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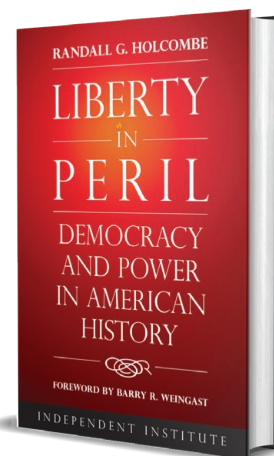

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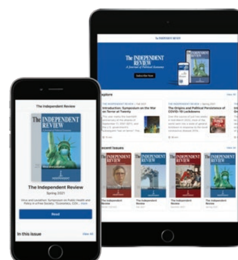

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Individualism and Its Contemporary Fate

Kenneth Minogue

My concern in this article is to explore what I take to be the essence of freedom and to locate it in the context of our civilization. Described thus, the idea is insanely ambitious, and all I can do is sketch a position. I shall identify freedom with individualism, discuss first its emergence and then its established character in the eighteenth century, and finally say something about its paradoxical place in the world today.

Individuality is a universal characteristic of objects, but *individualism* is the practice that accords to some personal acts, beliefs, and utterances a legitimacy that may conflict with the dictates of custom or authority. Today, this practice is usually formulated as "self-interest," which makes it clear that individualism may liberate some individual wants from customary controls. As self-interest, individualism is often wrongly identified with the moral vice of selfishness and gets a bad press. Sometimes it is foolishly attacked as "consumerism" and described as "hyperindividualism" or the mania for accumulating material goods. These hostile characterizations are part of contemporary rhetoric to which we shall return. Let me begin, however, by sketching the emergence of freedom in its individualist form.

Ambivalence and the Coming of Modernity

We inherit various aspects of our freedom from the Greeks, the Romans, and the barons of the feudal period, but in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries something

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new was beginning to appear. Urbanization and printing were its essential preconditions, and it took many forms, but in all cases the enterprise of individuals was at the heart of it. If the coming of freedom may be grasped in terms of any single formula, we might invoke that of Martin Luther writing on Christian freedom. Jesus came, Luther affirmed, to free us from the law into a higher dutifulness. These words make it clear why, whatever religious beliefs we may entertain, Christianity is and remains at the heart of our civilization. They also reveal why Luther's doctrines led to endless conflict. The question is: What might these terms—*law* and *higher dutifulness*—signify? For Luther, the law was clearly Judaic, and the higher dutifulness was Christian piety subject to divine grace. Luther was taking his followers back to what he understood to have been the pure origins of their faith. However, the "law" from which we might seek to be freed might in individualist terms be any restraint that a critical spirit encounters. Consider, for example, Montaigne's use of this structure of thought when he remarked: "Wherever I wish to turn, I have to break through some barrier of custom, so carefully has custom blocked all our approaches" (1958, 119). Such a formula might equally, however, become a dangerous incitement to any lunatic who wanted to shrug off all restraint or spread some rabble-rousing gospel of his own. What then makes this the insight that lies at the heart of individualism?

Human life is everywhere subject to customs, rules, and restraints, but in most cultures these things change more or less insensibly. In European cultures, by contrast, we have a world in which rising generations develop new enterprises and often challenge the assumptions by which their parents lived. Some old "laws" are rejected, and in general some new "dutifulness" emerges. Enterprise is the key, and competition is the result, and this pattern appears not only in economic endeavors, but in ideas, moral sentiments, science, religious convictions, and everywhere else.

Human beings everywhere experience ambivalence about some area of life, and such feelings pose a serious danger to the settled order of things. Our evaluation of most things in our lives varies not only from person to person, but sometimes even from moment to moment. In Europe, however, we find the one civilization that found a way of combining ambivalence with social order. Ambivalence thus liberates the critical spirit, and it lies at the heart of many of the disagreements and conflicts among which we live. In our free societies, such attitudes can be entirely compatible with civility. The skill of combining ambivalence with civility did not come easily even to Europeans, however, and was especially difficult to practice in early modern times, when disputes about Christian theology and practice were at their most passionate. It took time before religious tolerance became a standard feature of European societies. In politics, centuries were to pass before we institutionalized the debate between government and opposition as the standard way of conducting public business. First religion and later socialism and nationalism subjected the harmony of European states to severe strains, but the eventual outcome was a societal condition not only remarkably free and tolerant, but also resilient and outstandingly prosperous. As modern European societies became prosperous and technologically inventive, even those who

hated toleration and feared conflict had no alternative but to take notice. Everyone then wanted to understand the "secret" of European power and prosperity.

