Reclaiming individualism: perspectives on public policy.

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Individualism

[Chapter 1 of P Spicker, *Reclaiming individualism*, 2013]

Summary. *The idea of the independent, self-determining individual has been central to the defence of diversity and difference, but it has also been used to defend the established order. There are three overlapping fields of discourse. Moral individualism is a view of how people should be treated, based on independence, rights, personal liberty and moral responsibility. Methodological individualism is a way of understanding the world, either considering people as individuals, or in its stronger versions denying other, collective forms of analysis. The most important approaches are based either on average individuals or on the model of a rational, self-interested individual. Substantive individualism is a view that there are only individuals, and there is no such thing as society. These three discourses overlap, but they are separable; there is no necessary reason why someone who accepts individualist concepts in one respect should adopt the others.*

1.1 Individualism

Individualism emerged during the Enlightenment as a challenge to the established order. Feudal societies attributed social roles according to birth, status and obligation. Individualism was a critique of the societies that existed up to then, an assertion of the rights of every person to choose their own course for themselves, and a justification for resistance against oppressive governments. Individuals are independent and self-determining. They are not subject to obligations and restrictions imposed by birth or origin. Individualism is a claim for human dignity, and the rights of people to develop according to their own lights.[1] People are possessed of rights that protect them from the interference of others. The discourse of individualism is closely linked with liberal thought. The core principle of liberalism is that individuals have rights. In Locke's writing, those rights were to life, liberty and 'estates' or property;[2] in the US constitution, they became rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Liberals argued for civil liberties, including freedom of speech, assembly and worship. Individual rights were basic to a defence of diversity and difference.

All of this is still true. Over time, however, individualism has also come to stand for something quite different. The individual has come to represent someone who is selfish and isolated, who has no responsibilities to others. Individualism is at the root of laissez-faire liberalism, standing against state intervention in the operation of the economic market. It is widely used as a defence of the rights of those who have property, against those who have none. In that form, individualism has become a primary argument for the maintenance of privilege.

That is another moral argument, but it is often presented as something else. Analytical welfare economics and rational choice theory conventionally present a set of normative arguments about behaviour in the form of models. In principle, the models can be taken as possible courses of action, to which behaviour in practice can be compared; in practice, they are often translated in policy debates into assertions about human conduct. Part of the task of this book is to disentangle positions which bring together description, normative propositions and ideology.

Individualism, as this suggests, is not a single way of looking at the world. There are three overlapping fields of discourse: moral, methodological and substantive.

Moral individualism

Moral individualism is based in the view that everyone should be treated as if they are an individual. The most basic precept is that people should be treated as being independent of each other. This proposition is so widely held nowadays that it can be difficult to conceive that there are alternatives, but it would not have been accepted for much of the world's history. In real life, people can hardly be

[1] S Lukes, 1973, Individualism, Oxford: Blackwell

[2] J Locke, 1690, Two treatises of civil government, P Laslett ed., New York: Mentor 1965.

thought of as 'independent'; they are born into families, households, communities, ethnic groups or nations. It is not good enough to understand moral actions in terms of those collective groups, however, because individuals within those structures may have interests, preferences, wants or needs which are different from others in the same group. Wives are not represented by their husbands; servants are not represented by their masters; children are not exclusively represented by their parents. Those examples may seem curiously antiquated, but the contrary view would have been widely accepted even as late as the early 20th century, and the subordinate position of women and children is still asserted in some countries.

The second moral principle is that individuals have rights - moral principles that are attached to the individual, affecting the way that other people behave towards them. Many societies have been based, not in rights, but in duties - moral responsibilities which apply to people, groups or institutions. Duties are not a sufficient guarantee of the position of each and every person, and the idea of rights has developed to make up the deficiency. Some rights imply duties in other people: 'claim rights' are rights held against others, which will require them to fulfil duties towards the person. There are other sorts of rights, however, which do not clearly imply duties (the distinction is made by Hohfeld[3]). Powers and immunities are rights which an individual is able to do, and others are not permitted to interfere with. Freedom of speech is a power. The right of parents to raise children as they see fit is an immunity (often the actions taken by parents, including physical restraint or punishment, would not be permitted in other contexts). Privileges are special rights which an individual gains in particular circumstances - for example, a driving licence, or the authority to dispense restricted medicines. The language of rights is not confined to individualism - it plays a major part in socialist thought; but the distinctive contribution of individualism has been the attachment of rights, not to the state, nor to the law, and not to duties, but to the individual who is their subject. The idea of 'human rights' is the paradigmatic example: rights which are deemed to adhere to every individual by virtue of their humanity.

