

The Enlightenment's Concept of the Individual and its Contemporary Criticism

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Abstract. Communitarian social philosophy was born in opposition to some tenets of liberalism. Liberal individualism has been among its most strongly contested claims. In their criticisms, the communitarians point to the Enlightenment's sources of the individualist vision of society and morality. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that, even if the communitarian line of argument has been justified in more than one way, it is at the same time important to remember that the greatest figure of the Scottish Enlightenment, that of David Hume, does not fit the individualistic picture too well. I shall begin with a contemporary definition of individualism, as defined by John Watkins, then I shall proceed to argue that methodological individualism is rarely an innocent philosophical position, i.e. that it is very often a preliminary step in attempts to find a solution to many other, much more important and more practically relevant issues. For methodological individualism is usually associated with ontological, as well as moral and political individualistic doctrines, and they usually go hand in hand, influencing and strengthening each other.

1. Methodological Individualism

In a series of papers devoted to the problems of explanation in the social and historical sciences, John Watkins presented himself as an advocate of something which he called the principle of methodological individualism. This is how he understood it:

According to the [principle of] mechanism, the ultimate constituents of the physical world are impenetrable particles which obey simple mechanical laws. The existence of these particles cannot be explained—at any rate by science. On the other hand, every complex physical thing is the result of a particular configuration of particles and can be explained in terms of the laws governing their behaviour in conjunction with a description of their relative positions, masses, moments etc. [...] I am not an advocate of mechanism, but [...] I am an advocate of an analogous principle in social science, the principle of methodological individualism. According to this principle, 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

situation, institution, or event is the result of a particular configuration of individuals, their dispositions, situations, beliefs and physical resources and environment. (1957, p. 106)

The above principle of individualism can be seen in operation in John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, where he proclaims that his intentions are

to present a conception of justice which generalises and carries to a higher level of abstraction the familiar theory of the social contract as found in Locke, Rousseau and Kant. . . . The guiding idea is that the principles of justice for the basic structure of society are the object of the original agreement. They are principles that *free and rational persons concerned to further their own interests would accept in an initial position of equality* and in defining the fundamental terms of society. (Rawls, 1971, p. 11; italics added)

In Rawls's account of social justice we can easily find an individualistic approach on the explanatory, as well as on the moral and political, level. For indeed it seems that, as a rule, individualists, or social atomists, believe that their principle of methodological individualism is to be employed not only in the explanation of social phenomena, but that it is also to be adopted as a basis for any accounts of what the social goods are. For it seems that for the atomists those goods, ultimately, can be only concatenations of individual goods.

Watkins saw his own individualistic position opposed to the doctrine of holism or organicism, according to which, as he wrote,

social systems constitute 'wholes' at least in the sense that some of their large-scale behaviour is governed by macro-laws which are essentially sociological in the sense that they are *sui generis* and not to be explained as mere regularities or tendencies resulting from the behaviour of interacting individuals.

And, he added,

If methodological individualism means that human beings are supposed to be the only moving agents in history, and if sociological holism means that some superhuman agents or factors are supposed to be at work in history, then these two alternatives are exhaustive. (Watkins, 1957, p. 106)

I would like to place the opposition drawn by Watkins in a context of the whole package of problems and oppositions that have been dividing thinkers in moral and political philosophy for centuries.

There are those, then, who, in a very similar vein, wish to uphold the picture of a person as a fully autonomous atom of society and attribute priority to this atomistically conceived individual. But there is a growing number of those who would like to follow Aristotle in

his conviction that “The Whole is necessarily prior to the part. If the whole body is destroyed, there will be not a foot or a head,” from which he drew the conclusion that “the polis exists by nature and that it is prior to the individual” (*Politics*, 1253a, pp. 7–8). Those thinkers, questioning especially the autonomy of individual reason, seem now to be—to invoke Edmund Burke’s dictum—

afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own stock of reason; because [they] suspect that this stock in each men is small and that individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of natures and of ages. (*Reflections* . . . , pp. 354–55)

Accordingly, they emphasise the priority of the community, perceiving it as the primary source of determinations responsible for the social construction of the individual who does not possess any independent existence apart from the community. More importantly still, they perceive the atomistic vision of society as a threat to the ethnocentric identities and differences by means of which they try to define the meaning and purpose of their individual lives. They often vehemently reject this concept of society and of the individual, and declare their refusal to live in a community constituted only by the impoverished relationships reduced largely to contractual ties. They also strive to return to the “natural” thick fabric of social bonds which is upset by excessive and—to use C. B. MacPherson’s apt phrase—possessive liberal individualism.

