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DOES IT EXIST ?

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# AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM: DOES IT EXIST ?

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## Part I

There is always a great deal of talk about American individualism. Scholars find it a useful analytical tool and politicians find it a useful point to emphasize when dealing with other nations. Critics like to accuse America of too much individualism, and worry whether the American individualistic way will undermine older and different ways of being human. In such discussions it is often rather vague just what this individualism is which is being praised or damned, and why it is characteristically American.

American belief in individualism has a special quality. It is not the belief that individualism is the typical American way to live, but the belief that individualism is the universal human way to live, a way which underlies all the ways of other nations, although they often do not acknowledge or let their citizens live so as to express this core individuality. What is often taken as American cultural imperialism is in fact this belief in the universality of individualism. This belief has a significantly different structure from the ethnocentric beliefs common to many nations that theirs is the best way to live. I will try to explain what makes this American belief different. After the explanation, however, I will argue that the belief is not tenable in the form described, and I will suggest what modifications need to be made.

Obviously, for this discussion to proceed we need some definite



sense for the word "individualism." In Japanese, *kojin* and *kojinshugi* often have the negative connotation of selfishness. This is misleading when applied to the American situation. It is true enough that individualism involves a kind of self-regarding attitude, but that self-regard is institutionalized in a way that depends on a deeper notion of individuality than mere selfishness. People are selfish to varying degrees in all societies. What is distinctive about America is not that people are selfish but that there is an institutionalized place where selfishness is encouraged and necessary for the functioning of society. That encouragement depends on a deeper notion of individuality of which the selfishness is a consequence not the main content.

A further difficulty with the Japanese *kojin* is that it does not accurately translate the connotations of "individual." *Kojin* suggests a person cut off from a group, whereas "individual" literally means "un-divided" and compares the unity of the individual not to the larger unity of the group but to the possible disunity interior to the person. In other words "individual" connotes the achievement of unity out of multiplicity, while *kojin* denotes the breaking of a larger unity down to atomic units. These connotations give a very different tone to the English "Be an individual!" and its Japanese counterpart. The Japanese suggests breaking away while the English suggests coming together. The coming together may be from interior dispersion or from dispersion in a group-imposed identity. In either case the individuality is achieved; it is not a residual fact as is suggested by the Japanese word. In English one would not refer to a taxi as not being a member of a taxi company by calling it an "individual taxi" but the Japanese say *kojintakushi*, indicating the residual rather than achieved quality of the Japanese word *kojin*.

Another difficulty in the way of the proper understanding of individuality is the image of the "rugged individual" with its connotations of the frontier or the American West. Such persons can do everything for themselves and live in a chosen isolation from others. This self-sufficiency is not part of the basic idea of individualism I will be discussing. Self-sufficiency can occur in many different cultural settings: Chinese hermits, Russian fur trappers, African hunters, etc. If the image has a special appropriateness in America, that is not because it



is the content of the idea of individuality, but because it fits in with a prior notion of individuality as it developed in the American context.

American's relation to the vast spaces of the continent gave special power to the individualist dream. The frontier allowed Americans to act out the individualist theories they brought with them from Europe; it did not create those ideas in the first place. Americans in their empty land could act out the transition from a state of nature to the state of civil society which they had learned was the basis of all government. In today's world where the frontier is closed, the "rugged individual" is not as useful an ideal, but the basic notion of individuality continues to be relevant. This basic ideal does not depend on physical isolation; it was born in the cities of Europe and can survive in today's American cities as well. Americans generally believe that their notion of individuality touches something universal which is behind all nations and all societies. They could not believe this if they thought that individualism needed the frontier in order to function or to be meaningful. On the other hand, it is true that the frontier and the open spaces give an emotional coloring and a bias towards certain life styles which are typically American, but while these are consonant with individualism they are not identical with it.

In trying to understand what American individualism means it will be helpful to consider some examples. When Americans are travelling abroad, they sometimes make nuisances of themselves. The typical picture shows the "ugly American" standing at the hotel desk demanding a better room, or shouting at waiter in a cafe to bring him a hamburger. The American is *confronting* the foreigner with a demand that the American's rights and preferences be respected. On the other hand, when Japanese travelling abroad make nuisances of themselves, it is often because, travelling in a group, the "ugly Japanese" *ignore* the foreigners around them and behave as if they were in a Japanese context. So they get too drunk, or sing songs in the back of airplanes. The Japanese typically become nuisances in groups, while the American demand and confront as individuals.

In business life, Americans have different ideals from Japanese.



The actual practices may or may not differ. Many American businesses are more hierarchical and dictatorial than are Japanese corporations. Nevertheless, Americans feel that in the ideal case they would be respected as individuals and as possible sources of original ideas and decisions in their organization. They want the chance to make a difference in the organization, if possible by doing something new. They hope to influence policy, not just carry it out. These hopes are not so different from those cherished by many Japanese, but the imagined mode of their realization is different. Many Americans fantasize the chance to have a personal talk, one-on-one with the big boss, telling him the way things are and explaining new ideas. Such a dream would be a nightmare for many Japanese. They would carry out their fantasied services to the corporation in a different way.

