

# The Political Philosophy of Individualism: A Critical Analysis

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**Abstract:** The philosophy of individualism aims at the non-interference of the state in controlling the activities of the individuals. It regards that the happiness and progress of mankind can be achieved only if the people are left to manage their affairs by themselves without any restriction. It grants perfect liberty to individuals. The doctrine implies that the governments by their restraints or services can hardly make any contribution to the welfare of the individuals and, on the other hand, tend to destroy it if they extend their activity beyond the limits of maintaining law and order in the society. The real function of the state is to train and improve the individuals in such a way that they should not feel any necessity for the existence of state. The greatest service that the state can do to mankind is to make itself superfluous.

**Keywords:** individuals, state, government, society, liberty, necessary evil.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The individualists regard the state as a necessary evil. The state exists because the individuals are yet imperfect to carry on their affairs by themselves. If the state has to exist, there must be some governmental restrictions and restraints on individual's activities. As the exponents of individualism consider the state as an evil, they want to minimize the sphere of the state activity. They believe that the state exists to protect the country from external aggression with the help of army which is maintained for this purpose and to maintain internal peace and order with the help of police force. Thus the function of the state is negative in nature and not positive. It simply checks the individuals from violating the law of the state.

The political thinkers have always maintained different views regarding the extent of control the government should have to regulate the conduct of the individuals. It is generally believed that increase in government powers comes into conflict with the rights and liberties of individuals. A benevolent king is likely to become a tyrant when unlimited power comes into his hands and intelligent men of aristocracy, having high ideals, when come into power, become intolerant and unwise. Even democracy has not been able to solve this problem where majority rule ruthlessly oppresses the minority groups. As Mill pointed out, the self government of democracy is not the government of each man by himself but the government of each by the rest of the community.

Mere existence of state implies that a government should have certain powers to control and guide the conduct of the individuals. Even the individualists cannot deny this fact. The problem is what sort of activities should be controlled by the government and what is the sphere of individual's activities in which the government should have no interference at all. It may be said that the state should safeguard the natural rights of man and should not violate them. J.S .Mill has tried to provide a criterion where state is justified to intervene and restrain the activities of an individual. He draws a distinction between the actions of the individual which affect others and his conduct that affects only himself. He divides the actions of the individual into two parts (i) self-regarding, and (ii) others-regarding. According to Mill, man is sovereign over himself, over his body and mind. In so far as the action affects only the doer, the state has no reason to intervene. State cannot compel a man to be good and virtuous. The state should not resume a paternal role. Once it begins to interfere in the moral conduct of man, it is liberty to intervene at wrong places as well imposing restriction on ordinary and simple enjoyments as well.

Mill holds that an individual should be allowed to have any opinion he pleases. His opinion should not be suppressed even if it comes conflict with the opinion of the majority in the society. Mill says that many a time the opinion which is sought to be discredited by the society comes out to be true. The government and majorities are not infallible. Great men like Socrates and Christ suffered both at the hands of authorities and the public because their opinions ran contrary to the opinion held by the society then. Similarly it is just possible that the opinions held by democratic majorities and authorities today may be proved false in the future. Moreover the opinion suppressed by the authorities may be partially wrong and partially right. By suppressing such an opinion the society will be deprived of the benefit of the partial truth contained in it

Herbert Spencer, another ardent advocate of individualism bases his theory on natural laws which regulate and guide the social and economic life in society. He is of the view that natural forces help the society to achieve perfection. The natural laws demand that the state should allow the nature to operate in its own way without any interference. Process of natural selection i.e. survival of the fittest and elimination of the weaker is the fundamental law of nature. This law also applies to human society and helps in its improvement by eliminating the weak and undesirable element. Any interference by the government in this eternal struggle for existence will amount to modify nature. According to Spencer, every man is free to do that which he wills, provided he infringes not upon the equal freedom of any other man.