This controversy has been usually discussed under the guise of the opposition between the individual and the community, man and society. The upshot of the liberalism/communitarianism debate seems, however, to show that such a view of the matter is a gross misconception; this misconception stems largely from the fact that the concept of the individual as conceived by the atomists is seriously flawed. The flaws of this concept are in fact responsible for the fact that it is so attractive to the individualists and so repellent to their opponents. Thus, if there is any hope of overcoming this perennial debate, it will have to be sought through a comprehensive criticism of the concept of the individual which is so persistent in our culture as a whole.

The problem which makes me question the atomist position is that the finality of assertion of the existence of autonomous human individuals not only does not solve any philosophically interesting questions but, more importantly, prevents one from asking them. It seems that individualism, just because it sees human beings as “irreducible” and final constituents of the society, prevents itself from considering the questions of the utmost philosophical importance, i.e. the issue of the constitution of human self and of the sources of its rationality, autonomy and freedom. By ascribing fundamental and final status to its own

claims concerning the human self, it is forced to turn a blind eye to a vast philosophical domain of ways and modes in which numerous factors do take part in shaping individuals into their idiosyncratic forms; in doing so, it significantly impoverishes its own cognitive perspective.

2. Enlightenment Thinkers on Individuality

Individualist philosophy has been persistently traced to the intellectual efforts of the pre-Enlightenment and Enlightenment thinkers whose work was crucial in defining the modern philosophical and moral ideals of liberal and democratic society. Among them were especially Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Immanuel Kant, but also Adam Smith, Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin and many other thinkers, mostly of the British soil. Thus, it seems worthwhile to consider to what extent the charges levelled against the Enlightenment, as responsible for the modern era's individualist culture, are justified.

It is not difficult to find a justification for this historical claim. John Locke, for example, the 18th-century proponent of contractual political theory, develops his account of political society in a decidedly individualist fashion. In *Two Treatises of Government* he writes that

Men being, as has been said, by Nature, all free, equal and independent, no one can be put out of his Estate, and subjected to the Political Power of another, without his Consent. The only way whereby any one divests himself of his Natural Liberty, and puts himself on the bonds of Civil Society is by agreeing with other Men to join and unite into a Community, for their comfortable, safe and peaceable living one among another, in a secure Enjoyment of the Properties, and a greater Security against any that are not of it. (*Second Treatise*, §95)

Locke's political theory is based on the idea of natural human rights and was used by him to contest the religiously inspired traditional political authoritarianism, especially in the form given to it by his immediate opponent, Sir Robert Filmer, in his work *Patriarch* (1680). The basic philosophical assumption in Locke's conception seems to be the conviction that individual membership in political associations can be essentially reduced to an instrumental value, that of protecting the personal freedoms of individuals, and, most importantly for Locke, their property. For, as he writes, the "great and chief end of men entering into commonwealths and putting themselves under the government, is the preservation of their property" (*Second Treatise*, §124).

This individualistic idea of society is further strengthened by the writings of other Enlightenment's writers, British and European alike.

Adam Smith's moral theory, for example, even though its crucial concepts, that of sympathy and of the impartial spectator within one's breast, are construed as fundamentally social ones,¹ does not differ much from Locke's individualism. In particular, it does not prevent Smith from describing the ideal of the prudent man, with which he evidently sympathises, in the following manner:

The prudent man is not willing to subject himself to any responsibility which his duty does not impose upon him. He is not a bustler in business where he has no concern; is not a meddler in other people's affairs; is not a professed counsellor or adviser, who obtrudes his advice where nobody is asking it. He confines himself, as much as his duty will permit, to his own affairs and has no taste for that foolish importance which many people wish to derive from appearing to have some influence in the management of those of other people. He is averse to enter into any party disputes, hates faction, and is not always very forward to listen to the voice even of noble and great ambition. When distinctly called upon, he will not decline service of his country, but he will not cabal in order to force himself into it, and would be much better pleased that the public business were well managed by some other person, than that he himself should have the trouble, and incur the responsibility, of managing it. (*The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, pp. 215–16)

Smith's idea of the prudent man is not very distant from the similar idea of the magnanimous man described in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, a rational, self-composed, self-commanding, well-mannered, independent, well-off person, moderate in his emotions, who thinks himself as justly deserving greatest things and receiving them; as such, he indeed fits well the charges of egoistic individualism levelled against the Enlightenment and of liberal egoism so often associated, even if unjustly, with Smith's name. This idea of the self-centred individual, devoid of any deep interest in the fate of others, incapable of emotional commitment or devout love, does not leave much room for social feelings and interests, apart from those directly related to one's own business.