The basic "secret," one might say, is that modern European states differed from other cultures by the moral practice of individualism, in which the wants and beliefs of individuals are recognized not as disruptive, but as valuable in themselves. Intellectually speaking, individualism led to a revolution in the way in which Europeans thought about the world. The solid realities of traditional societies dissolved into subjective and objective components out of which Europeans could construct a world they found in some degree congenial. It was not at all irrelevant to this kind of pluralism that Europeans were divided into different cultural realms or states, each with its own language and traditions. These "national" variations stimulated each other. Custom, rank, and religion continued to be powerful elements in life, but alongside these universals of human experience something new had emerged: the recognition of difference as having a value of its own. The corresponding tendency at the level of the state was the appearance of sovereign rulers who could repeal laws without having to break them or ignore them. The right to repeal a law (whatever might be understood as "law" in this context) was essential in facilitating an unbroken moral legitimacy over the generations. The rule of law was thus to be distinguished from the commands of any ruler disposing of despotic powers; law must, of course, be distinguished from any sort of command, for law is not something we obey, but something to which we conform. Slaves may have to obey, but subjects conform to a law.

How did this new social and moral world differ from that of other cultures? The answer lies in the fact that in other cultures, custom and religion (along with the usual admixture of human caprice) determined the manner of life, subject to local variations. But whatever these variations, people in non-European societies lived according to what was believed to be the One Right Order of life, which supplied for each individual both a social location and a corresponding set of duties and expectations. Such orders in the most notably elaborated civilizations were the Hindu caste system, the Muslim sharia, and the hierarchies of the Middle Kingdom. And the basic point about these systems and of every other, down to tribal cultures, was that those living in such a world regarded their customs as the one right way of life. A consequence of this belief was a remarkable lack of curiosity about how other peoples lived. Lack of curiosity resulted from the belief that one need not take an interest in "error." Other ways of life were simply wrong! In fact, of course, most people in earlier times knew virtually nothing about the rest of the world. This contrast became one of the most conspicuous differences between European individualism and other cultures' traditional practices. Europeans were from an early period profoundly interested in how others lived, just as they were fascinated by other individuals' character. Shakespeare's creations—irresolutes such as Hamlet, lovers such as Romeo—expressed an attitude that corresponded to Montaigne's reflections on the parochialism of our judgments about how others live.

An interest in other ways of life fed the skepticism inseparable from the emergence of our individualist world. In this new world, even truth is subject to the bumps and bruises of competition. One typical figure was the poet John Milton, who believed that competition brought forth truth and challenged the doctrine of divorce on the basis of affirming the virtue of charity. In a world of printed books, the number of truths competing for the prize of recognition constantly multiplied. It was obvious from the very beginning, of course, that individualism causes conflict, and the same instinct that generates a dream of peaceful uniformity that ruled every other culture was also to be found in Europe. The price of such a dream is, of course, arbitrariness and repression. The passion for uniformity appeared in the early modern belief among European rulers that whatever other variations might be recognized, no state could be stable without a universal religious confession. It has taken a long time for this version of a basic homogeneity of belief to sink to the level of an abandoned superstition, but new forms of the one right order of belief keep appearing. They inspired, of course, the totalitarian projects of the previous century.

