

WHAT MORE CAN BE SAID ABOUT INDIVIDUALISM? It has been the subject of intense analysis and debate for a very long time. Indeed, individualism has been the topic of literally hundreds of volumes in political philosophy, social theory, moral psychology, and intellectual history. So what more can be added at this point?

At the start of the twenty-first century, we are witnesses to massive changes in the political economy of the global order. The power of new communications technologies, the expansion of market economies, the weakening of nation-states along with the rise of new nationalisms, and the re-emergence of international religious conflict and violence—together form a backdrop for questions about the rights and autonomy of the individual in relation to the need for solidarity around commonly-held moral goods.

These questions are relevant everywhere in the world today and no less so in contemporary America where the love for individual freedom has translated into a powerful, if not dominant, ideology. Over generations, this ideology has evolved with a mixed legacy: It has been both the foundation for the expansion of political freedoms for the marginal and the dispossessed and the justification for extreme self-indulgence, narcissism, and political disaffection. It has allowed for the very best and the very worst in American culture. Most people recognize the ambivalent quality of individualism in America.

While most of us would agree that self-absorption and an exclusive focus on one's own needs and desires is not only unhealthy but morally problematic, we would also agree that there is something to be affirmed and cultivated in the individual that we would do well not to lose sight of. One challenge we face lies in finding out how to move between these views, such that we affirm what is good in both the individual and the communities in which he or she takes part. Another challenge lies in thinking through what roles the institutions of contemporary society do (and, then, should) play in the development or well-being of these communities and the individuals that compose them. For example, what role does and should the government play in the lives of individuals? What

connection is there between groups—for example, civic organizations—and the individual? Is religion an area of culture that preserves diversity but does so at the expense of individuals? Or, are religious communities able to provide a rich environment for the cultivation of an individual's character?

This issue explores these questions, attempting to move beyond, on the one hand, the wholesale rejection of individualism as mere selfishness, and, on the other hand, the uncritical exhaltation of the individual as the pinnacle of our hopes. The relations between the individual and the groups to which he or she belongs are not new, but contemporary culture shapes these relations in unique ways, ways that suggest it is time to revisit these important questions.

— T. H. R.