Now, this individualist morality, although it has been formulated by the English-speaking Enlightenment philosophers and is most common

¹ "As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation," (Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 9). Also: "Man of the most robust make, observe that in looking upon sore eyes they often feel a very sensible soreness in their own," (*ibid.*, p. 10). The concept of sympathy in Smith cannot be equated with that of benevolence, as some commentators have interpreted it; some of them drew from this a confusion according to which in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* he dealt with the altruistic side of human conduct, whereas in the *Wealth of Nations* with its egoistic side. The editors of the quoted edition assert that such an interpretation of Smith's work is mistaken; see "Introduction," sect. 2(b).

among them, is not limited to Anglo-Saxon soil. The picture of social ties and social virtues emerging from Kant's moral philosophy can be summarised as a kind of Leibnizian harmony of moral monads, organizing themselves into associations that enhance and preserve rather than threaten the individual sphere and freedom of each. For Kant,

The tightest possible association between persons will be by life-long contract within marriage (a form that Kant avoided) or friendship tied by vows of friendship, the rest will be the quasi-contractual ties of fellow citizens under a common magistrate and a common law, and the loosest but not unimportant tie is that of cosmopolitan sentiment linking all mutually respectful autonomous persons in practices of 'affability, sociability, courtesy, hospitality, and gentleness (in disagreeing without quarrelling).' Presumably these cosmopolitan sentiments are to be largely reserved for those who are citizens of nations with whom our own nation is not currently at war, since Kant takes perpetual peace to be more an idea or ideal of practical reason than a realistic expectation. (Baier, 1994, p. 248)

The situation is considerably different among the thinkers of the French Enlightenment. It is Jean-Jacques Rousseau who is usually held responsible for French authoritarianism and anti-individualism, as well as for the persistent negative French attitude toward liberalism; his idea of the social contract is indeed strikingly different from the one developed by British authors. As many commentators have stressed, Rousseau's authoritarian ideas were just an alternative restatement of arguments which before him were employed by Thomas Hobbes in support of the absolutist conception of power incarnated in absolute monarchy. In particular, his concept of the general will, according to which sovereignty cannot be divided nor restricted, conjoined with the idea of the total alienation of the rights of the individual entering the social contract, which form his idea of radically democratic popular sovereignty, can be seen as a reversal of claims about absolutist monarchical sovereignty. Yet, despite that, even his seemingly anti-individualist idea of the social contract has been interpreted by some of Rousseau's followers as one in which the individual

will remain sovereign, and the society will be legitimate, if, social power having been given over to the whole, there is an identity of interests and of views between each person and the community, between the sovereign as everyone and the sovereign as individual. (Leroux, *Aux Politiques*, p. 154)

This tradition of thought, which includes thinkers like Tocqueville, John Stuart Mill, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper, finds, quite appropriately, its natural continuation in another English

defender of the liberal individualistic conception of society who famously proclaimed that there is no such thing as society, there are only individuals.²

3. Communitarian critique

As we have seen above, Watkins asserted that the existence of social particles cannot be explained. What contemporary non-individualists attempt to do is precisely to explain the nature of these particles, to show how they come into being and how they are shaped into various and distinct forms which usually escape the notice of the atomist. In other words, they want to penetrate that which has been assumed by the individualists to be impenetrable.

One of the most outspoken critics of the Enlightenment's individualist tradition, Alasdair MacIntyre, takes this concept of an individual as the chief aim of his criticism. He claims that for an individualist the "I" seems to be just a peg on which to hang anything an individual wishes to. Such a self has no history, no sources, no origin. This enforced transcendentalism, adopted out of fear of relativism, makes liberal theoreticians turn their back on the problematic of the social construction of the human self, and eventually leads them to a kind of moral voluntarism and emotivism. As MacIntyre observed:

From the standpoint of individualism I am what I myself choose to be. I can always, if I wish to, put in question what are taken to be the merely contingent social features of my existence. I may biologically be my father's son; but I cannot be held responsible for what he did unless I choose implicitly or explicitly to assume such responsibility. I may legally be a citizen of a certain country; but I cannot be held responsible for what my country does or had done unless I choose implicitly or explicitly to assume such responsibility. (1984, p. 220)