Here, then, in sixteenth-century Europe a quite new and remarkable moral practice appeared, and in a philosophically sophisticated civilization such as our own, it was soon theorized in a variety of different ways. In political thought, Hobbes, Locke, and Montesquieu were notable contributors to such understanding. Montesquieu was in a sense the Aristotle of modern political thought in that he supplied a taxonomy that recognizes the basic features of this new modernity. He recognized in most non-European states a form of rule based on fear, which he called “despotism.” He also distinguished a heroic classical model of rule, based on virtue, something no longer possible for Europeans. This model was that of a republic. Modern Europe, however, had its own distinctive form. It was essentially monarchical, a condition in which people living under a rule of law enjoyed the citizenly freedom of personal security against the caprice of civil power. This security was part of what we understood by “freedom.” Montesquieu identified the essence of the moral life practiced in monarchies as “honor,” a term associated with high rank, but which we may understand as a recognition of individualism. In other words, the individualist as moral agent was concerned not only with the question of whether such-and-such an act was right or wrong, but also with what the act might reveal about his own character. In illustration, Montesquieu cited the case of the viscount of Orte, who was in charge of Bayonne when, after the massacre of St. Bartholemew in 1572, Charles IX ordered him to kill the Huguenots of the city. Orte refused, replying that his army did not consist of executioners. The right thing was to obey the king, the wrong thing was to massacre innocent people. In other words, individualism introduced into human life a significant moral complexity that was distinct from the custom and religion that determined the right thing in other cultures. Max Weber referred to one aspect of this complex movement of things as the “Protestant work ethic.”

The Autonomy of Robinson Crusoe

By the eighteenth century, the modern world had settled down, and religious conflict had become marginal in many areas, but the meaning of individualism remained a central preoccupation among Europeans. One of its great myths was the story of Robinson Crusoe as a remarkably self-sufficient individual creating his own world from scratch. Ernest Gellner identifies Crusoe with Descartes, who was in a sense the founder of modern philosophy and points out that other cultures could not generate a Crusoe figure. A Hindu Brahmin, for example, could not live a proper life as a Crusoe figure without the services of members of other castes, and similar forms of social dependence exist in most cultures. Indeed, even a Roman Catholic Crusoe, lacking a priest to administer the sacraments, would have a serious problem. Crusoe is a myth, of course, because he is not natural man in a wilderness, but a skilled creature generated by a culture with abundant knowledge and access to many artifacts contained in the vessel on which he was wrecked. But here is a heroic image of European man in all his individual resourcefulness, exhibiting dramatically the self- sufficiency of Europeans. To be an individualist in this sense meant that social relations (family, friends, associates, and so forth) were chosen rather than kin determined and were all the stronger for that. Crusoe's great adventure was that of a solitary, but he was certainly not a social atom, and, like Europeans in general, he was nested or embedded not only in a cultures, but normally in a social world of family, friends, and associates of many kinds.

The moral point of Crusoe lies in his independence of mind, and it reflects the fact that freedom in European societies is not an ideal or a mere value, but an element in these societies' practical life. It is the condition in which many of them live their lives. Hilaire Belloc claimed that Christianity had abolished slavery, and although both the acts and the opinions of some Christians over a long period were ambivalent on this question, one can see what he means. The barbarian kingdoms that arose out of the collapse of the Western Empire had slaves, but by the time we enter the modern world, slavery has gone. And at the end of the eighteenth century again, English reformers abolished the slavery that had arisen as an opportunistic and profitable trade. In the United States, an even more intractable form of slavery was painfully abolished through a civil war. The point is not only that Europeans themselves want to be free to manage their own lives according to their own judgments, but that they also have a taste for dealing with other people on the same terms.

This preference poses a moral problem because virtue is generally understood as a moral agent's subordination of his own desires to whatever is good for others. Each person's virtues in a traditional society, for example, are social because complementarity is the basis of such communities. To be "social" is to be part of a world of mutual dependence. But how are we to understand individualist societies in which each individual is seeking to advance his own interests? Such individuals would seem to be competitive or, in modern jargon, to be playing a zero-sum game. Abstractly (but not realistically), every gain to X is a loss to Y. Such a nexus has caused capitalism to be identified with selfishness. This identification continues to haunt our world.

The issue has deep roots in moral thought. For more than a century before Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations,* philosophers and theologians had boldly toyed with the idea that a modern commercial society might in practice be possible on the basis of little virtue or, indeed, no virtue at all. It might be possible to have a tolerable society sustained by a collection of hypocrites doing the right thing merely because they feared punishment or loss of reputation. This line of thought in one sense culminated in Mandeville's satirical *Fable of the Bees,* in which prosperity was a function of vices such as vanity, self-indulgence, and legal quibbling. The traditional identification of goodness with the ideal society seemed to have been lost. "Morality" at its most demanding seemed directly contradictory to peace and prosperity. Commercial societies such as that of England seemed almost to find themselves in the uncomfortable position of resting on vice. This problem found one important resolution in a canonical statement by Adam Smith: a man intending his own gain, Smith wrote, "is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor," he adds significantly, "is it always the worse for society that it was no part of it. . . . I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good" ([1776] 1993, 291–93). The deep wisdom of that last remark must be clearly recognized. The point is that in a sense each person is an infallible judge of his or her own interests. We cannot, of course, exclude the ubiquity of human folly, but the point is that no outsider has as good a grasp of my interests as I do. But what does it mean to support "the public good"? Heads get broken and societies collapse from disagreement on that question.