The third key principle is that individuals are moral actors. 'Ethical individualism'[4] is a narrower concept than moral individualism in the round; it means that individuals make moral decisions, as independent, self-governing persons, and that the responsibility for those decisions rests with the individual. Decisions should be made by people in their own behalf. That position is sometimes justified on the grounds that people are the best judge of their own interests, but again the justification is a moral one rather than a descriptive statement. It is important that people should be treated as if they have the right to make individual decisions, even if in practice they cannot. So, children can take legal cases through a guardian or 'next friend', and people are able to assign power of attorney in anticipation of failing capacity to make decisions.

The emphasis on individual decisions leads, fairly directly, to the issue of freedom. Saying that a person is a moral actor implies the freedom to act morally, and the possibility of not acting morally. For Dworkin, 'ethical independence ... follows from the principle of responsibility.'[5] A person has to be able to think, to act, and to decide; the action has to be capable of being done; and there must not be coercion, either to do it or not to do it, because coercion prevents people from acting with responsibility.[6] Autonomy and choice are generally treated as central. A person needs to be self-governing and capable of making independent decisions, and there should be choices available, so that decisions are not fettered.

As I have already noted, this constellation of ideas, including freedom, autonomy and choice, is often identified with liberalism, and in the USA with republican thought. Liberalism in this sense is broader than individualism alone: it has things to say about the role of government, political institutions and the economy, which go beyond the immediate remit of this chapter (though they will be touched on at several points in this book). For present purposes, it is enough to emphasise that individualism provides liberalism, not just with a mode of discourse, but with a moral foundation - a normative view of the world based on independent persons possessed of rights, deciding for

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[3] W Hohfeld, 1920, Some fundamental legal conceptions as applied in judicial reasoning, New Haven: Yale University Press, obtained at archive.org.

[4] S Lukes, 1973, Individualism, Blackwell, ch 15

[5] R Dworkin, 2011, Justice for hedgehogs, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, p 4

[6] P Spicker, 2006, Liberty equality fraternity, Bristol: Policy Press.

themselves and making choices. The elements of moral individualism are discussed further in Part 2.

Methodological individualism

Methodological individualism extends individualism from being a moral view, and applies it as a way of understanding how the world works. As the name suggests, it is about methods. It takes the proposition that individuals can be understood as independent, autonomous decision makers and moves from that to the analysis of economics, politics and society. There are arguments about methodological individualism which go beyond methodology, but if we confine the discussion in the first instance only to ways of understanding human behaviour, it seems to me that there are two main versions. In the weaker form of methodological individualism, individualism is simply an approach to analysis: people are understood as if they were individuals. The position is most clearly demonstrated in economic theory, which analyses the behaviour of producers and consumers in individualistic terms. That is how Schumpeter, who probably invented the term 'methodological individualism', presented it. It was not feasible, Schumpeter wrote, to claim that all social processes were attributable to individuals, but methodological individualism was only a way of proceeding, implying no theory about society or the individual.[7] In the stronger form, methodological individualism is based in the view that an explanation of individual conduct says everything that is required to understand society. This is the position adopted by Elster, for whom methodological individualism is 'the doctrine that all social phenomena - their structure and their change - are in principle explicable in ways that only involve individuals - their properties, their goals, their beliefs and their actions.'[8]