From the communitarian perspective the gravest problem which liberal individualists cannot answer is how an individual acquires his or her ability to wish, to act, to choose, to consider, to assume responsibility, in the first place. MacIntyre proposes the narrative concept of the self, according to which the helpless creatures which initially resemble human beings only in virtue of their bodily shape, become fully human through listening, learning and imbibing the moral lessons stemming from the array of narratives told and retold by one's community throughout its history. One becomes human through participation in the narratives of a community; furthermore, it is impossible to

² Margaret Thatcher.

totally separate the narratives guiding individuals and communities in the execution of practical tasks from the practices themselves since there is, and must be, an intrinsic relationship between these two elements. Thus, for MacIntyre, individuals seem to be tightly enmeshed, encumbered or caught into this inextricable network of practical and narrative activities which sustain their community and themselves with it, without their being aware of the extent to which it is so.

He stresses that a human being, in so far as it is human, always belongs to a community. We become a part of a community by mastering its language which is our first first language. If we happen also to become members of an another community, we do so by mastering its language which then becomes our second first language. Together with mastering the language, we enter the world of narratives typical to that community, which are the source of self-identification for its members and of the community as a whole. We also enter a set of practices, that is organised human activities directed towards particular goals; the joint aim of the set of communal practices is the perpetuation of the community's existence. Practices and narratives are the chief constituents of the tradition of the community; the tradition is perpetuated by the very existence of the community and, vice-versa, the community is the carrier of the tradition; the tradition is a guide for the community.

Every tradition has its own standards of rationality. Accordingly, it does not make sense to say that there is just one rationality; indeed, there are as many rationalities as there are traditions, and they historically evolve together with the community and within an internal argument that keeps the community and its tradition alive:

I am born with the past; and to try to cut off myself from that past, in the individualist mode, is to deform my present relationships. [...] What I am, therefore, is in key part what I inherit, a specific past that is present to some degree in my present. I find myself part of a history and that is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognise it or not, one of the bearers of a tradition. (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 220)

There is no one universal rationality since, along with the set of practices, narratives and stories typical to a particular tradition, every one of us adopts a way of understanding things peculiar to that tradition. Every type of such an inquiry is not, and cannot be, absolutely objective, rational, or unbiased. Every inquiry is constituted by a tradition and—in its turn—contributes to that tradition by continuously constituting it ever anew. This *tradition-constituted and tradition-constitutive inquiry* is a basis for our practical judgements and valuations and is fundamentally affected by them. It also follows that there is no one set of political institutions which would be universally applicable and universally effective.

Charles Taylor, following similar lines, undertook the vast project of locating the sources of the self. Taking as his starting point the assertion that man is a self-interpreting animal, Taylor goes on to say that the process of self-interpretation is a process which is constitutive for the emergence of us as separate individuals. But at the same time he claims that we could never become such had it not been for the social environment in which this self-interpretation takes place and which provides us with the necessary tools for engaging in this process in the first place. For our sense of identity is not something which we can achieve entirely on our own; it is bound to have a strong social dimension since the construction of the self is done within, and by means of, language and, as Wittgenstein argued, language is something which can never be private, i.e. it cannot be created individually: it is necessarily social and intersubjective. Thus our identity is a dialogical product of our interactions with other people who share with us our language. Shared language is also a means through which we are endowed in this dialogical process with capabilities of evaluation, and, more significantly, of “strong evaluation” which Taylor understands as appealing to something beyond the agent himself. Our strong evaluations are “strong” in virtue of the fact they invoke not our internal emotions, likings or dislikings, but features which are external to us and which point to judgements which defy the emotivist idea of morality. For Taylor the concept of strong evaluation is integral to selfhood, for he understands the self as constituted to a significant degree by the process of strong evaluations which connect us in well-defined ways with other people; in fact almost all of our strong evaluations are prior to us and we inherited them from others. Also, he claims, we have no choice but to rely on them, and to allow them to guide us in something which we superficially take as our own “private,” independent choices. Thus our sense of who we are cannot be determined without the reference to our extra-individual commitments and identifications. The intersubjectively defined meanings of the terms in which we describe ourselves—as sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, employees—are responsible for our own self-understandings as individuals. Our sense of who we are is to a large extent a function of what others take us to be; and the image of ourselves created by others is reflected back to us by the individuals and groups with whom we deal on an everyday basis (cf. Horton, 1988, pp. 158–59).