Smith's famous remark is, then, a kind of revolution in moral sensibility. Something previously dismissed as a kind of vice was being admitted to a better class of moral standing. It was becoming clear that alongside the state, a legal order, and the broader thing called "society," a new and independent structure of things was coming into being, which we now call an "economy." It was based on production and consumption, and it had its own laws and processes as well as its own moral structure. A framework of social interdependence had been replaced by a dynamic division of labor that combined competitiveness with its own kind of complementarity. One enormous benefit was the generation of prosperity, yet commercial societies could never quite break free entirely from negative images. Christians worried about the idolatry of worshipping money—Mammon rather than God. Collectivists yearning for peace and uniformity pointed to the problems inseparable from freedom. Hostile images of what later came to be called "capitalism" soon generated a never-ceasing stream of proposals to replace the supposedly chaotic and selfish interests of individuals by central direction in the interests of all.

The New Context of Individuality

Individualism emerged unmistakably at the beginning of the modern world, and by the eighteenth century it was in its heyday. Let us now consider its fate in our

post-1945 world. But before we revert to Luther's interesting formula, let me make a general point regarding something that has changed everything.

The moral and political issues raised in governing a modern European state have been complicated by the appearance of a new consideration: the social. Europeans, already in love with technology, began to think of society itself as a machine that might possibly become the object of managed improvement. Such a project merged with the millennial passions of Christianity, and the outcome was the project of social transformation. Needless to say, the project took many forms, but nearly all of them were collectivist. The aim was to turn an association into a community, with special definitions of both those terms. "Association" results from people's choosing to be together. It depends on will, whereas in a true "community" each person finds his identity in the good of the whole. Public policy in our time came increasingly to be judged in the light of its supposed consequences for bringing about a better society. The hope was that politicians would bring a bit of decent benevolence to the profit- driven calculations of economic enterprise. Such thinking revealed a remarkable simplicity of mind, but it was designed for simple people. The addition of democracy to the constitutional practices of European states gave this idea a great boost, for what else would the people want, politicians often thought, if not a better—notionally a more equal—society?

This passion for a better society, cultivated in churches, universities, non-governmental organizations, and many other places, was not seriously compromised by the murderous careers of Nazis and fascists. Even the collapse of central direction in the USSR, long loved by intellectuals for its socially improving intentions, did not discourage people from thinking that there must be a better way of managing our world than letting individuals seek their own betterment. European states, however successful, prosperous, tolerant, and peace loving, could never escape some variant of the hostile image of capitalism classically expressed by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*. Hence, public policy bifurcated: political wisdom sought to sustain a state whose business consisted of providing such essentials as law and order, national security, the suppression of corruption, and the control of power, while the quest for a shadowy "social justice" justified policymakers' efforts to advance social equality. In recent times, rulers even find themselves being seduced by a whole new technology that purports to reveal the secrets of public happiness. Let us return, however, to Luther's interesting formula.

One version of the "law" from which we have been released is certainly that of personal commitment, above all in the form of marrying and creating families. Men and women do indeed often live together, and sometimes they have children, but fewer get married. It is as if all those bold "experiments in living" that surfaced in Bohemian circles early in the twentieth century—trial marriages, for example—have become for many the wisdom of the moment. In this area, two well-known developments are striking. The first is the liberation of sexual morality from the many conventions that even individualist societies had retained. Sex is so powerful a drive that all societies seek to harness it to desirable ends, such as stability and the creation of new generations. Contemporary Europe has marginalized these conventions, and

stability and demography have suffered accordingly. Worse, perhaps, the common identification of morality itself with sexual mores has diffused a widespread opinion that all moral principles are merely a matter of taste.