The key to the American belief is that Americans regard the individual as prior to the group. Group affiliations are in principle to be decided on, or at least ratified by, the free choice of the individual. An individual is a person capable of forming his or her own views and making decisions, committing his or her self, making agreements and contracts. Ideally there should be nothing in a person's life which is not based on or ratified by that person's free decision and free agreement with others (but the free decision is more important than the agreement with others). Many American popular heroes are loners who hold to their own beliefs and decisions no matter what others think or do. As the theme song of a movie about such a character said, "he wears no one's chains." The problems this can cause for social cohesion are obvious; the present point is that such heroic images embody the ideal that the individual is to make all group affiliations subject to prior free decision.

The movie from which I quoted, "Smokey and the Bandit," was very popular and spawned a series of follow-up films. In the movie, the hero is a truck driver who by his skill is able to make fools of the police who try to enforce such petty matters as traffic regulations. The hero is pictured as living virtuously and freely, not destructively, but the attempts by the authorities to confine him lead to considerable destruction of property, including an impressive number of automobiles. The movie exemplifies a belief in individualism, coupled with



the belief that individual freedom when left to be its natural self will produce a virtuous and creative person. While the empirical evidence for this belief is not very strong, and Americans confront the problems of individual license in their daily life, the belief in the innate goodness of human nature is common in Americans. This belief is not, however, precisely the same as the belief in individualism. The two are often conjoined, but they do not have to be. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century there was considerable discussion among philosophers, moralists, and religious writers about whether human nature included a basic instinct for love and altruism; in many cases all the participants in the debates agreed about individualism but disagreed about just what qualities were to be found in the natural individual. This shows that belief in individualism and belief in the natural goodness of such individuals are not the same.

What is crucial for understanding American individualism as many Americans think about it is the belief in the priority of the individual and the desirability in principle of having all the content of a person's life stem from his or her free decision. This is the belief that makes individualism. However, this belief in the priority of the individual is not completely clear. How is this priority to be thought about and what makes it possible?

What is required is that we be able to think about a core person who consists of a naked chooser. I use the word "naked" to indicate that this chooser must be thought as separated from all the content which the person's choices give to his or her life. Such a core person is not an individual member of a group, but an individual first and then a member of a group. As a core person he or she is not to be defined as a parent, a male or female, a professor or pipefitter, but only as a free deciding person. Of course when we describe "who" someone is we describe the content of his or her life: John is a father, a Ph.D. from Harvard, he plays chess, etc. It can be very revealing just what descriptions are chosen and in what order; psychologists make much of such things. But if we want to describe "what" a person is we must say that first and foremost he is a free deciding person, a core naked individuality, plus the results of past decisions and commitments. Yet the priority of freedom does mean that past commit-



ments never can completely define a person. There is always the possibility of change. It is not necessary to carry that possibility to the extreme found in some of the existentialist novels of Jean-Paul Sartre, but the basic point is not unrelated to his; if a person is first of all a core free decider, then no choices can be final, and commitments are sustained by continual renewal. I am not merely the sum of my commitments; I must be defined as the core freedom that has made those commitments and accepted those roles. I must be respected as such a freedom.

Of course we never meet such naked free individuality by itself. But this is the reality American belief calls on others to respect. Americans may abhor the choices another makes, but they are taught to respect that person's freedom to choose even while they attempt to oppose and block its results. This respect leads to ideas of "fair play" which are difficult for some non-Americans to understand, and difficult for Americans to practice in many contexts. This respect and fair play make Americans in some respects less competitive in their intergroup relations than the Japanese.

Another comparison with Japanese behavior that is revealing is to compare respect for another's freedom with sensitivity to another's feelings. Japanese are concerned with maintaining the skein of interpersonal relations and very sensitive to the feelings of others as these feelings are expressed or implied in situations. Americans are often less concerned about how the other person feels and more concerned about respecting his individual freedom. Such respect for individuality may necessitate sharp confrontations, or posing clear decision points, giving the other a place and time to say yes or no clearly. All these can offend the Japanese respect for the other's feelings. On the other hand, Americans may at times find Japanese concern manipulative and paternalistic, not respecting the need of the other to make decisions and to declare himself while doing so. Americans need to feel they are making decisions and are seen by others to be doing so. It is at times more important to appear decisive than to appear kind or concerned.

A similar point concerns feelings that are not expressed. Japanese pride themselves on being able to sense and take into account feelings



which are only implied and perhaps not even clearly recognized by the person who is feeling them. This leads to great attention and smooths out personal situations. Americans, on the other hand, often consider that a person's feelings are their own affair, and that it would be insulting to the person to take into account feelings which the person has chosen not to express. Thus situations can arise in American life where a man has feelings and the other person knows that the first man has them, and the first man knows the other knows, but because the feelings are not expressed they are discounted by both people when some decision is to be made jointly. This is most common in non-intimate relations; what helps define an intimate relation is that the other will consider your feelings whether expressed or not. As a result, American can sometimes feel that Japanese sensitivity and consideration amounts to treating the Americans as if they were children. What to the Japanese is the way one respects another person can at times seem to the American as a kind of disrespect. The source of the difference is the clash between two different notions of what a person is and what in a person is to be respected.

