

A Case for Individualism: From Des Moines to Durkheim

David R. Karp

The Mississippi River flooded from St. Cloud, Minnesota to St. James, Louisiana in the stormy summer of 1993. In Des Moines, Iowa, flood waters of the tributary Raccoon River merged with the potable water supply, and faucets ran with unfiltered, undrinkable brown water. The city closed the water mains, and the pipes ran dry. Ironically, citizens who had to paddle from home to home were faced with a drought. Days passed as tanker trucks delivered clean water to long lines of mud-caked folks holding plastic jugs. As the flood plains began to dry, municipal workers set to work restoring the clean water supply. When they reopened the main valves, fresh water slowly trickled throughout the waterworks.

Just when the worst of the disaster seemed to be over, water supply officials realized the town was suddenly faced with a social dilemma. Although clean water was now available, if people turned on their taps before the entire system was filled, the pressure would not build sufficiently to restore critical municipal services (such as fire-fighting capacities). Thus after withstanding the worst flooding in this century, people were asked to sacrifice yet a little more for the sake of the community.

While no single individual could diminish the water supply enough to reduce pressure, the additive effects of many turning on their taps at once could reduce it measurably. All hoped that others would restrain themselves, while each longed for a shower. Rather quickly, the self-interest of some overwhelmed the collective interest. A newspaper headline soon followed: "Flood Victims Riled as Cheat-

ers Tap Into Water System Too Soon." The story reported that "at first, officials thought they could dissuade citizens—who have been without water for 10 days—by appealing to their altruism." This appeal seemed to work for most, but too many were not intrinsically motivated to cooperate. The water pressure dropped.

In response, the city invited residents to inform on any neighbor seen using the municipal water, threatening to publicly announce the names of those who were turned in. Hundreds responded in this attempt at community shaming. The sanctioning here was normative; cooperation was expected to increase because potential cheaters would not be willing to risk social humiliation. Still, though, the water pressure was not returning quickly enough.

Ultimately, the government turned to directly monitoring water use. Those caught sneaking water had their water valves shut off at the street. Rather than rely on individual compliance or community pressure, the government assumed responsibility for water use.

Clearly, the three deterrent strategies attempted in this example (moral appeals, normative sanctions, state control) differed in cost and intent. Moral appeals were cheap, but they had no teeth, relying solely upon intrinsic motivation. In an individualistic society, how much can we rely on voluntary sacrifices to promote the common good? Normative sanctions required some additional coordination and cost (provision of a phone number, public announcements), but primarily distributed the costs across the community, making it a fairly cheap alternative. These sanctions had more teeth, but still required some social concern: individuals had to care about the social approval of the community to be deterred. Finally, state control had the strongest direct effect by eliminating cheaters' access to water. Yet this solution was very costly. It was entirely up to the city to monitor water use, and to send crews to shut off the water mains of cheaters.

Freedom and Responsibility

The Des Moines officials were faced with the general problem of trying to reconcile individual freedom with social responsibility. Communitarians worry that if left to their own devices, many individuals would not contribute to the collective welfare of society

because in our individualistic society they have failed to develop the necessary moral and civic commitments. Instead, many would pursue only their own interests, hoping to free-ride on the contributions of others. The tragedy, of course, is that the failure to pay attention to collective goods leaves a society of self-interested individuals worse off than if they had been cooperative, for one cannot free-ride when the collective good is not provided.

More broadly, communitarians wonder whether individuals can be entrusted to make the sacrifices necessary to sustain a community, or what we often call civil society. To what extent do community members feel solidarity with one another? How much community pressure must be brought to bear on self-interested individuals to obtain their cooperation? Should we invoke the rule of law? Do we need a new cultural doctrine? Perhaps the central issue for communitarians is how to maintain individual freedom and still provide collective goods. Ideally, individuals will cooperate to overcome the numerous social dilemmas communities face each day: they will voluntarily restrain their water consumption, donate blood, pay the subscription when they listen to public radio, vote to support levies for education, join brigades to pick up litter, mentor at-risk youths, and so on.