The decline of serious commitment is also, of course, an enfeeblement of identity because the individualist of past times found his reality in his identification with family, disinterested pursuits, and the nation to which he belonged. Commitment has eroded as a result of subterranean shifts in moral sentiment, but not from them alone. For in our time, the West's marvelous technological inventiveness has tipped us over into a form of life in which convenience trumps integrity. Punctuality is less pressing when one can rearrange matters by a quick message on the cell phone. Sex need no longer threaten us with procreation. Letters to friends have often given way to email messages, which reflect the impulses of the fingers rather more than the considered judgment of the mind. I generalize, of course, and we must remember that any Western society contains layers of sentiments and practices, some dating from quite remote pasts. These layers are what make us so interesting. The respectability cherished a century ago, for example, has now become an object of mockery—but not to everybody.

Our time has thus been a graveyard of inherited conventions. These now defunct conventions have been the "law" from which, in Luther's formula, we were released. Can we discover, then, a "higher dutifulness" into which we have evolved? I think we can. It is, I suggest, an admiration of compassionate feelings and of the virtue of benevolence toward abstract classes of people. We believe in a duty to respond to others' unsatisfied needs. The remarkable thing about this moral concern is that it has also become the most powerful *political* project of our time. It is now a generalized claim on the resources of both individuals and states, and these resources themselves reduce, of course, to the resources of individuals (and corporations) because states have no resources of their own. That junction of moral approval and political conviction resembles the early modern belief that the unity of a state required agreement on a single religious confession. Here in the idea of global benevolence is a moral sentiment that has progressed far beyond the judgment of Europeans themselves and found its most authoritative statement in universal declarations of rights, but it takes many forms. Feats of athletic derring-do, for example, are now often performed as incentives for sponsors to contribute to some deserving cause. Those who want to "make a difference" are thinking of the needy, and those keen to "give something back to society" seek to put their money or their energies behind some form of redistribution. We all are born, as it were, debtors to society, and we ought to work on repaying that debt. Business corporations are admired if they exhibit "social responsibility" by devoting some of their profits to good causes rather than to the shareholders who have staked them.

A standard form of politicomoral reproach has long been to condemn those who "put profit before people." In the higher reaches of philosophy, normative thinkers follow John Rawls in identifying justice with "fairness," an ideal nonetheless interesting because the concept of fairness can hardly be translated into any other language. The

grand ideal of social policy turns out to be to maximize the equal consumption of goods and services without weakening the regrettable need to give an incentive to the self-interested, the workers and the entrepreneurs who must keep prosperity ticking. In an ideal society, we all would be egalitarians rather than profit maximizers. A whole new social sector has grown up composed of nongovernmental organizations devoted to charitable aid, both in the society itself and in the more impoverished parts of the world. These organizations in turn have extensive links with the broad international drive toward global equalization of consumption, and states act as good global citizens in conforming to a great variety of international commitments to implement human rights and aid the victims of bad fortune. Another large element of this abstract benevolence consists in the equal distribution of social respect. Both governments and private corporations employ officials to discourage and often to punish a variety of unsound responses to women, homosexuals, ethic immigrants, the disabled, and many other classes of persons.

An ethic of abstract benevolence is obviously in need of a correlate: To whom must one be benevolent? The condition that philosophers long considered as the problem of the poor has been elaborated into terms such as *deprived*, *underprivileged*, *the unfortunate*, and, more generally, *the oppressed*, but the key term today has come to be *vulnerability*. There is a case for regarding feminists as the pioneers of this new move: women were vulnerable in a variety of ways—to violence, oppression, glass ceilings, sexual harassment, and no doubt other evils yet to be formulated. The feminist slogan that "the personal is the political" came to mean that personal security for women could be achieved only by state intervention. Women thus sought to escape the uncertainties of family protection by moving into the legally determined protections of the state. Vulnerability turned out to be a useful category, and other groups in society were soon claiming recognition as vulnerable—ethnic newcomers, homosexuals, transsexuals, children, problem families, drug users, old people, those with learning difficulties, the disabled, and so on.

