

# The Individual and Society

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## I. Four Social Philosophies

ANY theory in the field of politico-economic thought achieves validity and meaning only as the logically derived inference of some systematic solution of the more fundamental theoretical problems of philosophy. From the point of view of contemporary politico-economic theory one of the most important of these more fundamental theoretical problems of philosophy is the problem of the relation between the individual and society. In the politico-economic field of contemporary Western thought four main streams may be distinguished roughly: Anarchism, Communism, Liberalism, and Social Democratism. The corresponding economic setups advocated by each are, respectively, elimination of all social controls, state planning, a free market, and a "state-regulated free monopolistic market." These economic objectives only achieve their full significance when viewed as the logically necessary mechanisms for the expression of different points of view as to the relation between the individual and society.

In any discussion of this philosophic problem of the individual and society it is desirable to eliminate those philosophic points of view which do not raise the problem of an individual's relation to society. One such point of view is the materialistic philosophy which denies the existence of individual consciousness and will as motivating forces, and pictures the individual and all his actions as completely controlled by the capricious interplay of external natural forces. According to this view, society (or the interaction of man with his fellowmen) is externally controlled and is best described by the analogy of billiard balls which, having been started rolling by some Great Original Force on some Great Billiard Table, simply follow the paths mechanically pre-determined for them to the end of time by the external physical forces of nature—that is, the given speed, weight and direction of the billiard balls and the given physical characteristics of the billiard table. Where everything happens as it must, there can be no problem of the relation of the individual to society. Indeed, no such concept as a problem could ever arise in a mechanically ordered universe.

Another point of view which does not raise the philosophic problem we have set ourselves is the philosophy of mysticism. This stream of philosophy, historically Eastern in its origin and development, emphasizes almost exclusively a doctrine

of Individual Perfection or Personal Salvation—that is, it emphasizes the problem of the relation of the individual to some Superior or Divine Order. It turns toward other-worldliness and, in fact, in one specific instance toward seven successive circles of other-worldlinesses. Some variations of this view leave the individual will pre-determined by immutable divine law just as binding as the physical laws of materialism. Other variations leave the individual will free to some extent, but turn its attention exclusively to the attainment of other-worldly perfections by a consciously concentrated effort to free themselves of this world—material and social. Such a point of view, where it is divinely deterministic, cannot raise the problem of the individual and society; where it leaves the will free, it either relegates the social problem to a very minor position or rejects it completely by the anchorite's retreat to a hermitage away from the society of his fellow-men. From this point of view the problem of the relation of the individual to society is either non-existent, unimportant, or consciously to be avoided as evil.

In the examination of these philosophies which may be eliminated in a discussion of the problem of the individual and society, two philosophical postulates should have begun to emerge as the necessary basis for any point of view in which this problem is raised. First, there must be at least some element of free individual will, and second, the reality and importance of this world and this life here-and-now must be accepted. The first postulate is necessary in order to have an individual at all, for where there is no element of inner determination we do not have an individual, but simply a part of a giant mechanism—whether it be material or divine. The second postulate, by its acceptance of the world, makes important to the individual the fact of another will existing simultaneously with his own within the framework of a given set of natural conditions—it accepts not only nature, but also society. These twin postulates of free individual will and this-worldliness (as contrasted to other-worldliness) are the basic elements of Western European philosophy. They underlie the institutions which have produced what we call Western European civilization. It is within the limitations of these two philosophical postulates that any discussion of possible variations of points of view concerning the relation of the individual to society can be fruitful. They are the necessary postulates for this problem to arise. They must be consciously affirmed before one can begin an evaluation of what in the interests of over-simplification we have termed the four main streams of contemporary politico-economic thought that must be logically derived from four varying solutions of the problem of the individual and society.

\* For some account of Mr. Zalles, see the report of the Henry George Institute of New England elsewhere in this issue.—Ed.

## II. The Need for a Philosophy

Granted the existence of an individual defined as a center of thought and action flowing from some measure of free inner determination; granted the existence of at least one other such individual who, taken with the first individual, will constitute a society; and granted finally that they exist simultaneously within the framework of a common set of given natural conditions here and now; what is to be the relation between this individual will and the other will? This is the problem of the relation of the one and the other—the individual and society.

The problem as a problem demanding a solution is raised by the seemingly necessary conflict of interests of two infinitely expansive wills existing simultaneously in a limited material world. This seemingly inherent condition of conflict which, when unchecked, creates a state of barbarism must in the thoughtful creation of a civilization be restored by some philosophic theory as to the nature of the individual self and the nature of a society of selves. Upon this theory in whatever form it takes will be determined the spheres of activity within which, by voluntarily limiting themselves, both the individual and society may peacefully resolve the seemingly inevitable conflict of interests. This is what the four dominant trends of contemporary thought, Anarchism, Communism, Liberalism, and Social Democratism seek to achieve through the political and economic institutions which they set up as their immediate objectives. It is therefore necessary to examine each in turn as to their view of the nature of the individual and the nature of society, and the division of the spheres of activity within which each must be limited.