These are not purely altruistic acts, for they improve the community of which the individual is a part. Each individual benefits from the provision of a collective good (from restored water, a well-stocked blood bank, good schools, etc.). Thus contribution is not an act of sacrifice from one to another; it is an act of collective cooperation. To provide collective goods voluntarily, we do not need a society of altruists (fortunately!), but we do need a society of cooperators—individuals who are willing to work to provide a good that all can enjoy, but none alone can produce.

To increase cooperation, two obstacles must be overcome. First, individuals must choose to defer immediate gains in favor of long-term benefits. Social conservatives like to emphasize the need for impulse control in order to delay gratification. Good character in the Des Moines flooding example is indicated by the willingness to forego that shower for another day. Thus it is necessary to be able to envision

the long-term benefits of voluntaristic contributions and let that vision serve to restrain immediate temptations.

The second obstacle individuals must overcome is the free-rider problem; individuals must value more highly the collective good (a functional water supply) than the individual good obtained by free-riding on the cooperation of others (that shower). Again, individuals need not become altruists, sacrificing themselves for the benefit of others. They merely, though not inconsequentially, need to recognize their share in the collective good and be willing to cooperate in order to achieve a win/win outcome. Though it need not be purely altruistic, their motivation must indeed be moral, for community members must be able to transcend their individual interests.

The Critique of Individualism

Can people in a society in which the individual takes priority overcome their tendencies toward immediate and self-interested gains? Tocqueville worried that individualism was pernicious in its effect on civic virtues. He wrote in *Democracy in America*,

Individualism is a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow creatures; and to draw apart with his family and his friends, so that, after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself. Egotism originates in blind instinct: individualism proceeds from erroneous judgment more than from depraved feelings; it originates as much in the deficiencies of the mind as in the perversity of the heart. Egotism blights the germ of all virtue: individualism, at first, only saps the virtues of public life; but in the long run it attacks and destroys all others, and is at length absorbed in downright egotism.

Egotism is not the only problem individualism can engender. Often, even those who exhibit concern for the welfare of others are constrained by a narrow focus on individuals that undermines our capacity to envision collective consequences. The Des Moines citizen rhetorically wonders, "What harm could there be in simply taking a shower?" Another example: I frequently ask my students to read a media account of a hospital's decision to perform an expensive operation separating Siamese twins. According to the article, the chance of

survival of one twin was zero (they shared a lung). The other was predicted to have a two percent chance of survival. The article also discusses the possibility of not performing the operation (both twins would die) and spending the money on a vaccination program for children in the community. Based on probabilities, the vaccinations would save hundreds of lives for the same price. I ask my students whether the money (presuming it to be finite, which it surely is) should be spent on the operation or the vaccinations. Routinely, a majority of them vote for the operation. The twins, they argue, are at risk; how could we turn our backs? They do not see that the choice necessarily means turning our backs on those who would die because they were not vaccinated. Nor do they consider that those hundreds will be faced with the same costly medical care in the attempts to save them when their illnesses become acute.

The point here is not to establish a proper moral position, but to illustrate how we routinely fail to consider collective consequences because they are always matters of probability and abstraction. The twins were real; the vaccination program was attached to no human faces, only to an epidemiological statistic. The decision is constrained by the individualistic context within which the problem is defined. Individualism provides neither the cognitive map nor the moral compass to orient individuals toward the common good.

Do we then require a new cultural doctrine? Collectivistic societies like Taiwan or Singapore, in contrast to individualistic societies, prioritize social harmony and the common good while moderating the pursuit of self-interest. Does the solution lie in collectivism? While such a move might at first seem tempting, one must also consider some of the other features of collectivism: restrictive conformity and rigid boundaries between ingroups and outgroups. The Amish, after all, are not known for having fluid mobility between their own society and the larger society around them. And in Japan, as the saying goes, "the nail that sticks up is hammered down." Again we are confronted with the dilemma of protecting individual freedom while providing collective goods. Must we choose between the two, tolerating "tragedies of the commons" in order to protect freedom or, alternatively, "sacrificing individuals at the altar of the public good?"