In both its weak and strong variants, methodological individualism is a form of analysis, rather than a set of claims about what a society is. If we consider what people are really like, they are not separate from others or devoid of social relationships - if they are, there is something wrong with them. People are born into families, communities and nations. They are socialised to accept values; they are part of a culture. They have obligations and relationships which they may have had little say about. They are mutually dependent, not independent. Methodological individualism is sometimes constructed in a way that denies that reality, presenting people as if they were islands. Friedman, for example, supposes a society consisting of 'a number of independent households - a collection of Robinson Crusoes, as it were.'[9] Life is not like that, but that is not the point. There are reasons for examining relationships as if things were different. Part of the argument is moral: that whether or not people are actually acting or developed as individuals, they should be treated as if they are. The other part is analytical: that human behaviour and relationships can be understood in terms of interaction between independent individuals, and that approaching the issues individualistically offers insights that collective analysis does not. One of the earliest examples of methodological individualism in these terms is Hobbes' idea of the social contract[10] - not a literal account of history, but a metaphor, an explanatory myth to explain the relationships between individuals, society and the state. John Rawls, much later, used a similar mechanism to identify the roots of legitimacy.[11] Those are both, incidentally, examples from political science rather than from economics. That is worth pointing out, because much of what has happened subsequently in the literature on 'public choice' depends on propositions drawn mainly from economics, rather than methodological individualism alone.

The form of methodological individualism found in economics usually depends on an interpretation of social action in terms of the actions of individuals. That, in principle, is what microeconomic theory sets out to do. In its simplest form, microeconomics bases generalisations about economic behaviour – demand, supply, production and so forth - on aggregates. The 'individuals' who are referred to are 'average', approximating the aggregate behaviour of people in

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[7] J Schumpeter, 1954, A history of economic analysis, Allen and Unwin, p 855

[8] J Elster, 1982, Marxism, Functionalism and Game Theory, Theory and Society, No. 11(4), cited in G Hodgson, 2007, Meanings of methodological individualism, Journal of Economic Methodology 14(2) 211-226, p 216.

[9] e.g. M Friedman, 1962, Capitalism and freedom, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p 13

[10] T Hobbes, 1651, Leviathan, ed. C B MacPherson, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1968

[11] J Rawls, 1971, A theory of justice, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

the economy overall. The key advantage of doing things this way is that it becomes possible to disregard, for practical purposes, the inconsistencies, fluctuations and uncertainties that would have to be included in a discussion of the circumstances of real-life individuals. The disadvantage is that averaging can have strange effects. Little points out:

> The tastes of an average man do not change at all rapidly. He does not experiment very much. His life is not subject to any shocks or crises. ... His position on the social scale will not alter very much. The welfare of his friends and relatives is unlikely to alter greatly. Much more important, he never dies.[12]

(We might also note: he is a man. If there are any average women, it seems, they are men too.)

The justification for averaging in this sense lies in the assumption that differences between individuals can be taken to cancel each other out, leaving a sense that there is a norm. In practice, then, it boils down to much the same thing as discussion of people in aggregate. This sort of aggregation has been used, for example, to explain the mechanisms of supply and demand; both consist of the aggregate actions of multiple actors. However, the process has fundamental weaknesses. The first problem is that aggregates, averages or composites, in their very nature, do not represent the position of individuals; they tend to conceal diversity. Second, the assumption that variations are distributed around a norm is questionable - there might be several norms operating simultaneously - and whether it is not consistent with empirical evidence depends heavily on context. Describing average profiles for the customers of supermarkets is a useful shorthand, but attempts to do the same for benefit claimants have not proved to be helpful for practical purposes[13] - there is too much individual variation. If we are talking about other more complex issues, like the health status of the population, then aggregation and averaging may make very little sense at all - for the same reason that the mean number of legs available to a human being is less than two, people's state of health cannot sensibly be described in terms of variations around a central point. Third, it is not clear that differences in people's positions can be taken to cancel each other out. There are some circumstances when this is possible. If we are talking about goods for consumption, it might make sense to suggest that the aggregate reflects total demand - though if I cannot get a supply of drinking water, the reassurance that someone in a different city is able to use a hosepipe in the garden is not much help.

The problems with the concept of the average person have led to the development of an alternative model, based instead on a different kind of theoretical individual, whose behaviour is rational, consistent and self-interested. This approach, which will be discussed further in part 3, is widely used in analytical welfare economics, public choice and game theory. The two methodologies, based on rational actors or average men, are often taken as directly equivalent, and economics textbooks are liable to hop between the two as if they were saying much the same thing in different ways; but in fact the positions are discrete, inconsistent, and probably mutually contradictory. For example, if a rational individual is faced with an incentive, that individual will respond; if an aggregate group of individuals is faced with an incentive, only some will. If decisions are made by a rational individual, that individual is generally assumed to make decisions that are consistent with his preferences; if decisions are taken on the basis of aggregates, the aggregate preference might not be consistent with the preferences of the constituent parts. (Neither of those points may be self-evident - I will explain them further in due course. Incentives are discussed in 3.2, and the discrepancy between individual and aggregate preferences is discussed in 5.1.)