Vulnerability also turned out to have the useful property of multiplying vulnerable classes of people. Thus, girls were thought to be disadvantaged at school but rapidly came to excel at examinations, thereby creating a new class of the vulnerable in the form of poorly performing boys, especially if working class. Victims of burglary were, as victims, evidently vulnerable and were commonly offered counseling by the police. The real, society-transforming character of this evolution of moral sentiments, however, is revealed in the fact that the burglars themselves, especially if young, were also thought to have been "vulnerable." Society had failed them. It is remarkably difficult to escape classification as vulnerable.

The Paradoxes of Contemporary Moral Sentiment

That victimizers are themselves victims might well alert us that this new moral world is a tangle of contradictions. Collective benevolence as we have been considering it

may well seem to announce a society far kinder and gentler than that of a couple of generations ago. Out goes hanging and flogging, in comes counseling and "rehab," as it were. Physical pain, execution, indigence, derision, and lack of respect are just a few of the painful experiences we have now abolished. Are we therefore nicer people? Alas, we are not. For why are all these vulnerable people so vulnerable? They are because society is dominated by racists, sexists, pedophiles, exploiters, bullies, and many others whose destructive passions can be tempered and suppressed only by the enlightened elite who manage the state. In other words, the recessive side of this explosion of compassion is an insistence on our fellow citizens' nastiness.

A further paradox seems to me even more striking. It arises from those hostile images of "capitalism" (also known as a free society) that have been a constant expression of European critical self-understanding. No matter how much Western states have exceeded all others in tolerance and prosperity, the dream of an ideal society goes on revitalizing the idea of how awful we are. Commercial society, as represented in this image, is composed of social atoms—man alienated from man. Capitalism is a rat race in which "greed is good" and each man's hand is at war against every other's. Yet the history of European states in the past few centuries has been virtually the opposite of this representation. These states have exhibited a social cohesion so remarkable that nothing has matched them. Perhaps the most dramatic instance of this cohesion occurred in 1914 when an outburst of patriotic feeling effortlessly mobilized Europeans in support of their national states. We may perhaps regret that it was the alarms of war that dramatized this togetherness, but the fact itself leaves for dead any idea that freedom divides people from each other. Far from falling apart in a crisis, each of these states exhibited a cohesion seldom seen previously. In fact, "capitalism" and community go well together, even if that community is not the abstract kind that Communist ideologists so fatally tried to institute.

The hostile image of Western societies is thus false. But what makes this paradoxical? The answer is to be found in the character of contemporary Western societies. They are marked, as we have seen, by a notable collapse of commitment. Men and women do of course follow their instincts and often set up house together; much less frequently they marry each other. A similar lack of commitment relates individuals to the states in which they live. On the contrary, many Westerners, in their detachment from their own "natural allegiances," often reject their governments' foreign policies, as some remarkable Americans did in believing after September 11, 2001, that "we had it coming." Here, then, is a posture of abstract virtue that congratulates itself on being a rational transcendence of supposedly "uncritical" allegiances.

One notable consequence of this Western collapse of commitment in personal areas is that increasing numbers of individuals live alone. They are sometimes called, I believe, "singletons." And the reason for this atomized condition is not the commercial force of capitalism, but the eroding effect of state welfare benefits on the material conditions that sustained family loyalty in earlier generations. The paradox is, then, that the capitalism of commercial societies exhibited a remarkable social cohesion and

that the growth of the welfare state itself has caused a collapse into atomism. No less remarkable is that democratic politicians who "shower welfare" on their citizens are despised as bribing pygmies, whereas the politicians of earlier times (when governments supplied nothing of this sort) had no trouble in commanding popular respect.

Another point seldom recognized in the hostile images of European individualism is that the liberating character of Western freedom results from its recognition of the legitimacy both of autonomous individuals and of independent institutions, and the result has been a remarkable explosion of disinterested pursuits.

A "disinterested pursuit" springs not from self-interest, but from a detached concern with some activity done for its own sake. The classic example of this passion for the disinterested was the emergence of universities from the twelfth century onward, but the same disinterested passion appears in the development and institutionalization of sport and games in the West, in the charitable endeavors of the rich in creating everything from homes for the poor to the grand collections of art galleries and museums, in the efflorescence of hobbies and inventiveness that has marked our civilization, in the integrity of our legal arrangements, and in much else.