Dilemma: Balancing Individualism and Solidarity

Emile Durkheim suggested that we need not choose between freedom and the common good, nor do we need to compromise. It is possible, he wrote, both to fully embrace individual freedom and to promote the common good. But before we turn to the solution he proposed, it will first be helpful to examine a similar argument that Durkheim *rejected*, and to briefly examine the communitarian framework within which Durkheim worked.

Classical liberals essentially deny that the individual-freedom/common-good dilemma exists. They claim that the collective goods flow naturally, if accidentally, from the pursuit of self-interest. Durkheim rejected this assertion. (In the Des Moines example, it is clear that Durkheim was right.) Durkheim's 1914 essay, "The Dualism of Human Nature and Its Social Conditions," speaks to the inevitable conflict between the individual and society:

Society has its own nature, and consequently, its requirements are quite different from those of our nature as individuals: the interests of the whole are not necessarily those of the part. Therefore, society cannot be formed or maintained without our being required to make perpetual and costly sacrifices. Because society surpasses us, it obliges us to surpass ourselves; and to surpass itself, a being must, to some degree, depart from its nature—a departure that does not take place without causing more or less painful tensions.

Acknowledging this tension, Durkheim was equally concerned about capitulation to the extremes of either individualism or collectivism. According to Durkheim, excessive collectivism leads to the suppression of rights. His activism during the Dreyfus Affair, in which he vigorously protested the arbitrary repressiveness of the French state toward the progressive Dreyfus, establishes his liberal credentials. At the other extreme, excessive individualism was described by Durkheim as fundamentally and reprehensibly egoistic. Modern society has promoted egoistic individualism, he argued, by implicitly forcing individuals to dissociate from traditional religion, institutional ethics, and other long-standing practices and beliefs. Thus, because of his concern with the need to balance individual liberties and social responsibilities, Durkheim may be considered an early communitarian.

Another communitarian feature of Durkheim is the primacy he gave to "social facts," which refer to those features of the social landscape that exist independently of particular individuals. Various social institutions, laws, norms, and values persist even as the members of a community change. Although particular individuals may choose not to marry or to divorce, marriage as an institution persists (and has cultural bearing and influence even on singles and divorcees). Durkheim believed that a society cannot be understood without paying close attention to these social facts. He did not believe that individuals are completely autonomous, free to make decisions without regard to the context within which those decisions are defined. Individualism, for example, partially determined how my students viewed the surgery decision. Their compassion was constrained by immediacy and individual context, but could not extend to the looming human consequences of inefficient or unjust distributions of scarce resources.

As a communitarian, Durkheim was deeply concerned with the forces that bind individuals together in solidarity, the forces that would make voluntary cooperation amenable to the Des Moines citizens. What is most problematic to solidarity in a complex, modern society is, according to Durkheim, the increasing division of labor. In a simpler society in which social roles are few in number, solidarity can be achieved by an implicit shared purpose and doing similar things together. In such a society, we cooperate to provide collective goods because we so easily identify our interests with those of similar, almost interchangeable, others.

But as social roles become more varied, the differentiation of individuals and their experiences diminishes their solidarity. It becomes increasingly difficult to relate to the role of another when the other's everyday existence is so different from one's own as to be unimaginable. It becomes hard to believe that others will share one's values or aspirations. Why should the tax attorney cooperate with the taxidermist? Why would he trust that she will not free-ride on the Des Moines water supply? As a result of this social differentiation, individualism waxes and solidarity wanes.