If the reference to a notional individual, or *homo economicus*, is justifiable, it is not because it offers a description of the world, but because it offers a methodology - that is, a rationale and an approach to analysis. There are times, however, when the predictions of individualistic theories seem remote from the behaviour of real people: some of the discussions later in this book, about markets, incentives and collaboration, are illustrative. Rational behaviour at the individual level does not necessarily lead to rational aggregate outcomes. Average behaviour does not conform to predictions

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[12] I Little, 1957, A critique of welfare economics, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p 49

[13] A Bryson, D Kasparova, 2003, Profiling benefit claimants in Britain: a feasibility study, Department for Work and Pensions Research Report 196

of rational behaviour: Thaler argues that 'Behaviour can be (and is often shown in the laboratory to be) purposeful, regular, and yet systematically different from the axioms of economic theory.'[14] It is not true on the whole that people can be said to make independent decisions: the decisions of economic actors are directly influenced by a history of production, consumption, and existing patterns of behaviour. And it does not follow, because an individual is self-interested, that the same individual will always want more.

The character of economic theory used to be represented in terms of 'positive economics', as a rational, objective examination of economic behaviour.[15] Rational choice theory has similarly been criticised for claiming to be 'positive', when it is anything but.[16] It is not clear that any theory which offers prescriptions in place of descriptions can be said to be value-neutral. It is probably true, too, to say that methodological individualism is sometimes invested with a moral fervour that sits uncomfortably with its pretensions to be scientific and dispassionate. David Green, from the pro-market think tank Civitas, writes:

> One of the main problems we face is that some defenders of a market economy think they have to defend formulaic economism and they often do so with the zeal of someone who wants to uphold individual liberty and guard against political absolutism. In truth they are very different ideas.[17]

The dominant theories rest in a prescriptive view of individual action - they outline what people should do, in idealised circumstances. Some hefty chunks of economic theory, including analytical welfare economics and general equilibrium analysis, are normative rather than descriptive in form. That does not have to be true of methodological individualism, which requires only that interactions are studied from the perspective of the individual. Behavioural economics, a fusion of economics and psychology, describes what people do rather than assuming it. However, it begins from the proposition that it is possible to start with individual behaviour and aggregate it into social phenomena; in that sense it is also methodologically individualist.

Substantive individualism

The third form of individualism is sometimes identified with methodological individualism, but there is a critical difference. In an influential essay on methodological individualism, Lukes identifies five main forms. Lukes' catalogue includes

1. 'Truistic Social Atomism', the view that societies are made of human beings;
2. a belief that the only meaningful statements about society are statements about individuals;
3. a view that in society, only individuals are real;
4. an argument that sociological generalisations are impossible, and
5. the principle that society must be run for the good of individuals.[18]

The most obvious thing to say about this list is that it does not seem to be much concerned with methodological individualism in either of the senses in which I have discussed the term so far. Only the second proposition says anything directly about how to analyse society; the fourth could be taken as its converse, but it does it indirectly. The gist of statements one and three is that society *is* made up of individuals. The fifth, a form of moral individualism, says that it *ought* to be treated that way. These statements mainly represent, then, not methodology, but individualist understandings of social

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[14] R Thaler, 1991, Quasi rational economics, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, p 191

[15] e.g. M Friedman, 1953, Essays in positive economics, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[16] M Petracca, 1991, The rational actor approach to politics, in K Monroe (ed) The economic approach to politics, New York: Harper Collins.

[17] D Green, 2010, Prosperity with principles, London: Civitas, p 38.

[18] S Lukes, 1973, Methodological individualism reconsidered, in A Ryan (ed) The philosophy of social explanation, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

action – ontological accounts of what society is like, rather than statements about methodology. For Watkins,

> the ultimate constituents of the social world are individual people who act more or less appropriately in the light of their dispositions and understanding of their situation. Every complex social situation or event is the result of individuals, their dispositions, situations, beliefs, and physical resources and environment.[19]

This is about the nature of society, rather than the methods used to analyse it. Schumpeter called this position 'sociological individualism', to distinguish it from a methodological approach.