In the economic field the individual have advocated free trade. They believe that every individual knew best his own interest and the means to pursue it. By pursuing his own interests he, unintentionally, serves the common interest as well. There should be no restrictions on industrialists and workers. Let these be free competition without any legal restraint. The existing economic differences are the result of natural endowment or chances of fortune. State is not morally justified to remove this disparity. State should, on the other hand, sustain private property and whatever inequalities appear with it. Sumner and Humboldt are among various other who have passionately supported the theory of individualism. According to Humboldt, "State should abstain from all solicitude for the positive welfare of the citizens and ought not to proceed a step farther than is necessary for their natural security and protection against foreign enemies." Sumner who was deeply influenced by the biological writings of Darwin and Huxley and application of biological principles to social phenomena by Spencer, says, "Let it be understood that we cannot go outside of this alternative: liberty, inequality, survival of the fittest; non liberty, equality, survival of the unfittest. The former carries the society forward and favors all its best members; the latter carries society downwards and favors all its worst members."

Thus the individualists contend that just and morality demand that state should not interfere into the affairs of individual. Man finds scope for development only in perfect liberty. Government action kills the initiative, self-reliance and self-confidence of the individual and blunts his character. The highest civilization can develop only under an individualist society. Nature should be given free hand to work in its own way. It will lead to the survival of the fittest and the rule of the rich, wise and intelligent will be established. On the other hand state help to the poor and the weak will lead to the establishment of the rule of universe and ignorant people. In the economic field state should not interfere and full scope of free competition be allowed. It will stabilize the prices, raise the level of efficiency and result in manufacture of superior type of goods. Most of the state regulations are ridiculous, mischievous, useless and futile. Experience shows that state control leads to inefficiency and corruption

## II. THE DECLINE OF INDIVIDUALISM

The theory of individualism, upholding freedom and liberty of the individual in every field of life, may apparently appeal to our hearts but it is open to severe criticism. It is both fallacious and dangerous. The individualists hold that the state is a necessary evil. But experience shows that mankind has made tremendous progress with the help of the state. The establishment of railways and roads, the compulsory education, regulations for traffic and public health etc. have added to the comforts of man and not retarded his progress. It is wrong to say that state exists because crime exists. We find that with the progress of civilization, the activities and responsibilities of state have also increased. In the modern complicated society of today it is no longer possible for a man to lead life in his own isolated way without having any regard for others. Of course when life was very simple and man did not have the amenities provided by the scientific knowledge of today, the scope for state intervention in individual's life was little. As the society gets more complicated, the sphere of state-action will increase. Instead of state becoming superfluous it tends to become more powerful and paramount.

Mill contends that man is sovereign over his body and mind and state is justified to intervene only when his actions affect the others. But it is not easy to discriminate between actions which affect the doer only and those which concern the others. The different actions of man cannot be contained in water-tight compartments. All the actions of an individual, somehow or other, affect the others. There is contradiction in the contention of Mill. Realizing the hollowness of this theory, Mill, in the later years of his life, favoured the extension of the functions of the state in the interests of social welfare. He had gone over to the socialistic ideal of common ownership of the raw material of the globe.

The individualist view that as the state action increases the liberty of man decreases, is wrong. There is no hostility between state and man. On the other hand rights and liberties of man can be protected by state action. The state removes the hinderances from the way of the individual and trains him to exercise his liberty and rights in the best possible way. Proper education of the people by the state makes them more free. Liberty does not mean the absence of restraint. Licence is hardly a thing to be desired. Only a disciplined man knows his rights and liberties and can make the proper use for the development of his-self and the society. It is absurd to regard state actions and liberty of the individual as contradictory. On the other hand they supplement each other.

The individualists like Mill have too much stressed on the freedom of speech and thought. In no case an opinion of the individual be suppressed even if it is proved to be wrong. It has been generally accepted that freedom of speech is the basis of democracy and full opportunity should be provided for the free expression of thought. But today the freedom of opinion is not as much threatened from the direct repression by the government as from unreliable means of propaganda by the government and others. The monopoly press of today constantly feeds the people with distorted and one-sided information. Now, even the advocates of free speech admit the necessity of some governmental limit upon it. Abuse of the freedom of speech cannot be allowed. Under the garb of free expression, obscurity and incitement to crime cannot be permitted.