For Taylor this approach toward the individual has important political consequences; he describes his own position as “holistic individualism.” This seemingly contradictory stance can better be understood by looking at it through his distinction between ontological and the advocacy of issues in the communitarian-liberal debate. On the

ontological level Taylor is a strong communitarian, but on the level of ideological issues he does not wish to forsake the liberal ideas of freedom and individual differences. This leads him to criticise modern democracy as based on liberal atomism and he strives to reformulate liberal arrangements in a way that allows for a reasonable level of political participation which is to reflect social diversity, and to endow the democratic politics with a genuine sense of belonging to a community.

It is important to remember that it is not only communitarian antimodernist thinkers who engage themselves in the criticism of this Enlightenment and liberal dogma of the priority of the individual. Among them are also intellectuals who call themselves, or are called by others, postmodernists. Some of them, following Derrida and others, are busy with deconstructing the subject, the cornerstone of the 18th century post-Cartesian epistemology and morality, trying to dislodge this concept from its dominant position in all sorts of domains of human life and thought. Especially powerful among them is Zygmunt Bauman's critique of excessive individualism, rationalism and the postulate of blind rule-following which he sees as a result of the Enlightenment concept of morality and holds it responsible for all the evils of modern European civilisation, including the atrocities of communism, Nazi ideology and the Holocaust. In order to reject the Enlightenment's stifling ethical code, he suggests, we should again become moral, personalise morality and salvage it from the rationalistic pretensions of 18th-century thinkers. According to Bauman, there seems to exist a natural, autonomous state of morality, unadulterated by any artificial ethical (*scil.* rational) universal rules. Bauman sees ethics as a set of rules imposed on the spontaneously emerging moralities of different communities. In this, he apparently echoes Hegel's distinction between *Sittlichkeit* and *Moralität*, the former being the result of the natural development of moral laws, obeyed by communities, the latter being the product of rationalist philosophers, among them Kant, who wish to impose on this living moral network allegedly universal rules of conduct thought out in the insulated ivory towers of their studies.

A crucial and novel consequence of the debate between individualists and communitarians seems to be nearly universal agreement in rejecting the traditional Platonic and Enlightenment priority of epistemology over social philosophy, expressing itself in the conviction that—to rephrase Richard Rorty's formulation—ethnocentricity or solidarity is more important than objectivity, or that democracy, in order to function, does not need epistemological justification or metaphysical grounding. Instead, the principles currently sought are the principles of practical, not theoretical reason, and justification for social action

is sought within the sphere of morals and values, not the theory of knowledge.

4. Hume's Moderate View

As mentioned above, this individualistic picture has been blamed by many philosophers on the thinkers of the Enlightenment. In the light of the above, this judgement finds ample confirmation in many writers of the period. Thus we may say that at least some of the Enlightenment thinkers stand guilty as charged. But there is one important exception to this. David Hume appears to have escaped both horns of the dilemma, individualism and collectivism. The uniqueness of Hume's moral thought may be appreciated especially through the contrast between his work and Kant's, whose critical powers, supposedly, in his own words, were awakened by the Scottish moralist. A closer reading of Hume makes it easy to justify Bertrand Russell's judgement, according to which Kant was indeed woken up from his dogmatic slumber by David Hume, but only to fall back into it again. I believe it is Hume who can show us the way out from this entrapment between excessively abstract and rationalist individualism and the equally excessively anti-rationalist and collectivist communitarianism.

These hopes are largely based on Hume's consistent sceptical attitude toward the legislative and law-giving abilities of philosophical reason, so often ascribed to the thinkers of the Enlightenment. For Hume,

nothing is more requisite for a true philosopher, than to restrain the intemperate desire of searching into causes, and having establish'd any doctrine upon a sufficient number of experiments, rest contented with that, when he sees a farther examination would lead him into obscure and uncertain speculations. (*Treatise*, p. 13)

He stresses instead that the "true philosophy approaches nearer to the sentiments of the vulgar, than to those of a mistaken knowledge" (*Treatise*, p. 223). Especially in his moral philosophy Hume attributes to "the vulgar," as well as to customs and habits, an infallibility which cannot be achieved in the abstract philosophical speculations of pure reason. In his extended argument against Locke's concept of the original contract, having first provided logical and historical arguments against it, he subsequently has recourse to a very specific authority to support his deliberations. This authority is nothing other than that of the "universal consent of mankind," of "popular authority," or of "the sentiments of the rabble." Juxtaposing these "sentiments of the rabble to any philosophical reasoning," Hume formulates quite a remarkable

claim that “it must be observ’d, that the opinions of men, in this case, carry with them a peculiar authority, and are, in a great measure, infallible” (*Treatise*, p. 546). The infallibility of the opinions of men is for Hume an antidote to judgements which can follow from a “too strict adherence to a system in philosophy” (*Treatise*, p. 547). This is not, to be sure, an isolated statement which could possibly be attributed to a slip of the pen, or the mind, for further along in the *Treatise* he repeats that