> By sociological individualism we mean the view, widely held in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, that the self-governing individual constitutes the ultimate unit of the social sciences and that all social phenomena resolve themselves into decisions and actions of individuals that need not or cannot be further analyzed in terms of superindividual factors.[20]

I do not think the term 'sociological' helps here, so I am going to call it *substantive individualism* - the argument that individualism is a description of social reality: that what we call 'society' is an artefact, and all it really is a collection of individual human beings. Mrs Thatcher famously argued that 'there is no such thing as society'.[21] That statement chimes in with a long tradition of individualist thought. Jeremy Bentham argued:

> The community is a fictitious body, composed of the individual persons who are considered as constituting as it were its members. The interest of the community is, then, what? - the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it.[22]

Karl Popper argued that

> the 'behaviour' and the 'actions' of collectives, such as states of social groups, must be reduced to the behaviour and actions of human individuals. ... we should never be satisfied with an explanation in terms of so-called 'collectives'.[23]

Lukes objects to the suggestion that sociological analysis is impossible or vacuous. Coming from an eminent sociologist, that objection is predictable enough. There are evidently social phenomena, like suicide, crime or social stratification, that need to be understood in social terms as well as from the perspective of individuals. However, Lukes goes too far in accepting the apparent 'truism' that a society is made up of individual human beings.[24] It is made up of lots of other things besides. A collective decision by the individual human beings who happen to be in a parliament building is not the same as a decision of the Parliament. British Petroleum is not just a collection of human beings; the Royal Opera House, the Church of England or the Scottish Parliament are more than the people who make them up. These are corporate bodies, and they have personalities, both in law and as a matter of social fact.[25] Corporations have structures, rules and procedures which define their social relationships. A society comprises, not just human beings, but a wide range of collective entities – families, businesses, employers, charities, clubs, government bodies, voluntary societies, schools and universities. The idea that society is made up only of individuals, or that only individuals have any

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[19] J Watkins, 1957, Historical explanation in the social sciences, British Journal for the Philosophy of Science, 8(30) 104-117, p 106.
[20] J Schumpeter, 1954, A history of economic analysis, London: Allen and Unwin, p 855
[21] M Thatcher, Interview for Women's Own, at http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689
[22] J Bentham, 1789, An introduction to the principles of morals and legislation in M Warnock (ed.) Utilitarianism, Collins, Glasgow, 1962 p.35.
[23] K Popper, 1945, The open society and its enemies, vol 2, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul pp 87, 91
[24] Lukes, 1973; and see R Bhargava, 1992, Individualism in social science, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp 5-6.
[25] See e.g. R Scruton, 1989, Corporate persons, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 63 (Supp) 239-266.

social existence, is at odds with most of our everyday experience.

Substantive individualists emphasise the importance of treating people as they are. Gray makes this case for 'conservative individualism':

> We are not, in truth, Mill's sovereign selves, parading our individuality before an indifferent world: we are born in families, encumbered without our consent by obligations we cannot be voluntary choice renounce. ... Conservative individualists recognise that, before anything else, even before freedom, human beings need a home, a nest of institutions and a way of life they feel to be their own.[26]

This is as much a moral position as it is a description of society. Denying the validity of individual experience can be an excuse for overriding the needs and concerns of individuals. But that can be read as an objection to the generalisations of rationalist methodology as well as to collectivist interpretations. For Hayek, 'true individualism' stood in contrast with 'false, rationalistic individualism' based on abstract understandings of humanity.[27] He condemned

> the silliest of the common misunderstandings: the belief that individualism postulates (or bases its arguments on the assumption of) the existence of isolated or self-contained individuals, instead of starting from men whose whole nature and character is determined by their existence in society.[28]

This is not a 'misunderstanding'; some individualists do exactly that. Friedman does it, for example, when he talks about a 'collection of Robinson Crusoes'. For a substantive individualist, the representation of people as 'average individuals' is difficult to justify - any averaging must disguise the behaviour of individuals, rather than representing the range and diversity of individual choice. Equally, the idea of a typical, 'rational' individual is problematic - substantive individualism begins from the proposition that real people are individuals and act differently from each other, whereas rational choice assumes that people in aggregate fall into predictable general patterns of behaviour.