Solution: Seeing the Universal in the Individual

The answer to the puzzle for Durkheim lies within the very puzzle itself. If modernity maximizes individual differences, then the common experience of individuality can bring us together. In his essay "Individualism and the Intellectuals," Durkheim wrote:

As a result of a more developed division of labor, each mind finds itself oriented to a different point on the horizon, reflecting a different aspect of the world, and consequently the contents of consciousness differ from one person to another. Thus, we make our way, little by little, toward a state, nearly achieved as of now, where the members of a single social group will have nothing in common among themselves except their humanity, except the constitutive attributes of the human person in general. This idea of the human person, given different nuances according to the diversity of national temperaments, is therefore the only idea which would be retained, unalterable and impersonal, above the changing torrent of individual opinions.... Consequently, nothing remains which men can love and honor in common if not man himself. That is how man has become a god for man and why he can no longer create other gods without lying to himself. And since each of us incarnates something of humanity, each individual consciousness contains something divine and thus finds itself marked with a character which renders it sacred and inviolable to others. Therein lies all individualism; and that is what makes it a necessary doctrine.

For Durkheim, as we become increasingly unique as individuals, we must become increasingly aware of the pricelessness of individual awareness. Individualism is not what divides us, but is the only remaining doctrine that can bind us together for cooperative purposes. There is great irony in identifying that which has been criticized for driving us apart as the linchpin of our solidarity. Of course, Durkheim's revision of individualism refers to more than egoism, and he was aware of this. "Without doubt, it can happen that individualism is practiced in a completely different spirit. Some use it for their personal ends, as a means of disguising their egoism and of more easily escaping their duties to society."

Thus, Durkheim was referring to something other than selfishness in his moral vision of individualism. He was referring to the ideal of the individual that is at the center of liberalism: that the individual is

sacred and must be protected, usually through the mechanism of rights. Durkheim believed this deep respect for the individual is vitally linked to sympathy (that favorite sentiment of the Scottish moralists), which is an affective bridge between oneself and the welfare of others.

Now, the only thing necessary for a society to be coherent is that its members have their eyes fixed on the same goal, concur in the same faith. But it is in no way necessary that the object of this common faith be unrelated to individual natures. After all, individualism thus extended is the glorification not of the self but of the individual in general. It springs not from egoism but from sympathy for all that is human, a broader pity for all sufferings, for all human miseries, a more ardent need to combat them and mitigate them, a greater thirst for justice. Is there not herein what is needed to place all men of good will in communion?

By acknowledging the dignity of all community members, the Des Moines citizen accords each the right not to cooperate, but this is coupled with the belief that one should because each citizen is expected to take seriously the needs and interests of others. Certainly Durkheim was promoting an idealized version of individualism; an ideal that even he recognized is often unrealized. He agreed that individualism can lead, as Tocqueville argued, to egoism. But Durkheim did not consider individualism an ideal or value that individuals can adopt at will, selectively choosing its positive or negative traits. Rather, he viewed individualism as a "collective representation," a nonmaterial social fact that transcends individuals and structures their social belief system. Its influence is comprehensive, if potentially contradictory in its effects. To grasp its underlying positive effect, individualism cannot be properly understood through the narrow lens of individualism itself—which points only to autonomy and isolation—but must be understood in communitarian terms.

Durkheim implied that we cannot find solidarity in modern democratic society without individualism. Individualism and solidarity should not necessarily be constructed as opposites. In a complex division of labor, individuals are interdependent, each making a unique contribution to society. Their experiences, attitudes, and beliefs are influenced by their positions in the social order. In this way,

they are embedded and constrained. Yet the uniqueness of positions fosters autonomous self-identities. For Durkheim, the doctrine of individualism endorses the protection of individual rights while providing an ideology of respect for all individuals that transcends ingroup boundaries, creating solidarity amidst diversity. Although the Des Moines citizens may not know one another and may not be able to effectively imagine all of the attitudes, beliefs, and values of one another, they can still cooperate if they believe in the inherent worth of these anonymous others. This faith, grounded in the doctrine of individualism, is sufficient to motivate cooperation because they cannot justify exploiting these others for their own selfish gains.