Japanese literature is full of situations where tragic conflict develops between a person's different relations to others. The samurai must choose between love for his wife and loyalty to his lord. Such situations are common in Western and American literature also, though expressed in a different social structure. But American literature also contains a type of situation which is not so common in Japanese, where a person must choose between faithfulness to himself and faithfulness to some social relation, be it love or duty. What makes such a situation difficult is that the hero does have the possibility of cutting the social relations or changing them. Faithfulness to one's self may have two differing components. One could be faithful to one's self as a naked core chooser, for instance by resisting pressure from others and deciding some issue on one's own. Or, one could be faithful to some choices and commitments made in the past which one feels are particularly deep and define one's personality in a fundamental way. (The way I have phrased this matter of faithfulness to self opens up issues critical of individualism as so far described. It seems unlikely that the sharp dichotomy between faithfulness to one's



self as a naked chooser and faithfulness to one's chosen basic commitments is correct. I want, however, to postpone critical comments until after the exposition is complete.)

Americans try to build their society on the principle of respect for each individual's freedom. Of course this ideal is often far from realized, but that does not diminish its power as an ideal for American life. It can be appealed to in order to criticize current practice. It has standing in the Constitution and is very difficult to disagree with in public, however much people might not be acting in accord with it. What is harder to understand, however, is that for Americans this ideal is not some picture of what American life should be, but is an ideal with a universal quality; it defines what any human life should be. Americans tend to believe that those societies which do not act on this ideal are in error and represent an earlier stage of history which ought to come to an end.

This view expresses a kind of cultural feeling of superiority. It can lead to actions that many others take as cultural imperialism. It has led Americans in the past to many simpleminded attempts to impose American institutions on other nations. But the simplemindedness of the attempts should not blind the observer to the sophisticated reasoning behind the American belief.

Many societies have included among their cultural self-definitions the belief that theirs was the supreme expression of human life, a model which ought to be followed by other nations. The Greeks despised the barbarians; the Chinese named themselves the center of the world; the French and other European nations declared their cultural superiority. History is full of such examples. But there is something unusual about the American claim. Chinese claims to superiority and universal validity were based on a substantive cosmology and on the products of a long and sophisticated history. The glories of French culture could be pointed to as evidence for the superiority of the French way of life. But Americans believe what they do about the American notion of individualism without any need for evidence. Of course Americans will point to the achievements of their country, but the American belief in the universality of individuality predates



those achievements. Even if American practice was not too successful, or at times went against the ideals, the belief has a structure which guarantees its universality.

The crucial feature is the nakedness of the core individual. The logic of the belief runs as follows: the person as free individual chooser is prior to any content of his life which results from his act of choice. But these results of choice include all social roles, values, principles, group affiliations and practices. They include, that is, all those things which are normally taken to characterize one culture in comparison with another. Thus the differences between various national cultures lie on the side of the results of choice, and do not affect the position of the naked core person so defined. America and Japan may differ in many ways but those ways are all subsequent to the activity of the free choosers who make up the two nations. American practices, however, better express and affirm that core individuality.

Thus there are really two sub-claims to the American belief in the superiority of American individualism. The first is the claim that the pure naked core self is a universal human reality which underlies all cultures. The second is the claim that the particular American practices in politics and economics, practices which in principle leave individuals free to decide, better affirm and express the basic human reality.

Other nations can therefore be criticized in several ways by Americans. Other nations may not recognize the basic reality of free individuality, or they may recognize it yet still not treat it properly in their institutions. Such proper treatment consists in making room for individuals to make their decisions. Americans are convinced that their own political and economic system generally does better than other nations at expressing and protecting individuality. When visiting foreign nations Americans find themselves almost instinctively sizing up the degree of freedom of the press, the nature of representative institutions, and other typically American features. Any evaluation of the other nation will mention these features, even if they are not features which are of crucial importance in the minds of the inhabitants themselves. The American belief in the primacy of the in-



dividual has the awkward consequence that even when the inhabitants of other nations seem happy in their non-individualistic ways, a phenomenon which is not too difficult to find in history or at the present day, Americans are committed to saying that such individuals do have a core freedom which is being imposed upon. The inhabitants are thought to need to recognize their own freedom and to demand its expression.

Americans will of course admit that as far as America is concerned that there is room for improvement, and will debate about other systems. Thus, for example the parliamentary system along British lines has at times proved attractive. The point is that the attraction is not that America adopt some new culture, but that such a political system might better express and actualize the American belief in the individual. In other words such a change, were it to be made, would be made because it was thought to do better what Americans were already committed to doing, not because it was a new system with new values.

