

INDIVIDUALISM: TRUE AND FALSE

LIKE ALL of Professor Hayek's writing this pamphlet,* originally delivered as an address at University College, Dublin, is distinguished by its patient endeavour to achieve clarity with regard to fundamentals. Whether it will induce Socialists to see any of the case for individualism, or whether it will lead individualists to reinterpret their beliefs is another matter. Passionately held beliefs in social affairs often attain to the fervour of a religion, and the lack of reason of a superstition. The words which denote these social faiths acquire a magic power, and any attempt to analyse what they stand for is tabu.

Preconceived notions give to each listener a differing idea of such words as individualism or Socialism, accompanied by a strong emotional bias which precludes rational discussion. Of individualism Professor Hayek says, "I almost began to regret that I had ever connected the ideals in which I believe with a term which has been so abused and misunderstood." His own position is this: "The true individualism which I shall try to defend began its modern development with John Locke, and particularly Bernard Mandeville and David Hume, and achieved full stature for the first time in the work of Josiah Tucker, Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith, and in that of their great contemporary, Edmund Burke—the man of whom Smith said that he was the only man he ever knew who thought on economic subjects exactly as he did, without any previous communication having passed between them." In the nineteenth century he singles out Alexis de Tocqueville and Lord Acton as continuing this line of thought. He distinguishes this school of individualism from that which traces its origins from Descartes, Rousseau, the Encyclopædists, the Physiocrats, and Jeremy Bentham and the philosophic radicals. In passing we may remark that this seems to do less than justice to the Physiocrats. No doubt passages may be found in them which lean to an authoritarian view of society, and this perhaps is particularly true of Quesnay, the founder of this school, but it is less true of others, notably Turgot.

The true individualism of Adam Smith is "a theory of society, an attempt to understand the forces which determine the social life of man, and only in the second instance a set of political maxims derived from this view of society." The false individualism is illustrated by Descartes' observation that "those nations which, starting from a semi-barbarous state and advancing to civilisation by slow degrees, have had their laws successively determined, and, as it were, forced upon them simply by experience of the hurtfulness of particular crimes and disputes, would by this process come to be possessed of less perfect institutions than those which, from the commencement of their association as communities, have followed the appointment of some wise legislator." It is not difficult to see how this view led to the false theory of the social contract, and ultimately to belief in dictatorship. Thus the one view of individualism aims at establishing equality of conditions in which men will be able to associate with their fellows as they please and plan their own lives, while the other leads to the search for "some wise legislator" who will plan their lives for them, and so ultimately to the very negation of individualism.

True individualism has become discredited by many false ideas which are popularly supposed to be of its essence. One of these is that it is an essentially selfish philosophy, which is based on the concept of an "economic man" concerned only with his own enrichment. Another is that it is concerned with the defence of private property in all its forms, whether

conducive to the well-being of society or not. "The main concern of the great individualist writers was indeed to find a set of institutions by which man could be induced, by his own choice and by the motives which determined his ordinary conduct, to contribute as much as possible to the need of all others; and their discovery was that the system of private property did provide such inducements to a much greater extent than had yet been understood." Professor Hayek adds: "They did not contend, however, that this system was incapable of further improvement, and still less, as another of the current distortions of their argument will have it, that there existed a 'natural harmony of interests' irrespective of positive institutions." Despite this weighty opinion, there is good ground for saying that the development of individualist thought did stagnate. Not enough has been done towards determining what is a "suitable legal system" which will "make man by the pursuit of his interests contribute as much as possible to the needs of other men" and in particular "in determining what the contents of property rights ought to be with respect to different kinds of things." Professor Hayek says: "This is achieved on the whole by the simple conception of property as the exclusive right to use a particular thing where mobile effects, or what the lawyers call 'chattels,' are concerned. But it raises much more difficult problems in connection with land, where the recognition of the principle of private property helps us very little till we know precisely what rights and obligations ownership includes. And when we turn to such problems of more recent origin as the control of the air or of electric power, or of inventions and of literary or artistic creations, nothing short of going back to the *rationale* of property will help us to decide what should be in the particular instance the sphere of control or responsibility of the individual."

Here is the great, unfinished task of individualism, and unless it be taken up with determination and success, the present trend towards regulating and planning all the affairs of life will never be halted. Mankind has forgotten how much it owes to those who liberated it from the paternalism and the restraints which stifled progress and invention at every turn. It is upon those achievements that we are now living, and they have provided the material means which have made possible many social and Socialist experiments. To many it seems inconceivable that the advance of science and of technology can be slowed down or halted, but who can say what might happen if free outlet for individual initiative should be curtailed. Something of that kind seems to have happened to other civilisations which became too centralised, autocratic and stereotyped. Not equality, but equality of opportunity in the use of and access to natural resources must still be the goal of human effort.

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* *Individualism: True and False*. By Professor F. A. Hayek. Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co. Oxford: B. H. Blackwell. Price 2s. 6d.