The possible logical alternatives of thought will be four. There will be the two extremes: first, the sphere of activity of the individual almost unlimited and the sphere of activity of society so limited as to be almost non-existent; second, just the reverse, society unlimited in its scope, the individual completely limited. The third alternative is to achieve a state of dynamic balance between the two spheres of activity within which each may find its fullest expression. Fourth, there is the alternative of any possible wandering from this ideal balance between these spheres in the direction of either the first or second extremes. Each of these philosophical alternatives will develop as their logical inferences differing politico-economic institutions for the organization of society.

## III. The Programs of the Philosophies

Philosophical Anarchism is the theoretical expression of the first extreme. It denounces any form of organized social coercion or limitation of the individual will and leaves the will limited only by the given physical laws of nature. It is based on a view of the nature of the individual and of all individuals as being essentially good. The nature of all social organization or coercion is viewed as inherently evil.

Basing its views on these assumptions its economic set-up would logically be a system of free economic exchanges between free and equal individuals, private enterprise, private property in labor products, common ownership of land, but it would have no social organization to protect individuals against violations of person or property, to insure the sanctity of contracts, to manage the common property in land or to adjudicate niceties of rights and obligations between individuals. The key doctrine is of course the belief in the natural goodness of man when undisturbed by social coercion.

It may be pointed out here that if man is naturally good and has no inherent capacity for evil, then he is not a free moral agent, but is acting under some sort of compulsion to be good. He cannot then be said to be either good or bad, but simply is what he must be. If he does always what he must do he is reduced to a predetermined mechanism and can no longer be considered an individual. If, however, he is capable of choosing evil and is re-established as a moral agent, then the keystone of the anarchist theory falls out and some sort of sphere of activity for society must be re-introduced to limit the evil choices of the individual will. Anarchism attempts to resolve the conflict between the individual and society by denying the necessity for society as a limitation to the individual will.

Communism may be taken as the theoretical expression of the other logical extreme. If we are to re-introduce some sphere of activity for society as a limitation of the sphere of the individual, how far may we go? Logically the limit will be reached when society's sphere of activity has completely swallowed up the individual's sphere and completely limited the individual freedom of action.

The Communist politico-economic set-up involves a state-planned economy with all individuals economically controlled by society through the social control of land, capital and even labor itself. Private enterprise, market exchanges and private property by and large are replaced by state enterprise, state production and distribution, and state ownership of capital wealth. Politically a dictatorship is necessary until individuals are so conditioned as to obey without question the dictated economic planning, at which time the political dictatorship will "wither away," since it is no longer necessary.

What is the view of the nature of the individual and of society from which this politico-economic program may be logically inferred as necessary? The basic postulates of this point of view are that society is an organic entity and that individuals are but parts of this greater organism, which has evolved by a process of predetermined historical evolution. The parts of an individual body are in conflict until forced into their proper subordination by the higher organism of the individual, who conflicts with his brothers until harmoniously subordinated by the higher organism of the family, which again resolves its inter-clan conflicts in the higher organism of the nation, whose international conflicts are

resolved in the higher organism of all humanity. The ultimate aim of this point of view is to resolve the conflict between the individual and society by forcefully subordinating the individual will to the mysterious will and purpose of society viewed as an organic entity. Opposed to anarchism it destroys the individual through the furthest logical extension of the social sphere of activity. It is not a theory of inorganic materialism, since it postulates will, consciousness and purpose in the social organism which exists here and now. It is perhaps best described as a philosophy of organic (as opposed to inorganic or completely deterministic) materialism. It leaves freedom of the will only to the social entity and deprives the individual of all right to make free choices, while deliberately conditioning him to accept without question a specialized function within the organic social entity. The social sphere of activity swallows the individual sphere.

Our third logical alternative must be a theory which attempts a dynamic balance between the extremes and maintains a sphere of activity for both the individual and society, so that neither swallows up the other, but each complements and fulfills the other. Such a theory is Liberalism. Liberalism may be described as a theoretical attempt to resolve the conflict of the individual and society in terms of freedom of action for the individual—but a freedom limited by the equal rights of all other individuals to equal freedom of action. The necessary sphere of activity of society emerges from this view of equal rights for all individuals as those institutionalized activities which are logically necessary for the establishment and maintenance of equal rights for a community of free individuals. Individuals are defined as unique centers of thought and activity who are all equal in their opportunity or right to be free within the framework of nature; society is defined as the impersonalized will of all free and equal individuals to serve them as the guarantee of their freedom and their equality.