The naive American who complains about the absence of bowling alleys at Ankor Wat (an actual example) is a figure of fun for other nations, and deservedly so. Americans are also accused of not understanding the subtleties of cultural relativism and making simple projections of American values on all the world. It is true that Americans have implemented their beliefs about the universality of individualism in simple ways. But the beliefs themselves are not simple; they represent an alternative to cultural relativism based on a theory of man which makes room for diversity but also asks for certain basic realities to be respected, realities which are the foundation of the variety that does exist. Such assertions seem more strong than those of other nations based on cultural or religious grounds or on specific cultural achievements. The notion of naked core individuality may more plausibly be widely applied than other social notions such as the Japanese family system, precisely because the core individual is so purified and naked. Americans may be narrow in their conceptions of what kinds of institutions can express core individuality, but their basic ideas are not naive. If human beings are indeed such core freedoms, if all content of one's life should be created or ratified by free deci-



sion, then the universality of individualism is well established, since all cultural and national differences will be subsequent to free individuality.

Americans therefore are willing to reject the idea that another nation's culture should be left the way it is. They must repudiate such a view, if they are to be true to their own beliefs about individuality. If humans are, beyond and behind culture, pure individual choosers, then it would be wrong to connive at the avoidance of this truth and the suppression of individual freedom even among people who do not realize that they are being imposed upon. To adopt a benign and tolerant attitude of relativism toward other cultures would be to go along with repression of the reality of other individuals. Thus, because the Americans want to respect the freedom of the individuals who comprise another culture or another nation, they may refuse to respect the institutional arrangements or cultural ways of that nation. Respect for individuals comes first.

Japanese are sometimes puzzled that in debate with Americans about matters like trade policy, the reply "that is the Japanese way of doing things" is not considered a justification that should be automatically respected. The Japanese are willing to respect whatever arrangements the Americans wish to make in their own country, why are they not accorded the same respect for Japanese ways? The point is, the Americans are inclined to test the Japanese ways against the American standards. Again, if the American belief about individuality is correct, then the Japanese ways should be so tested.

Another example could be found in levels of politeness in language. Some Americans will use polite levels of speech in Japanese even to people of low status, or use informal levels to people of high status. This may be simple linguistic ignorance. But it could also be a protest against the Japanese way of using their own language. This seems strange; after all it is the Japanese language. But the Americans who so misuse Japanese politeness levels may be doing so on principle, because they think that the Japanese practice implies disrespect for the individuality of the person one is speaking to, an individuality which is deeper than any mere matter of social status.

Such principled disagreements with another nation's cultural ways



are difficult to handle. The other nation may feel offended or patronized. The Americans may make the mistake of taking as a matter of principle what is really a local American custom. It is difficult to decide just what counts as irreducible respect for individuality. The extreme cases are easy, but the grey area in the middle is enormous and Americans are not very tolerant of grey areas.

One reason for the difficulty Americans have with grey areas in these matters is that American beliefs tend to create a series of sharp dichotomies. An act is either free or unfree. Freedom is either respected or it is not. A person either acts from within his own freedom or is forced from outside. While Americans realize that life is complex, the structure of the beliefs I have been describing is such that sharp contrasts are enforced. All the dichotomies relate to the fundamental division of inside and outside. The result is that Americans often have difficulty understanding or sympathizing with cultural arrangements and values which cannot be located easily by one of these dichotomies. Thus in economics it seems easy to say that markets are either completely free or they are in principle defective, and in politics, that people are either free or slaves. Such judgements would be admitted to be true "to some degree" of course, but the dichotomy and its concomitant emotion is more powerful than the qualification.

The problems created by the sharp dichotomies necessary to maintain the beliefs I have described will be a major theme in the next part of this essay. In closing the descriptive part, however, I want to indicate one area where American beliefs meet a recalcitrant reality. Typically there arise situations where the need to get something done with urgency conflicts with all the respect due free individuals. Military life is a prime example of such a conflict, but similar ones occur in business and in almost any area of life. It is revealing that Americans tend to image their own military as made up of heroic individuals and that of other hostile nations as made up of ant-like conformists. In fact military life makes similar demands on organization and hierarchy everywhere. Americans like to avoid such situations, or look away from them when they occur, but they must be faced, and the result is that when necessary Americans will choose to get the job done. But they will also fantasize utopian arrangements which would eliminate



the conflict. They will also be curious and a little envious toward cultures, such as Japan, which are not perceived to have the same conflict between efficiency and individuality.

## Part II

It is not difficult to understand the appeal of the set of beliefs about individualism which I have described above. It is also not difficult to see the problems which such beliefs lead to. In this section I will discuss some of those problems, and indicate where their root is to be found. If the original beliefs are revised, however, they surrender just that feature of the original set of beliefs which made possible the universalization of the idea of individuality to all cultures and nations. My conclusion will be that the American belief in the primacy of individuality actually is a mixture of several different strands of belief, some of which are more viable than others. The peculiar kind of universal claim Americans make about individuality will turn out to be untenable as it stands but closely related to another strand in the web of belief which is tenable.

There are both practical and theoretical problems with the American beliefs I have described. First I will consider the practical difficulties in living in accord with those beliefs. Later I will look at the underlying theoretical problem.

