

Individualism vs Collectivism: A Debate Between Liberalism and Communitarianism

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Abstract

The notion of individualism has been one of the important features of the liberal tradition. Liberal thinkers, such as John Locke, Immanuel Kant and John Rawls have promoted the rights and liberties of the individuals. In this paper I will primarily focus on Rawls' views and will attempt to discuss about the charges raised against the Rawlsian deontological position by the communitarian critics like Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor. The communitarian critics have questioned the abstract and individualistic notion of the self on a number of issues.

*Based on the tradition of the social contract theory, Rawls in his theory of justice as fairness presents the model of a liberal society which preserves the liberty and equality of its citizens and to protect the autonomy of the individuals it legitimatises the use of the political power in society. In other words, it provides the description of how a just and fair society must be arranged. In his seminal work *A Theory of Justice*, he has given priority to the right over the good. He propounds the two principles of justice which secures basic liberty, rights and equality of opportunity for the individuals.*

Communitarianism primarily emphasises the importance of community in the social and political lives of human beings. It gives importance to the shared understandings of communities, public participation and a sense of solidarity and fraternity. Whereas the primary concerns of liberalism have been the autonomy and liberty of individuals and justice in society. Communitarians blame liberalism for neglecting the importance of community in the formation and development of an individual.

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Introduction

Michael Sandel's book *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* is a critique of a particular approach to moral and political philosophy that he calls "deontological liberalism." Sandel asserts that it is not possible for us to imagine ourselves being independent of all our attachments which constitute the kind of person we are. We are members of a society, members of a family and are associated with our nation, our people and these kinds of associations are based on some moral value. According to Sandel, the idea of a person, as it has been presented by Kant and Rawls, is highly individualistic and ignores the importance and role of the community, and social and historical circumstances in the formation of human nature. Human beings cannot be located in a totally isolated realm since their identity depends upon their various relations and roles in a society.

Sandel is right in asserting that our identity depends upon our attachments and obligations which define the person I am, but this obligation is only a sufficient condition for the construction of the self, not the necessary condition. A part of the self should be unencumbered in order to decide which obligation should be given more importance than the other ones. It is not only attachments and obligations that decide the person I am. Kymlicka has also pointed out that though we all inherit a few attachments and various roles, still we should be capable of questioning and revising those practices and duties which are constitutive of those relationships. According to Kymlicka, Sandel too has accepted that the self can re-examine its ends and adds that Sandel has failed to show why individuals should not be given the conditions appropriate to that re-examining, as an indispensable part of leading the best possible life. On the other hand, Alasdair MacIntyre criticises the liberal and the Enlightenment tradition for giving a very abstract, tradition-neutral, antecedently individuated, and emotivist notion of the self. and for failing to give the due importance to the notion of the good.

According to MacIntyre, the Enlightenment has presented a very mechanical notion of human being as an agent who does not have any particular conception of good, but follows his or her own rational will. Since there can be no universally accepted rational principle of morality, every person is allowed to legislate his or her own code of conduct following the abstract notion of the self and individual choice, freed from the contingencies of social and historical conditions.

To be rational is to participate and communicate in norm-governed social relationships and interactions of a particular institutionalised social order. MacIntyre holds: “Hence ‘rational’ is not a predicate to be applied to individuals qua individuals, but only to individuals qua participants in particular social orders embodying particular conceptions of rationality.”

The modern self does not find its identity from the social roles that it adopts, but rather is able to adopt any role and any standpoint as it chooses. We are a part of already defined practices of a society and our roles and nature of the practice performed by us can determine what we should do and how well it is done. One cannot exercise a virtue only qua individual.

In his book, *Dependent Rational Animals* MacIntyre asserts that without understanding or taking into account the fact that human beings are dependent on others, only reason cannot provide the basis for morality. Enlightenment has overlooked this fact and that is why it failed. In the liberal tradition the self is “one that moves from sphere to sphere, compartmentalizing its attitudes”. We are dependent on others because of our inadequacies, imperfection and flaws.

When MacIntyre argues in this way, he forgets that the Enlightenment Project too is a product of a particular historical circumstance related to the various parts of the world. It was a revolution against the domination of religious institutes over the authority of the state and the lives of the citizens. In that situation, the preservation of individual autonomy and liberty within the minimum interference of state became indispensable. Some of the liberal thinkers have given preference to the concept of right and some others have focused on the concept of good, but almost all of them have, in one way or the other, been determined to establish a just society in which everyone can exercise his or her own rational will, liberty and autonomy, including slaves and women. MacIntyre’s rejection of the Enlightenment Project or the liberal tradition is insincere because it lacks a proper understanding of that tradition.

This whole debate could be understood by looking into the distinction between ontological and advocacy issues presented by Charles Taylor. He argues that ontological issue deals with the distinction between atomism and holism and advocacy issue deals with the distinction between individualism and collectivism. His contention is that the liberal thinkers have neglected this ontological distinction between atomism and holism and have mistakenly adhered to the position of atomist individualism. The position of holism, according to Taylor, can make the liberal position much more convincing. He gives arguments in support of this claim that even in a liberal state like America, people have the sense of patriotism which could be found in their

understanding of the American way of living. In an individualistic society we feel the sense of belongingness with the other members of the society and if the liberal tradition attempts to question that then Taylor finds it very unlikely that an example of such a society could be found and it could be viable in any way. Taylor argued against the liberal position that “men are self-sufficient outside of society”. (Taylor 1985)

In this paper, I wish to argue that the liberal position of Rawls has been very much liberal towards the communitarian arguments. He is concerned with attaining justice in the society by securing the rights and liberties of the individuals. He has never said that the social and psychological contingencies do not influence an individual's life or views. He is just making an effort to establish such a social arrangement in which in the name of a common good of the society, individual's rights should not be sacrificed. While liberals may not have been arguing that individuals can completely extricate themselves from their social context, the liberal valuation of choice still seemed to suggest an image of a subject who impinges his will on the world.

The liberal thinkers, in general, and Rawls, in particular, are not denying the individual's dependency on the social and historical context. It is the possibility of making an attempt to transgress that context.

Now I would like to consider the arguments mentioned by Taylor who asserts that the liberal thinkers would have to give appropriate value to the holistic approach because one can not live in an atomist way within a society. I wish to argue that I agree with Taylor that an individual cannot lead a life in an independent way as he or she is dependent on others for his or her existence. However, while living within a society, an individual's rights should also be protected to the extent where that individual could go against the common good of that society. This does not mean that this position is making an individual to live an atomist life. When one is arguing for his or her rights, this does not neglect the acceptance of one's dependence on others, but this only shows the possibility of considering one's rights in an independent way too. It is like opening the possibility of understanding an individual from an individual's point of view. It is to give enough liberty to change the equations of dependency, and social values. It is to think what could be the best way of living for an individual within a society. If the liberal position accepts this, it cannot accept the common good of the society to be the overarching value.

Liberal position is about giving preference to the individual's rights over the common good. It is not against all the associations. It is to give enough liberty to dissociate oneself from certain associations if found challenging the rights of an individual. This

is an idea of holism of the atomistic individuals where the individuals have more power than the members of a holist society.

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- ³ MacIntyre claims that individuals do not merely follow their individual will in order to perform any action. They are guided by the variety of practices and systematic conducive to the internal goods of that society.
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