What are the logical inferences in the political field of these definitions of the individual and society? Government or the State is obviously necessary, but it must, as the impersonalized will of all individuals, be as completely representative as possible. This calls for democratic processes of election and as great a degree of decentralization as the nature of external emergencies may permit. There must always be the possibility of dissent and recall of delegated powers. Delegated powers must always be limited in scope to the necessary functions of government or the social as opposed to the individual. These functions will only be those activities which are necessary to guarantee equality and freedom for all. They must be binding on all individuals and are therefore properly social functions, since they are necessarily universal in their nature and cannot be undertaken by a particular individual, but must rather be undertaken by society or all individuals universally as represented in the instrument of government. These functions would principally be policing; administration of justice;

trusteeship of all land (government must see that land goes to the highest bidder, collect the rent, and disburse it in equal share to all members of society); and finally the protection of the very existence of the individual and society when threatened by hostile societies or natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes. This last function will usually demand a vast extension of delegated powers and a high degree of centralized social authority with a consequent decrease in the sphere of individual activity. These extensions must be strictly viewed as emergency powers to be exercised only for the duration of the emergency. Any unnecessary extension of such powers demands as a last resort a revolution by free individuals to re-establish the proper sphere of the social and of the individual.

Under non-emergency conditions the activities in which an individual is free to engage and in which government must not only not interfere, but actively guarantee his freedom, are all those actions, the opportunity for whose simultaneous performance is equally available to all other individuals. This is a concept of a moral category or law for freedom of individual action first clearly stated by Immanuel Kant, though it has its roots in the Christian ethic. To illustrate, it is clear that simultaneously all individuals cannot rob or kill—some must rob and kill and some must be robbed and killed; but we may all simultaneously vote to delegate powers, worship as we please, enter into contracts, and hold as private property what we have labored to produce. This last, of course, is logically dependent upon our equal opportunity to get at the materials of nature and is, of course, Henry George's great contribution to the logical development of the philosophy of liberalism in its economic inferences. In general the logical economic inferences of the liberal point of view are a free market for free exchanges, private enterprise, free competition, private ownership of labor products, common ownership of land, freedom of contract and most particularly no special monopoly-creating privileges of any kind whatsoever.

To sum up, Liberalism holds the sphere of activity of society to include all functions which must be universally binding on all for the maintenance of the equal freedom of all and which cannot therefore properly be the function of a particular individual; while the sphere of activity of the individual must include all functions which all particular individuals possess equal opportunity to practice simultaneously and hence are logically suitable for particular control, since these activities cannot interfere with any other individual's equal right to freedom. The moral or social limitation is not truly a limitation of the individual will, but rather the condition or instrumentality through which the individual is free to reach his fullest development intellectually and materially through the free exchange of ideas and goods on a basis of socially guaranteed free and equal association. In the Liberal resolution of the problem of conflict, the individual and society are thought of as balancing and fulfilling each other.

The fourth logical possibility in dealing with this problem

is the solution of Social Democratism, which careens like a drunken sailor toward all three of the previous theories in turn and at once. It has no fundamental conception of the individual and of society. It is based on the philosophy of pragmatism—try something—anything, and see if it works. Principles are all relative; they are only true for a particular time or place. If something is successful, keep it; if it is not, discard it and try something else. But how, it may be asked, can anything ever be judged a success or failure from this point of view, since no guiding principle is established by which logically to measure success or failure. Its politico-economic program is as confused and contradictory as its philosophy. It stands politically for democratic socialism—that is, a democratic dictatorship. Economically, no more need be said about it than that it stands for a state-regulated free monopolistic market of social and private enterprise. It can be politely described as a hybrid philosophy, though a less generous view might say of it as of a stray puppy, that its parentage is probably multiple. As a serious possible alternative it is only important because it is being so widely adopted today as a serious working program. It represents a state of transition, of flux until the pressure of conflicting social forces resolves themselves into a stable form based on a philosophical principle of organization or until contemporary economic breakdowns become irreparably disastrous and produce the collapse of all attempts to work out an organization of society based on ideal principles.

#### IV. Conclusion

In the light of some resolution of our problem of the conflict of the individual and society, these, then, are the main logical alternatives presented to thoughtful students today. They constitute the great politico-economic issue of our times—a burning issue. The increasingly severe economic breakdowns of the last decades are bringing ever dangerously nearer the collapse of the whole structure of Western European civilization. Nazi-Fascism cannot be thought of as a theoretical alternative to our four main streams of thought that constitute the intellectual issue. Nazi-Fascism is the negation of thought; the destruction of the possibility of the thoughtful weighing of alternatives that constitute an issue. It is irrationality; it is violent opportunism. It is barbarism; it is the beginning of the collapse itself—thinly veiled under a cloak of many economico-philosophic stripes—discordant, ribald, lunatic stripes held together only by the smear of human blood. If we fail to meet this issue we shall inevitably revert to the chaos, the barbarism and the violent, animal savagery out of which Western man has so long struggled to rise by taking thought on the fundamental nature of his present existence and logically deriving therefrom the structure of a civilized way of life in which he might at last be free to realize to the full his immense latent potentialities.