Spencer goes to the extreme when he maintains that the individual should be left to himself to struggle for his existence single handed and thus prove his fitness to live. It is not the function of the state to help the poor, destitute and aged. Such a philosophy can be supported by only those persons within whom the milk of human kindness has completely dried up. This doctrine is devoid of all humanitarian principles and smells of utmost cruelty and selfishness. Individualists like Spencer and Summer have failed to understand the human nature. People cannot tolerate such a philosophy which teaches them to be indifferent to human miseries.

Today the individualists are more interested in the economic freedom than the moral or intellectual. The economic individualism has become the creed of conservatives. This theory is being used as a weapon against socialism and regulations of prices, profits, wages or working conditions. They want to preserve the status quo and oppose the transfer of private enterprise into the hands of community. For this purpose they advance different arguments. They maintain that the state should not interfere between the employers and employees. Both should be left free to make the contracts and strike the bargain. There should be no state laws regulating the wages and other service conditions. The employers should be free to offer the wages as they please and it is for the workers to decide if they are willing to work for that wage or not. This principle of liberty gives licence to the capitalist to exploit the worker and gives the latter the right to starve to death. The poor worker cannot refuse to work at the wages offered by the employer because refusal means starvation of himself and his family. Hence the dire need of state intervention to check the exploitation of the large number of masses by handful of capitalists.

The individualists hold that the state enterprise is less efficient than the private enterprise. Moreover state action gives rise to corruption and waste. This allegation may be true to some extent. But the fault does not lie with the public enterprise. In a society where the pattern of its system is capitalistic and the possession of wealth determines the status of an individual in the society, the state-enterprise may not show better results. But even then private enterprise does not present a rosy picture. The state activities are visible to the public and are open to criticism while the private enterprise remains hidden from the public view. During the last war the individualists amassed huge wealth while the poor masses were starving to death. Even today they are in possession of unaccountable black money which runs into billions. Huxley has rightly remarked that "state lives in glass house; we see what it tries to do, and all its failures, partial or total, are made the most of. But private enterprise is sheltered under good opaque bricks and mortar. The public rarely knows what it tries to do and on its failures when they are gross and patent to the all world."

The economic individualism or the doctrine of laissez-faire had wretched consequences. The living conditions of the workers were horrible. They were ruthlessly exploited by the capitalists. The conscience of the people was aroused and social reformers came forward to mend the society. They rejected the basic assumptions of individualism and regarded social evils as man made which could be removed by courageous application of moral authority of church and positive assertions of the powers of the state. The appeal to humanitarian sentiments of a Christian and civilized nation made by Thomas Arnold, Carlyle and Mrs. Gaskell had much influence in promoting the enactment of labour-legislation in England

### III. CONCLUSION

The individualist creed was repudiated by those who advocated socialist ideals of one sort or other. British writers put forth the doctrine that wage earners in field, factories and mines are the real producers of wealth, most of which is taken away by employers, traders and other non producers. They proposed collectivist schemes to ensure an equitable distribution of wealth. Utopian and Christian Socialists like Saint Simon, Charles Fourier and Robert Owen regarded private property as the chief cause of private property and main source of all the ills in society. They believed that change could be achieved by appeal to reason and sense of justice of influential members of the community. They made some practical efforts to achieve their purpose. Marx and Engels with their theory of scientific socialism completely smashed the philosophy of economic individualism. This philosophy of Marx has changed the face of the world. This philosophy in its broad terms has been accepted by the huge majority of the people in the world. The newly emerged nations of Asia and Africa find their salvation in the socialist ideology which is the bitterest enemy of individualism. Even in the capitalist countries the theory of individualism has been beaten hollow. The modern concept of the welfare state has assigned it a positive role. The citizens look upon the state for the position of necessities and comforts. In the advanced countries, the state has taken upon itself the responsibility of education, public health and employment. The state is assuming more and more powers in its hands. State is no longer regarded as an evil. On the other hand, it is an organization which has helped the individual and the society in its development.

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