(a) We might start our consideration of practical problems with some comments of the columnist George Will.<sup>1</sup> Writing about the recent movie "Flashdance" Will sees in the reaction to the film a parable of the problems of Americans today. The heroine in the movie wears ragged clothing. Today in America one can buy clothing made pre-ragged, so that one can have the "Flashdance look" without the inconvenience of actually living in poverty and struggle. Will recalls that once when Wallis Warfield Simpson appeared at Ascot with the second button of her blouse inadvertently unbuttoned, many women began wearing their blouses with the second button unbuttoned. Will continues:

"The fading of religious explanations of mankind's place in the cosmos has left the self dislocated and without identity. So people



put on new identities – Mrs. Simpson’s or John Wayne’s, or our lady welder’s [the lady welder is the heroine of the movie]. Liberated by skepticism from the restraints of religion, by democracy from social oppression, by technology from drudgery, the modern individual is free to do as he or she pleases. And what does it please him or she to do? Unbutton the second button, slip the belt sideward, don a pre-torn jersey.”

Will gives an historical explanation of this free individuality for whom nothing special is worth doing. I have discussed some beliefs Americans often have about individuality. Those beliefs are part of the philosophical theory connected with the historical changes Will mentions. The result is sad: people use their freedom in trivial ways. Will’s own solution to this is to demand that we find a vocation, something we experience as “a gift and a mastering passion” which we can follow and be good at something we love to do. Aside from the difficulty for many people of experiencing such a passion or vocation, the belief in total freedom and the naked core person means that no particular feeling, even a mastering passion, need be taken as a guide to action.

The belief in universal individualism asserts that there is such a thing as a core person or free chooser which is separate from the content of its choices. If one tries to live in this fashion, completely autonomous and regarding all the content of one’s life and choices as subject to free revision, a distance is created between one’s self and all one’s principles, values, commitments. When one is deciding these matters one can have no guidance except from other freely chosen criteria. There is no resting place, only total responsibility. After one’s choice one seems completely free to redecide and revise at any moment.

Jean-Paul Sartre has described the agony of this kind of living in detail in his fiction.<sup>2</sup> The individual as described above has problems when it comes time to exercise his or her freedom. There is nothing special he or she has to do, and all traditional evaluative guidelines must be questioned, or at least can be at any moment. This is a condition many Americans aspire to, yet if they actually found themselves in this condition what would they do? The standard answer is, “they



would do whatever they felt like doing.” This answer is inadequate, since one’s feelings are also not to be taken as absolute guidelines for choice. It is possible to alter one’s feelings. Indeed, a truly free individual would have to be capable of distancing him or her self from momentary feelings, or else freedom would mean only the right to be determined by whatever causes feelings, be those causes genetic, parental, cultural, or just current fads. Freedom implies some distance from the feelings of the moment. Current American practice shows an awareness of this in the plethora of self-help books which urge ways to change one’s feelings as well as one’s clothing or “life-style.” In one sense these books testify to a praiseworthy degree of freedom. Few people in history have had the leisure to even contemplate a change in “life-style.” On the other hand, these books also testify to the degree of fad and fashion in what are supposed to be important choices.

Thus the results of pure freedom can be the consumer society and dominance by fads. Throughout American history people have criticized the superficial living that seems to result from democracy. Thoreau’s protests are well known.<sup>3</sup> Walt Whitman, the great celebrator of democracy, makes similar complaints in his prose essay, “Democratic Vistas.” More recent critics are too numerous to mention. These critics all say that the superficiality of a life lived according to fad and fashion somehow contradicts the real intent and real possibilities of individualist democracy. But if the beliefs I have sketched above are rightly described as one strand in America’s web of belief about itself, then the dominance of fad and fashion is not so surprising. What else is a naked core self to do? Few people will be artists who create their own life style in the manner that Nietzsche urged modern people to do.<sup>4</sup>

To avoid the life of fad and fashion requires more deep dedication and commitment than the naked core self is ever required to produce. Most of the critics of such individualism want to reformulate the American beliefs to include some sort of deep self or underlying unity, as the Transcendentalists and Whitman wished to do. Such a deep self must be supported by some story about its place in the cosmos. This requires some strong beliefs about the nature of the universe, beliefs



which may not be in harmony with other, particularly scientific, beliefs. With the general fading of large speculative metaphysical systems, more recent critics of the American view of the self may not be able to make the strong philosophical claims of a Whitman or an Emerson,<sup>5</sup> but they do often suggest revisions in the concept of the self to make it more open to tradition and to a sense of interaction rather than distanced choosing. I will agree with these suggestions, but it is just these changes which will cut out the possibility of universalizing the American model of the individual self.