The general opinion of mankind has some authority in all cases; but in this of morals is perfectly infallible. Nor is it less infallible, because men cannot distinctly explain the principles, on which it is founded. (p. 552)

Hume’s moderate expectations from, and his sceptical attitude towards, the authority of philosophy result largely from his view of human reason as intimately connected with volition and the passions. Reason as understood by Hume can never influence any of our actions; it is completely passive or “perfectly inert” (*Treatise*, pp. 457–58). All it can do is direct our judgement in our search for causes and effects (*Treatise*, p. 414). But at the same time reason is constantly exposed to the influence of our emotions, feelings and will. For example, if we have the prospect of pain or pleasure to be caused by some object, we experience emotions of attraction or aversion, and act accordingly. As Hume’s analysis of this example shows, reasoning is confined to the discovery of the relationship between types of objects and the expected character of their influence on us. But at the same he stresses that the impulse to act according to the formed expectations does not arise from reason but is only directed by it. This leads him to conclude that reason is nothing but the discovery of the connections between objects and their effect upon us. Thus reason can never produce any actions nor give rise to any volitions, and, equally, it cannot prevent us from experiencing any volitions. Hume concludes that reason has no original influence of its own on our actions nor can it withstand any influence of the will. To quote the famous passage:

Thus it appears, that the principle, which opposes our passion, cannot be the same with reason, and is only call’d so in an improper sense. We speak not strictly and philosophically when we talk of the combat of passions and of reason. Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them. (*Treatise*, p. 415)

Hume, sceptically withholding his judgement concerning the existence of substance and cause, adopts a similar attitude towards the existence of the human soul, the place where human reason has traditionally been believed to reside. Indeed, his approach toward the individual,

rendering personal identity as fluid, prefigures many later philosophical attempts towards the dissolution of the substantive human self. He writes, for example:

When we talk of self or substance, we must have an idea annex'd to these terms, otherwise they are altogether unintelligible. Every idea is deriv'd from preceding impressions; and we have no impression of self or substance, as something simple and individual. We have, therefore, no idea of them in that sense. (*Treatise*, p. 633)

And he continues:

When I turn my reflexion on myself, I never can perceive this self without some one or more perceptions; nor can I ever perceive any thing but the perceptions. 'Tis the composition of these, therefore, which forms the self. (*Treatise*, p. 634)

This is how Hume understands the fluidity of the self within his naturalistically oriented epistemology. But it also has an immediate effect upon his conception of the self within his moral philosophy, leading him to something which can be described as an ethnocentric or even a pre-communitarian concept of the individual. The best way to understand this feature of his moral philosophy is to look at his definition of sympathy as “the most remarkable quality of human nature,” allowing us to “sympathise with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own” (*Treatise*, p. 316). This feature of human nature is to be found not only in the children, who easily embrace every opinion that is proposed to them, but also

in men of the greatest judgement and understanding, who find difficult to follow their own reason or inclination, in opposition to that of their friends and daily companions. To this principle we ought to ascribe the great uniformity we may observe in the humours and turn of thinking of those of the same nation; and this is much more probable that this resemblance arises from sympathy, than from any influence of the soil and climate. . . .(*Treatise*, p. 316–17)

What is particularly interesting is that this ethnocentric idea of the individual leads Hume to formulate the very modern, or rather post-modern, social construction of man as a creature whose most fundamental feelings and features do not belong to him or her in virtue of natural endowment, but rather are inscribed in him or her through the process of social interaction with others, in which sympathy plays a fundamental role:

Hatred, resentment, esteem, love, courage, mirth and melancholy; all these passions I feel more from communication than from my own natural temper and disposition. (*Treatise*, p. 317)

Just like Hume's criticism of the substantive self prefigures in some ways the much later deconstruction of the allegedly impenetrable self, his concepts of communication and sympathy, being crucial in the social construction of the self, prefigure the communitarian criticism of individualism in the sense that they stress the commonality of an individual's moral features and the fact that they are to a significant degree formed in each individual through his or her participation in communicative processes with others.