If Hayek's approach was applied consistently, substantive individualism ought to look very different from methodological individualism. It may be possible to hold to substantive individualism while using aggregate or collective methods for convenience. Many concepts in economics, such as market price or money supply, are not describing the action of individuals directly. The analysis of markets often deals in aggregates and complex processes; they may be compatible with individualism, and they may be reducible to individual actions analytically, but they do not have to refer to methodological individualism conceptually. (Hayek criticised Friedman's use of macroeconomic concepts for the same reason: 'there is no such thing', he wrote, 'as *the* quantity of money.'[29]) Ultimately, however, substantive individualism should mistrust general statements about human action; it reserves a space for individuals to be irrational, distinctive and different.

Nevertheless, and despite the gap between them, substantive individualism has become closely identified with the strong version of methodological individualism. If the world is made up of individuals, the argument runs, then that is how it should be analysed, and that is how policy should be formed.[30] If there is some confusion between methodological and substantive understandings of individualism, one of the contributing factors has been the refusal of some substantive individualists to accept that other ways of looking at the world make any sense at all. When Hayek writes that 'there is no other way toward an understanding of social phenomena but through our understanding of individual actions directed toward other people and guided by their expected behaviour',[31] he crosses the line into the sort of methodological abstraction that he claims to be condemning. Bhargava refers

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[26] J Gray, Beyond the new right, London: Routledge, pp 52-3

[27] F Hayek, 1948, Individualism and economic order, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, ch 1

[28] Hayek, 1948, p 6

[29] Hayek, cited D Green, 1987, The New Right, Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books, p 148

[30] See e..g. J Watkins, 1957, The principle of methodological individualism, British Journal for the Philosophy of Science 3(10) pp 186-189.

[31] Hayek, 1948, p 6.

to the fusion of methodological and substantive views as 'ontological individualism', and the doctrine that no other form of analysis is possible as 'atomism'.[32] Arguments may then be methodological and substantive at the same time, in the sense that they offer an individualist analysis that could also be applied to the analysis of social issues.

Substantive individualism is only partly about an understanding of society. It is also about a process or way of recognising the decisions of individuals, and a set of principles related to that. Hayek writes:

> What, then, are the essential characteristics of true individualism? The first thing that should be said is that it is primarily 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.[33]

The political maxims may be secondary, but they carry considerable weight in public policy. The belief that individualism relates to people as they really are leads to a series of prescriptions for the way that decisions are made – a set of social processes and policies which allow individuals to express themselves in their own way. They include arguments about choice, markets, collective action and the role of government. Debates on these issues occupy a large part of the subject matter of this book.

1.2 Individualism and collectivism

Collectivism is based in the view that people interact, not as individuals, but as part of social groups, such as families, communities, schools, associations, businesses, tribes or nations. Like individualism, collectivism can be represented in three models: moral, methodological and substantive. Moral collectivism considers that groups, can be moral actors, and are worthy of moral status. There have been collectivists who have elevated the position of the group above the position of the individual, but the idea that it might be legitimate to sacrifice the position of an individual for the good of the group has been heavily tainted by its association with nazism and fascism. Most present-day collectivists would argue only that the interests of groups should be considered as well as the interests of individuals, and that moral principles have to be formed in terms of the social context. The position of minority ethnic groups, or the position of social blocs like gender or older people, are not effectively protected if they are considered only as individuals. This is the typical position of socialists, who interpret key values of liberty, equality and solidarity in collective social terms rather than strictly in terms of relations between individuals.[34]

Methodological collectivism is the characteristic mode of operation of sociology, in the same way as methodological individualism is characteristic of microeconomics. One of the central issues in sociology is how to balance the role of agency - the deliberate action of human beings - with what we know about patterns of social behaviour. Durkheim argued that there was a dimension to suicide, ostensibly a most individual act, which could only be understood in social terms.[35] Sawyer refers to this as the problem of 'emergence', where the actions and interactions of agents produce global patterns of behaviour that are difficult to explain in terms of the component elements.[36] One of the reasons we are aware of systemic disadvantage in areas like health is because the information has been grouped and processed collectively, using the collective construct of 'social class'. This can be taken to mean that people are understood as if they are part of collective groups; but if methodological individualism can be understood, in its stronger form, as a view that relationships and social structures are best understood in terms of relationships between individuals, methodological collectivism can equally be taken to claim that relationships between individuals are best understood in terms of social relationships and structures. That is certainly the position of many approaches to social analysis, including feminism and critical theory.