(b) Another side of the problem of living as a pure naked chooser is highlighted by the recent turn to more fundamentalism in politics and religion in America. At least part of this turn is the search for some natural content for choice, some naturally valid guidelines which can be just accepted and do not have to be certified by yet another act of freedom. Fundamentalist religion shows this tendency strongly, but it can also be found in varieties of ethnic revival in America, in economic and political rigidities of the right and the left, in the feminist movement. In another way it can be found in ecological and holistic movements which, although they sketch a different theory of what nature is, still appeal to some natural guidelines. Both right and left join in this, that they try to find in the nature of man, or the nature of nature, or the nature of society, or the nature of God, some guidelines for living and content for life that cannot be swept into doubt by the actions of the free self. One can interpret these movements as a inauthentic feeling of the true reality of selfhood, a refusal to face up to the freedom inherent in the notion of the core self. Or one can take these movements as signs that perhaps the self is more complex and more complexly located than the beliefs I have described would make it out to be.

(c) A related problem occurs when belief in pure naked freedom runs into factually unchangeable definitions of the self. It is very well to talk about all the content of life being available for review and revision by the free self, but there is not much that self can do about its sex, age, parents, nationality, place and time of birth, and so forth. Of course people try to flee from these "outside" determinations of their selfhood. In the extreme they dream of various



technological utopias where these determinations could in fact be changed. Genetic manipulation offers hope—but that will be the parents, or society who will decide; the unborn still comes into the world without having had the chance to fill out an application form specifying its desires. Sometimes the technological dream is very explicit the science fiction stories in John Varley describe a society where a person can change his sex, height, weight, appearance with kits purchased at the neighborhood pharmacy.<sup>6</sup> (In this connection compare the ideal world sketched by Robert Nozick at the end of his *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* where each person can find just the companions and environment he or she wants.) Such dreams of total control aside, American literature is filled with stories of people who try to escape their ethnic or sexual or racial identity. As necessary as this fight against socially imposed roles may be, some features of our self cannot be made subject to our will. Since this is true, some modifications must be made in the idea of the naked core individual.

(d) Another practical problem is the coexistence of doctrines of great freedom with the fact of great predictability. People are puzzled when they are simultaneously told they are free to do whatever they want, and are approached at election or purchasing time solely on the basis of their ethnic identity and group affiliations. There is no strict contradiction between true freedom and statistical predictability.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless the feeling of inconsistency can make people strive to be “different” for no reason but only to escape feeling predictable. This striving shows the difficulty of providing content for one’s choices when freedom is defined as the capability to judge and change all the features of a person’s life. These pressures to be unpredictable reach an ironic height in the sales of products advertised as unique and “individual” while being sold to large numbers of people.

(e) The final practical problem I want to point out is somewhat different from the foregoing. If Americans believe that their institutions are well suited to allowing the core freedom of persons to express itself, there remains some question just how far in detail those institutions should be urged on other nations. For example, a legislative body seems essential to the American conception of government, but does it have to be a bicameral legislature? Apparently not,



since the state of Nebraska gets along with a unicameral legislature. What about elections? majority rule? the judiciary? the jury system? elected judges? When Americans deal with other nations they recommend American institutions, but not in every detail. It is unclear where the line is to be drawn between essential institutions and contingent features. This problem afflicts any argument "in principle" such as the beliefs presented in Part I. It is never clear where the "principle" leaves off and contingent detail begins.

This difficulty may seem abstract, but it strikes home when the American government or American people is called upon to declare itself satisfied with the institutions, civil rights record, or political "progress" of a client state. Another, domestic example, much debated in America today, concerns bilingual education. It is essential that the nation have one common language, and that that language be taught in the public schools? Clearly a common language was crucial to nation building by the great European states which imposed a standard language upon the welter of local dialects. What about democratic America? Is having one common language an imposition on the freedom of some groups, or not? Part of the difficulty is that one recent immigrant group, the Hispanics, is both numerous and reluctant to abandon cultural patterns learned south of the border. Mainstream Americans may not like this, but if they object too much to this exercise of freedom the supposed cultural neutrality of American individualism is called into question.

There are other, more familiar practical problems with individualism as it is described in Part I. These problems concern competition and concern for others. But we have surveyed enough problems to show that living according to the strict theory of individualism described above is a formidable task which introduces difficulties that have no obvious solution.

### Part III

This part will concern the theoretical flaw in the set of beliefs described in Part I and what might be done to remedy it and to modify the description of American individualism. The modified theory of



individualism will describe American practice better than the beliefs in Part I, but will remove the basis for the universalization of individualism characteristic of the beliefs of so many Americans.

The theoretical flaw is easily stated; it is obvious from the practical difficulties considered above. The conception of the self as a naked chooser demands a very sharp distinction between what comes from within the chooser and what comes from without as external force. Americans often discuss where this line is to be drawn in a given choice. But in fact the line cannot be drawn.

As selves we are embedded in language and tradition in a way which is not fairly represented by the conception of a naked core chooser. The influence of language and culture is too deep, and the person too tied up in networks and relationships. Our individuality is something we achieve in relation to others, not a core given in advance, though of course as organisms we have our neural apparatus given in advance. That neural apparatus itself is not an empty slate, *tabula rasa*, but involves considerable biological preprogramming. The degree of biological and cultural preprogramming necessary to operate as a person is a matter of considerable debate at present, for example in disputes about language learning. But the current trends in the social sciences give no reason to hope that a naked core self will be uncovered behind the selfhood that we achieve in relation to others.

