that his latterly increased recognition of the need of integration cannot be reconciled with his official equalitarianism.

At this point the discussion merges with the more ancient theme of individualism: freedom. Broadly speaking, individualism as a movement has disintegrated historic social forms for the sake of emancipating individuals from the restraints of custom and social subordination. In the first quarter of the present century England was one of the most class- and tradition-bound societies in the Occident; America probably the least. Yet Englishmen, lower classes included, impressed some observers as developing more individuality than Americans. Does this speak well for individualistic freedom? Perhaps a strongly stamped group type is a better springboard for significant individuality than is miscellaneous liberty of association. Also there is evident truth in Nietzsche's theory of the "passion of distance" developed in an aristocracy.[23] An undiscriminating society breeds undiscriminating habits of mind. In our daily press the very word "discrimination" means not justice but injustice.

Dewey often speaks of the "liberation" or "release" of individuality.[24] But releasing is dangerously near relaxing. Man is a lazy animal. Has not individualism unwittingly encouraged life to go slack? An individual would seem more likely to acquire what Stuart Sherman called "the tension of style" if he undergoes the discipline of a rigorous schooling than if his uniqueness is directly "released."

Of course, Dewey has his own views about schooling, and he would surely reply that in neither school nor society has he advocated indiscriminate, but only *intelligent*, release. Intelligence mediates between old and new, habit and impulse, discipline and spontaneity, sociality and individuality; it supplies the intrinsic connection between freedom as choice and freedom as

[23] Cf. D. G. Ritchie, *Natural Rights* (2d ed.; London, 1903), p. 248. Dewey, of course, argues, as stated earlier, that it is rather aristocracy which is indiscriminate. But the question is whether a classless society is not in still worse case: class discrimination is at least *some* discrimination.

[24] E.g. *Freedom and Culture* (New York, 1939) (hereafter cited as *F.C.*), pp. 22 and 125; *C.E.*, II, 488 f. and 491; *L.S.A.*, pp. 55 f.; *I.O.N.*, pp. 30 and 143; *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, pp. 207 ff.

power and thereby supports this comprehensive statement: "Freedom consists in a trend of conduct that causes choices to be more diversified and flexible . . . . while it enlarges their range of unimpeded operation."[25] Only the discipline of intelligent purpose ministers to freedom; all other is vicious rigidity and repression.[26]

It seems to me that this is an incomplete disjunction. Anyone who has ever been shaped by a real tradition or a good school knows that in that process something bigger than the individual and his intelligence takes hold of him and gives him direction. It is severe and in a sense arbitrary, but it is alive. Therefore it differs both from flexibly experimental intelligence and from the rigidities Dewey attacks. He seems to have had in mind not living disciplines but only their dead petrifacts—or that mechanical substitute which is called the public-school system. In this his philosophy is a true reflection of recent American culture.

Dewey's reliance on "freed intelligence" to ripen individuality turns out to be another form of the one-sided emphasis on continuity which we have found to be the heart of his position, for intelligence as he conceives it is precisely a process of mediating, connecting, making continuous. We may conclude that a culture which maximizes freedom in the sense of intelligence will make men too flexibly and restlessly experimental—too continually reconstructing experience and dissolving its traditional limits—to develop individual style.

The theme of mediation continues in the third motif of Dewey's individualism: participation. Liberty and equality have often been thought antithetical, but for Dewey both are fully realized only in shared activities, and both are in decline today because modern conditions subordinated co-operativeness to liberty and equality instead of including them in it.[27] In this respect he reverses the emphasis of classic individualism, which

[25] *P.C.*, p. 291; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 286 and 295–98; *E.N.*, pp. 222 and 245; *D.E.*, pp. 352 and 355 f.; *H.N.C.*, pp. 170 f., 304 f., 311 ff.; *L.S.A.*, pp. 44–55; *Q.C.*, pp. 249 f.

[26] *P.C.*, pp. 289 f.; *D.E.*, chap. x.

[27] *F.C.*, p. 22. On freedom and participation cf. *D.E.*, pp. 304 and 352 f.

contained a strong vein of egoism and hardly took "fraternity" seriously. He maintains, as we have seen, that individuality and mutuality develop together without limit, that sharing in the work of co-operative intelligence will always enrich and not submerge the individualities of all. He holds up, therefore, the intimacy of personal intercourse as a model for all associated living and blames the softness of contemporary individuality on the hardness and externality of our "molluscan" social organizations.[28]

Now this position seems to assume a very remarkable harmony of individualities, if the maximum sharing of experience is not to blur their shapes. Further, one might object with some justice that, even if Emerson's "men descend to meet" is an exaggeration, there are things which retain their preciousness only if they are not shared with everybody. But the most fundamental difficulty is that Dewey seems to have disregarded the ultimate effects of the enormous centripetal forces in social life. These occur not only on the cruder levels of herd psychology: even deeply affectionate family relations have been known to be too strong for some of the individualities concerned. Such forces must be balanced by powerful centrifugal ones if individuals are to be free enough to crystallize their own shapes, and for this the philosophy of unlimited participation has made no provision.[29] On that score the old individualism seems wiser than the new, for it did offer a centrifugal force in the form of unapologetic self-interest. Yet, to judge by its results in modern life, even that is insufficient. Nietzsche, who saw the problem, found at least a relevant hypothesis in the explosive inner tensions of an aristocracy.[30]

[28] *F.C.*, pp. 22 f. and 166 f.; *P.P.*, pp. 211 ff.; and references in n. 6 above.

[29] Dewey recognizes the existence of centrifugal forces and the need of balancing them with their opposites (*C.E.*, II, 854 f.; *F.C.*, pp. 160 f.), but not the converse problem. Jan Struther states admirably a law of diminishing returns in personal intimacy which is relevant to the present discussion (*Mrs. Miniver* [New York, 1940], p. 94).

[30] Cf. my *What Nietzsche Means*, p. 158. Dewey observes the role of tension in individualization (*A.E.*, p. 157) but does not appear to have looked for its social implications.

Let it be said in closing that this paper does not attempt a total assessment of individualism and is far from suggesting that the totalitarianisms now on the march are likely to be more favorable to individuality. Modern collectivists attack the atomism in space characteristic of the older individualism, but both suffer from atomism in time:[31] that is, they tend to cut men off from the real past and a real future. Is not this the significance of both Rousseauist and racialist myths?[32] But that is another story. Concerning individualism we must conclude that it has weakened individuality to date for lack of a sense of time, a sense of style, and a sense of tragedy.

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[31] Never more forcefully expressed than in Dewey's classic statement that democracy is committed to "the ordering of life in response to the needs of the moment in accordance with the ascertained truth of the moment. Modern life involves the deification of the here and the now . . . ." (*The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy*, p. 267).

[32] Cf. Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Out of Revolution* (New York, 1938), pp. 697 f.