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[32] Bhargava, 1992, p 40.
[33] Hayek, 1948, p.6
[34] e.g. Party of European Socialists, Our Values, http://www.pes.org/en/renew/our-values
[35] E Durkheim, Suicide, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1952.
[36] R Sawyer, 2005, Social emergence, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp 2-5

In recent years, too, there has been a revival of functionalist approaches to social action. Functionalism is based on the view that patterns of social organisation are developed because they are useful or beneficial to a society. The belief that cooperative behaviour is a product of human evolution, [37] or the view that behaviours are maintained because they are beneficial to relatives or kinship networks, [38] are examples; they justify collective action in terms of the supposed benefit to the group. [39] There are deep flaws in those arguments – values and norms are not all benign, some collective actions work to the detriment of the group, not to their benefit, and cultural adaptations that have been beneficial at one stage are not necessarily beneficial at others.

The strongest form of methodological collectivism is holism. Sociological holism, Sawyer explains, 'holds that macrosocial phenomena have primacy over individuals in explaining behaviour and cannot be redefined in terms of individual behaviour'.[40] Examples of holistic explanations might include the marxist analysis of class conflict,[41] the concept of institutional racism,[42] or the idea of structural dependency in development theory;[43] each depends on the relationship between social units rather than the individuals who play a part in those units.

Substantive collectivism argues that it is social groups that are real, rather than individuals. To an individualist, that statement may seem bizarre. In its strongest form, the proposition can veer into a remote and inhuman quasi-mysticism: examples are Hegel's view of the conflict of nations as the march of God through the world,[44] or the Nazi elevation of the Volk and the race over real people. Individualist arguments developed in mediaeval times in reaction to a corporate view of society, where status was ascribed, and individuals had no rights or significance in the great order of things. In contemporary society, one of the principal defences of individualism is that the alternative is a repressive authoritarianism, and individualists often stigmatise collectivist arguments in those terms.

That is not, however, the only way that collectivism might be expressed, and it has become rare in the modern era. Substantive collectivism is largely formed as an alternative view of human experience, best represented in communitarianism. The central proposition might be that we are social animals; our lives have no meaning or shape outside a social context. Our social relationships define us as people: to a sociologist, Dahrendorf once wrote, a person is the sum of his roles.[45] Families, firms and institutions are as real to us as other human beings. Next, social reality is constructed - this is the basic proposition of symbolic interactionism.[46] Our understanding of ourselves and other people is always framed in terms of our social relationships. If 'emergence' is the process of understanding how individual actions coalesce into collective action,[47] its converse is 'social causation', where individual behaviour depends on and is conditioned by the social framework. It is not necessary to go so far as 'causation' to accept that the character and pattern of collective relationships shape the values and actions of individuals. Living in society is the condition of humanity. People are socialised; they learn language, thought and behaviour. Communitarians argue both that our moral values, too, derive from our social position: we are not individuals in isolation, but come into the world as children, brothers or sisters, part of a network of relationships and responsibilities.[48] That means, in turn, that we cannot sensibly talk about issues like freedom, rights or property without placing them in a social context.

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[37] N Henrich, J Henrich, 2007, Why humans cooperate, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[38] R Dawkins, 1976, The selfish gene, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[39] M Nowak, 2006, Five rules for the evolution of cooperation, Science 314(5805) 1560-1563.
[40] Sawyer, 2005, p 48.
[41] K Marx, F Engels, 1848, The communist manifesto, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1967.
[42] S Carmichael and C Hamilton, 1967, Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America, New York: Vintage Books, pp. 2-6.
[43] R Packenham 1992, The dependency movement: scholarship and politics in development studies, Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press.
[44] G Hegel, Philosophy of Right, http://socserv.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/hegel/right.pdf p 197
[45] R Dahrendorf, 1973, Homo sociologicus, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
[46] L Coser, B Rosenberg, 1976, Sociological theory (4th ed), Collier-Macmillan; P Rock, 1979, The making of symbolic interactionism, Basingstoke: Macmillan.
[47] R Sawyer, 2001, Emergence in sociology, American Journal of Sociology 3 551-585.
[48] A McIntyre, 1981, After Virtue, London: Duckworth; D Rasmussen, 1990, Universalism versus communitarianism, Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press.