What I have just said does not constitute a proof of the claim that the naked core self is coexistent. But it is enough to motivate the search for a more relational conception of the individual self.

We need to be able to think of selfhood as the product of a new set of social relations. Following lines suggested by Hegel's analysis of civil society in the *Philosophy of Right* and the discussion of selfhood in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, American thinkers such as John Dewey began to think of individuality itself as a social product. Dewey wrote, "individuality is not originally given, but is created under the influence of associated life."<sup>8</sup> A set of relationships is created through which people will recognize one another as human and as citizens by recognizing one another as unique and creative individuals, rather than, for example, recognizing one another as members of a tribe, holders of a particular status location, or members of a national family.



On this view, what characterizes modern American selfhood is not its reaching some purified ideal of a precultural self, but its emerging out of a particular set of social relations which are a historical development from earlier forms.

It would exceed the bounds of this essay to defend the more relational concept of the self. The relational conception attempts to avoid the strict separations of inner and outer that characterize the beliefs discussed in Part I. Thus it accords more with what the social sciences tell us about the actual influences on our behavior, and it avoids the difficulty of postulating behind the interactive selfhood revealed by sociology and anthropology a further naked core self that is somehow untouched by social relations and maintains a pure core freedom. This congruence with the social sciences does not prove that the more interactive conception of the self is correct, but it does make the conception more plausible. An actual proof of this conception would consist principally in showing that attempts to prove the existence of the naked core self do not succeed. I will not attempt to do this, contenting myself with the remarks made earlier about practical and theoretical difficulties. What I will do is to trace the effects of adopting a more interactive conception of the self on the beliefs about individualism and on the question of what is unique about the American way of life, and whether that way of life can be universalized as something natural to all human beings, as many Americans believe.

The first consequence is that if a more interactive conception of selfhood is affirmed, no particular culture's conception of selfhood is thereby rendered more "natural" than any other. Since various kinds of individuality and other kinds of self-definition can all arise within various sets of social relations, the theory does not by itself discriminate among them and declare one to be "the best." Such judgments may still be made, but they will not be made on the basis of the theory of the nature of selfhood, but rather on the basis of more ordinary arguments about the effects on society and people of this or that set of relations and this or that way of conceiving the self. Such judgments will be a fallible and difficult to argue as any other practical judgment.<sup>9</sup>



The second consequence of a more interactive and relational conception of individuality is that we need a new characterization of what is unique about American society. Even if the theory of the naked core self which many Americans hold is not valid, there remains something different about America which needs to be described. In part this will be that Americans do believe in the naked core self. But it is not their beliefs but their practice which makes America unusual, and it is the practice which seems to spread and threaten other cultural practices.

“Modern” times began in the West with a series of changes in religion, economics, science, and government which found their justification in the great Enlightenment philosophers of seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe. That philosophical background was drawn upon by the founders of the American state. In part, the spread of American ways is a spread of those philosophical beliefs about the individual, but in greater part it is the spread of the practices developed in America.

The distinctive practice which characterizes America is the separation of private from public, and the attempt to keep the public space free from domination by any particular group. To understand this point, consider those regimes in the world today where one group, be it a party or a family or a small oligarchy, has succeeded in dominating the distribution of publicly necessary goods, the management of public force, and other public functions. These functions will be managed so that the ruling group benefits, and actions harmful to the status of the ruling group will be prohibited. Such regimes where one definable group comes to dominate the machinery for satisfying public needs have been typical of most of human history.

America was founded with the intention of preventing any one group from making the central power its own. The public space, the distribution of publicly necessary goods, the control of publicly approved force were to be kept neutral, undominated. Individuals and groups were encouraged to compete, but not for the supreme prize of domination. There were to be no dynasties, no state churches, no aristocracies, no groups which could claim that they spoke for the people in a way that made consultation with the people unnecessary.



The extent to which America has fulfilled its design is a matter of dispute, but the design is clear and still approved by the majority of Americans. The design originally arose from the practical needs of the American colonies together with the individualist theories of politics common at the time. I am suggesting that the individualist theory is flawed, but the practical needs and practical arrangements have their own justification in their general success. The way of life has achieved its own justification independent of the theory which helped give it birth. Such a result suits well the typically American pragmatic temper.

In particular, if we concentrate on the actual genesis of the American separation of private and public spheres, rather than on its theoretical justification, we see that from the beginning it was groups as well as individuals who were considered to be actors on the public stage. This is important. The American separation of private from public spheres is realized in a set of legal and economic practices. Those practices define ways in which people can recognize one another as human, as individuals, as citizens, as partners in various relationships. These methods of mutual recognition do not demand that the participants in the public sphere be naked core choosers, or even that they be individuals at all. They could also be groups. The groups could, and do, have various internal structures. Some of those groups have within themselves only a limited amount of individualism, for example various religious sects such as the Amish, or recent groups of followers of various gurus. The structure of interaction worked out for those who will enter into the public space in America demands that all cooperate in keeping that space free of domination. It does not dictate what beliefs the individual must have nor what inner practices a group must adopt.