It is especially the idea of communication that makes Hume's concept of the individual very close to MacIntyre's conception of the "narrative sources of the self" as well as to Taylor's line of criticism of social atomism. Significantly, both of these authors invoke the concept of conversation, which they seem to understand somewhat as Hume understands his idea of communication. Taylor, in order to make his point, introduces the distinction between matters which are for me and/or you, and matters which are for us. This can be explained with the help of an example of two neighbours working in their gardens in the back of their houses. At some point one of them interrupts the silent work and says: "Fine weather we are having." As Taylor notices, the conversation opener does not provide the other neighbour with important information of which he would previously be ignorant. He is working in his garden precisely because he is consciously taking advantage of the aforesaid fine weather. But what the trivial remark achieves is the fact that the weather, being formerly a matter of some relevance for each neighbour separately, from now on becomes a matter to both of them. This attending-together-to-something is not reducible to attending to the same thing in the separation of our loneliness. Thus the conversation

is not the co-ordination of actions of different individuals, but a common action in this strong, irreducible sense; it is our action. [...] This threshold, which conversation takes us over, is one that matters in all sorts of ways and on all sorts of levels in human life. In human terms, we stand on a very different footing when we start talking. ... (Taylor, 1995, pp. 189–90)

It is precisely this view of communication and sympathy, through which individuals create and understand themselves and each other, which makes Humean moral philosophy markedly different from the egoistic conceptions of many other Enlightenment philosophers. The difference can be further appreciated by having a look at his reflections on the most important of human passions, on friendship and love.

5. Hume on Love

In his autobiographical essay *My Own Life*, Hume confesses that he took pleasure in the company of modest women and that he had no reason to be displeased with the reception he was met with from them (Essays, p. xl–xli). The Humean view of the intrinsically societal nature of human beings, their morality and their passions, is in telling contrast with Kant's moral philosophy. We do not find any evidence of Kant's (justly called a misamorist³) being involved in similar relationships. But this difference is not only one of the individual inclinations of both philosophers; for it makes its way into their conceptions of morality. This issue enables us to realise still another aspect of the contrast between the Kantian monadic and contractualist view of human relationships and Hume's naturalist and contingent view of the social relations concept of man.

Kant stresses that true friendship is merely an Ideal. He approvingly quotes the Greek saying: "My dear friends, there are no friends," attributing it once to Socrates and once to Aristotle. Kant acknowledges that

we all have a strong impulse to disclose ourselves, and to enter wholly into fellowship; and such self-revelation is further a human necessity for the correction of our judgement. To have a friend whom we know to be frank and loving, neither false nor spiteful, is to have one who will help us to correct our judgement when it is mistaken. This is the whole end of man, through which he can enjoy his existence. But even between the closest and most intimate friends there are still some things that call for reserve. (*Lectures on Ethics*, p. 244)

Although he recommends a prudent and carefully measured "disclosure" between friends, at the same time he warns lovers about too intimate relationships with one another by saying that an intimate can be "capable of sending us to the gallows in a moment of passion, though he would implore our pardon as soon as he had cooled down." Kant evidently thought that the duty of respect and keeping a due distance from another is much more important than a loving and intimate tie. As Annette Baier commented, for Kant "the whole end of man is correct judgement, not fellowship. Fellowship is merely a means to this end, and a risky one" (1994, p. 34). Or rather, more likely, he was just afraid of too close a relationship.

Superficially, we may realise how important the subject of love is for Hume on the basis of the fact that the part of the *Treatise* which he

³ By Annette Baier (1994). In this paper I am indebted to her account of David Hume's philosophy, included in her *Moral Prejudices. Essays on Ethics*, in more than one way.

devoted to the passions of love and hatred is seventy one pages long, that is more or less of the same length as the one devoted to the subject of causality. There we find very poignant statements concerning the nature of the human individual, which, despite its social nature, still remains for Hume one of the animals:

In all creatures, that prey not upon others, and are not agitated with violent passions, there appears a remarkable desire of company, which associates them together, without any advantage they can ever propose to reap from their union. This is still more conspicuous in man, as being the creature of the universe, who has the most ardent desire of society, and is fitted for it by most advantages. We can form no wish, which has no reference to society. A perfect solitude is, perhaps, the greatest punishment we can suffer. Every pleasure languishes when enjoy'd a-part from company, and every pain becomes more cruel and intolerable. Whatever other passions we may be actuated by; pride, ambition, avarice, curiosity, revenge or lust; the soul or animating principle of them all is sympathy; nor would they have any force, were we to abstract entirely from the thoughts and sentiments of others. Let all the powers and elements of nature conspire to serve and obey one man: Let the sun rise and set at his command: The sea and rivers roll as he pleases, and the earth furnish spontaneously whatever may be useful or agreeable to him: He will still be miserable, till you give him some one person at least, with whom he may share his happiness and whose esteem and friendship he may enjoy. (*Treatise*, p. 363)

Similarly, in an argument against philosophers who locate the source of every human feeling in man's selfishness, he strives to undermine the idea that since every act of virtue or friendship is accompanied by a secret pleasure, these passions cannot be disinterested.