The terms in which communitarianism is formed are not so different from the claims that Hayek makes for 'true individualism';[49] both understand individuals in terms of the societies where they live. That does raise the question as to whether individualist and collectivist concepts are mutually exclusive. The terms seem to represent, rather, alternative approaches to the interpretation of social phenomena, placed somewhere on a spectrum between contrasting extremes. Individualism and collectivism are not genuinely contradictory; they are different perspectives on human experience. There is, or should be, no great difficulty in accepting that people sometimes act as individuals, sometimes in families or businesses, sometimes in social groups; and that such diversity is part of human experience. Individualism without a sense of community is often vacuous; communitarianism without moral individualism can be numbingly repressive.[50] Each gains strength from the other. There is often more difficulty in reconciling moral, methodological and substantive accounts of society than there is in accepting insights from individualism and collectivism simultaneously.

Individual and collective discourses

A discourse is not a set of shared opinions, but a mode, vocabulary and set of concepts within which ideas are framed. The discourses of moral, methodological and substantive individualism overlap, but they are separable. There is a marked difference between viewing the world through the lens of methodological individualism, by rational choice or in terms of economic man, and considering the position of each individual. Some substantive individualists adopt a strong moral position, an assertion of the independence and value of the person; but others treat individualism as a process, a set of rules for making decisions rather than a commitment to individuals, and if that means that individuals suffer, that has to be borne. Moral, methodological and substantive principles often lead, then, to different conclusions, and different prescriptions. There is no compelling reason why someone who accepts individualist ideas in the terms of one of these three perspectives should adopt either of the others. A moral argument for the individual does not rely on individualist methodology; methodology does not in general commit anyone to substantive or moral outcomes; arguments from the way things are do not produce good moral arguments.

Equally, distinctions between different forms of collectivism reflect on individualism only within the spheres to which they relate. Establishing that people live collectively in households and families - a substantive argument - is not a counter either to moral individualism, or to a methodological perspective. Moral arguments for collectivism or solidarity are not particularly helpful in interpreting whether an individualist methodology approach is appropriate (though, as I have argued, where that methodology is intrinsically normative, a normative response may be called for). Methodological collectivism, of the sort favoured by Durkheim[51] or Parsons,[52] can offer valuable insights into society, but it does not address the moral arguments to respect each individual as a separate entity.

Despite the differences, the three perspectives are not always distinguished in practice. Some writers happily segué between individualism in its different varieties, seeing no distinction between the message given by moral, methodological and substantive approaches. Kenneth Arrow, no mean individualist himself, takes Samuelson and Hayek to task for eliding moral and substantive arguments.[53] Conversely, many of the writers who find unbridled individualism indigestible are informed as much by moral as by methodological concerns.[54]

I would not describe myself personally as an individualist or a collectivist. In epistemological terms, I see no contradiction between the statements that individual decisions produce social effects and that society shapes people; both can be true. (That makes me, in Sawyer's terms, a 'dualist'.[55])

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[49] Hayek, 1948, ch 1

[50] W Kymlicka, 1989, Liberalism, community and culture, Oxford: Clarendon Press

[51] E Durkheim, Suicide, London: RKP 1952.

[52] T Parsons, 1951, The social system, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970.

[53] K Arrow, 1994, Methodological individualism and social knowledge, American Economic Review 84(2) 1-9.

[54] e.g. R Wolff, 1990, Methodological individualism and Marx, Canadian Journal of Philosophy 20(4) 469-486: 472-3; Petracca, 1991

[55] R Sawyer, 2005, Social emergence, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press ch 5

In moral terms, I consider that individual freedom and collective responsibility both have value, and each is diminished without the other. My primary purpose in writing this book is to take a normative position. It is not possible to do that, however, without recognising and dealing with the methodological and the substantive arguments.