This means that the American practice, as distinct from the original American theory, can allow varying degrees of individualism. What is enforced is only the neutral, non-dominated character of the public sphere. Once we free ourselves from the illusion that all the agents who enter upon that sphere must be naked core individuals, there is room for a more realistic look at American practice.

Americans themselves have traditionally found it difficult to ana-



lyze American society in terms of class or ethnic identity, partly because their theories tend to blind Americans to the great variety of participants in the public space. Americans tend to believe that all the actions that influence the public space can be analyzed into the decisions of free individuals.

The foregoing has suggested that America is best characterized as that society which has tried to institutionalize the separation of private from public spheres, where the private sphere need not be analyzed in terms only of atomic individuals but also in terms of other social agents or influences. Such a description of America preserves the unique historical ideals of America without the questionable theory of naked core individuals. The suggested description also fits well with a more relational conception of the self, since the separation of private from public is itself a set of social relations and ways in which people can recognize and relate to one another.

This revised description of America still keeps the aspiration to freedom and independence, but removes the objectionable absolutistic character of the theory described in Part I. As a result, it removes the basis for the automatic universalization of American ways to other cultures. On this description, American ways are one set of social relations among others and have no natural primacy.

This does not mean that they cannot be urged on other nations, but the basis for such urging must change. It can no longer be the automatic assumption of superiority based on some "natural" reality of the self. It can only be painstaking and detailed practical argument considering results and benefits of various institutions.

On the other hand, American ways can spread without being urged. Japanese and others concerned about the influence of America often worry about the spread of individualism and selfishness. It may be that this worry is slightly misplaced. It may be that the American separation of private from public spheres should be the true cause of worry. This separation can spread through business practices, through attitudes to religion, through the structure of international organizations. The American federal system and separation of private from public spheres is a more apt structure for international cooperation than the Japanese familial or group model of society where the public



space is administered by senior members of the national family or group as a whole. In a pluralistic world it would be difficult to get agreement on such a familial model for international relations.

Historically, however, the American separation of private from public spheres, though designed to protect the rights of the various component groups, has had a solvent effect, weakening the hold of such groups on their members. The American way magnifies the effects of pluralism on the groups within America. Traditional ways come to seem less natural, more just one way among others. The result may be that people are alienated from traditions and come to resemble the naked individuals described in Part I.

If the American separation of private from public becomes common in international areas, or spreads by cultural contagion as an attractive ideal, helped perhaps by the aspirations of less powerful groups who see in it a way to better their condition, the corrosive effects of the American separation of private from public life will spread also. It is this change in the structures through which people relate which is more significant than the often cited spread of American selfish or materialistic attitudes.

In conclusion, I have outlined a set of beliefs about the nature of the self which lead Americans to assume the natural superiority of American culture. After indicating problems with these beliefs I have suggested an alternative description of what is unique about America. On this alternative description, America is not the land whose practices best accord with the pre-cultural reality of the self. America is the land where for various reasons social practices were developed which attempt the separation of private and public spheres and the creation of a public space which is kept free of domination or administration by any one group. Such a more correct description of America removes the basis for the automatic assumption of American superiority. Because, however, the practical effect of the American arrangements is to weaken the hold traditions have on citizens, Americans may come to behave something like the pure individuals described by their common though erroneous beliefs. Thus the attitudes and beliefs described in Part I are understandable as the result



of the social patterns in American life, rather than as a grasp of some pre-cultural reality. Thus too, what is involved in the spread of American ways to other cultures may be something different from the selfishness and individualism we hear so much about.

#### NOTES

1. George Will, "'Flashdance' May Reek, But It Is Metaphysical," a column reprinted in many newspapers during the late summer and early fall, 1983.
2. The most famous description is in the novel, *Nausea*, where the protagonist finally finds in a passion for art a tentative direction somewhat like Will describes.
3. Besides *Walden*, Thoreau's essay "Life Without Principle" deserves mention in this regard.
4. Nietzsche's urging to a self-created life based on creating one's own values are found in many places in his writings; the fifth book of *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* is a typical example.
5. Such attempts are still made today, particularly by people who see in the latest findings of physics hints of a deeper vision of the place of the self in the universe. For example, cf. the writings of Frijof Capra, including his latest book, *The Turning Point* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982) or the more thought-out book of Morris Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982). While the attempts these books make seem to me unconvincing, they are part of a larger movement to revise the notion of the isolated individualself.
6. *The Ophiuchi Hotline*, a novel, and the short stories collected in *The Barbie Doll Murders*, portray this society with a mixture of compassion and worry.
7. Cf. Ian Hacking, "Nineteenth Century Cracks in the Concept of Determinism," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, July-September 1983, pp. 455-475.
8. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: Mentor Books, 1954), p. 155.
9. What I have just said needs defense against attacks from Hegelians and Marxists that in fact the interactive or relational theory of the self does finally recommend certain institutional arrangements as best. Such defense is possible, and involves questioning the necessity of the transitions used by both Marx and Hegel in their arriving at a ideal set of social arrangements.