The virtuous sentiment or passion produces the pleasure, and does not arise from it. I feel pleasure in doing good to my friend, because I love him; but do not love him for the sake of that pleasure. (*Essays*, p. 85–6)

To sum up the difference between Kant and Hume, we may say that where Kant pronounces a warning to the effect that we should not treat our friends in a way we might regret when they cease to be our friends, Hume offers a radically different injunction: do not treat strangers in ways you will regret should they become your friends (Baier, 1994, p. 40). For

Our situation, with regard both to persons and things, is in continual fluctuation; and a man, that lies at a distance from us, may, in a little time, become a familiar acquaintance. (*Treatise*, p. 581)

6. A Non-Universal Rationality

As we have seen, Hume denies reason its ability to control and direct our actions.

To consider the matter aright, reason is nothing but a wonderful and unintelligible instinct in our soul, which carries us along a certain train of ideas, and endows them with particular qualities, according their particular situations and relations. (*Treatise*, p. 179)

By thus making it contingent upon our circumstances, volitions and passions, human reason seems all of a sudden to become totally incapacitated and cannot perform its purported role of moral supervisor of our actions. It would seem, then, that by Hume's doing so, all moral philosophy collapses, because, after all, its overall aim—to provide rational directions in our behaviour—cannot be achieved on the basis of a view of reason which cannot be our moral guide anymore. But even if we follow Hume in depriving human reason of these controlling abilities, we cannot deny that there are rules of conduct which we look up to in performing our actions. It is understandable, then, that many philosophers, like Kant, had recourse to the universality of moral rules which serve as our unquestionable guidance in practical life.

The problem with this universalistic approach, however, is that it conceives of reason as a supra-natural element, alien to the rest of human being, as something coming not from this natural world, but from a transcendent, or indeed transcendental realm. In opposition to this, Hume enables us to understand moral rules not as dictates of universal reason, but as *contingently permanent* rules which, on the one hand, do perform their controlling function, but, on the other, remain flexible and allow for variation and divergence.

But how, having disposed of universal reason, can these rules be understood? Indeed, this question can only be asked, and profitably so, within the perspective provided by Hume.

Hume's answer to this problem is that rational moral rules which we obey are just bundles of our interests, passions, emotions and feelings which have crystallised into customs and habits, and which thereby acquire the permanence which is denied to the momentarily experienced, numerically different individual feelings and emotions.

This instinct, 'tis true', arises from past observation and experience; but can any one give the ultimate reason, why past experience and observation produces such an effect, any more than why nature alone should produce it? Nature may certainly produce whatever can arise from habit: Nay, habit is nothing but one of the principles of nature, and derives all its force from that origin. (*Treatise*, p. 179)

Our passions ossify, crystallise or petrify into rational commandments—into a rational ethics—just because the observance of more or less permanent and more or less reliable rules of conduct is a prerequisite of our being able to move effectively and safely among the objects of the natural world and other human beings. It is due to their practical effectiveness that some of our interests, needs and passions become less transient and turn into sign-posts to be followed in our daily moral traffic.

If the sense of common interest were not our original motive for obedience, I would fain ask, what other principle is there in human nature capable of subduing the natural ambition of men, and forcing them to such submission. Imitation and custom are not sufficient. For the question still recurs, what motive first produces those instances of submission, which we imitate, and that train of actions, which produces the custom? There evidently is no other principle than common interest. (*Treatise*, p. 553)

Therein seems to lie the source of the big difference between various rules formulated by different communities in order to regulate the processes of the satisfaction of hunger, the need of shelter and of sexual needs, and the particular instances of consumption, house-construction or incidents of love-making which we are all occasionally involved in; and it is this difference that endows moral rules thus established with their moral force. Thus, in virtue of their being crystallised or ossified, they differ from individual emotions, but they also differ from the universally valid commandments of reason, which thereby turns out to be wholly unnecessary. It is this difference also, which is the source of the continuous dialectics between the individual self and the community in which he is trying to make his living, and to make his life meaningful.

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