From this point of view, the most alarming feature of our times is that the very concept of "disinterestedness" has almost disappeared from the language. Our world wants a bang from every buck. The point of anything valuable is to exploit it for some contemporary benefit, a kind of greed for advantage that is remarkably destructive of the free and disinterested creativity that made European modernity the exemplar of what it is to be civilized. In a world of creeping utilitarianism, everything we do must have some practical point. Indeed, such is the practical bias in our thought that in asking the question, "Why did people do X?" the clinching answer always takes the form of revealing that some practical interest was being pursued. The result is that every time disinterestedness creates something great—from the rules of cricket to the cultivation of mathematics—states (and sometimes corporations) step in to try to control and direct it. "Interests" have a positive lust to control "the disinterested," but even worse is that they even deny its reality. As F. A. Hayek and his comrades responded to "the crisis of their time," so we must respond to the special circumstances of ours. And among the many candidates for being thus described—collectivism, out-of-control compassion, quantitative easing, and so much else—I would specify the destruction of disinterestedness as the heart of the matter.

What, in so complex a world, has become of Robinson Crusoe, the archetypal individualist whose whole life was an exploration of what could be made of nature and of his own sentiments? Crusoe figures still exist, of course, but our conception of society has changed radically. Eighteenth-century Europe consisted of states understood as associations of independent individuals. Twenty-first-century Europe can be recognized only as an association of vulnerable people in need of help and guidance. But in order to manage their own vulnerability, these people have been equipped with a set of unconditional entitlements or rights. In *Ancient Law* (1861, chap. IX), Sir Henry Sumner Maine famously characterized the emergence of the modern world as a move away from status

toward contract.[1] Contract is essentially conditional; status is not. An association of people equipped with rights or entitlements is therefore a society in which individuals are increasingly assigned a status. In welfare theory, entitlements are things owed to those who cannot help themselves—the disabled, for example. A status that brings an entitlement to assistance—to unconditional medical help, for example, or to support for unemployment—is a release from the ordinary obligations individuals have always had to manage on their own account. It is no doubt a benefit for rather passive people to be relieved of these strivings, but these individuals have no control over their substance. They are at the mercy of their governmental masters. And dependence beyond the protection all governments should provide is, of course, an erosion of freedom.

We therefore arrive at a last paradox: that the conditional and contractual relations associated with capitalism directly stimulate social association, whereas the unconditional status of entitlements does precisely the opposite. We are wary of others, including families, because they make claims on us. Needing others less, we spend our lives attending to our own feelings. It might seem as if this new welfarist world of entitlements is a triumph of individualism. People, relieved at last of some of the need for thrift and prudence by the provision of general welfare, can use their resources (or rather the pocket money left to them after taxes) in doing whatever they might choose. An explosion of free choice at last? Alas, it is not, because here we encounter the ultimate confusion in understanding individualism. In our contemporary world, choice certainly abounds, but it is a choice of the trivia, disconnected from the moral commitments of earlier times, the commitments that alone made individual choice the essence of freedom. Instead of responding to rational desires about the management of life, contemporary choice degenerates into a twitch responding to the hedonistic beckonings of impulse.

The glamour of individualism to outsiders came from its prosperity and its freedom from external controls—its autonomy. This was, however, a surface sustained by subterranean virtues such as courage, integrity, and commitment. A moral agent's autonomy now seems to be shaded by a relentless concern with mere life, honor shaded by a willingness to fall in with guidance about "lifestyle," and responsibility shaded by a disposition to interpret human beings as creatures of social circumstance. Virtues, by redescription, can turn into vices, and vices into virtues. People always vary greatly, and there is, of course, a great deal of ruin in a nation. In the eighteenth century, however, there was also a power of regeneration. Is there still?

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1. The growth of the idea of entitlements is a large subject in itself. British members of Parliament in recent times notoriously thought themselves "entitled" to every kind of "expense" arising from their being in London. Several generations back, however, members of Parliament were not paid at all. The point about rights and entitlements is that they are essentially consumerist, and therefore integrity and other essentials of the moral life disappear because rights constitute an unconditionally beneficial rule. Similar problems with malefactors claiming "I never broke the rules" have arisen in Canada, which had the interesting problem of translating the term *entitlement* into French. The Gomery Commission came up with *la culture du tout m'est du* or "the culture of everything is mine by right" or "everything is owed to me." See Cooper 2010.

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