Thus, in the end, Durkheim's communitarianism stems from his equal concerns for protecting freedom and providing collective goods. Neither is sufficient alone, yet there is clearly tension between them. Durkheim's reconciliation requires a full embrace of his concept of the individual; an optimistic portrait of the individual's moral promise. Because the modern individual is no longer subsumed by collective identities, it is necessary to find an alternative mechanism of solidarity. For Durkheim, the first step is the active protection of rights. This creed is the precondition for a sympathy that can transcend ingroup boundaries. Thus, Durkheim argued that individualism is not merely inevitable, but necessary for communitarian self-transcendence.

Durkheim's account provides an explanation for why so many did not free-ride in Des Moines. After all, in an individualistic society, it is all too easy to rationalize noncooperation (What harm could one shower cause? I'm sure others will take showers, too. I *deserve* this shower after all the hardship I have suffered. No one will notice. No one will care—and so on). And our easy rationalizations undermine the social compact that ensures freedom, but expects responsible action. But the fact that most of the citizens of Des Moines were "riled" by the cheaters speaks poignantly to their own voluntary commitment. The citizens who contributed to the collective good did so because of their commitment to individual freedom and their belief that, when pressed, most individuals will consider the welfare of others (even unknown and quite different others) and act accordingly.

Necessary, But Sufficient?

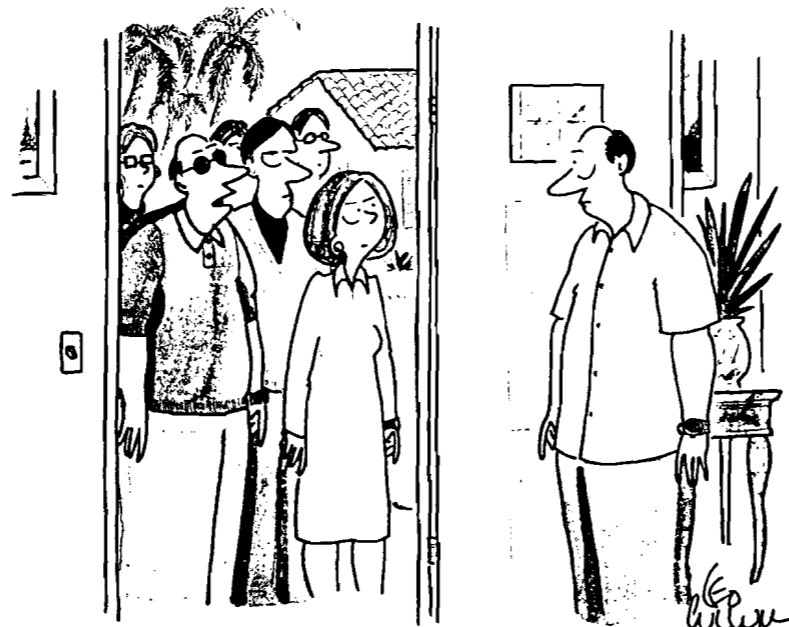
Is Durkheim's doctrine of individualism enough? So far Durkheim counters Tocqueville's argument that individualism necessarily "saps the virtues of public life." But can individualism also provide the moral framework within which communitarian decision making can occur? Here, it appears that the doctrine of individualism falls short. While it may successfully invoke the dignity and rights of the individual in its efforts to spur collective action, it tends to limit the focus to individuals, forgetting collective outcomes. There is no simple solution when future collective goods are an abstraction (such as a water supply reducing fire risk or vaccinations reducing future disease) and immediate individual costs are personal and concrete (such as an empty five gallon jug or foregoing a critical operation)—even when the collective good is clearly desirable to all concerned. Although most people restrained their water consumption in Des Moines, enough people did not so that the restoration of services was seriously impaired.

Although Durkheim argued that individualism is vital for modern solidarity, its atomizing tendencies do tend to undermine the provision of collective goods. Durkheim was only able to hint at a solution to this problem. In *Moral Education*, he argued that respect for the individual, sympathy for others, cooperative values, and collective action that entails the sublimation of immediate self-interest must all be consciously taught.

There is a whole cluster of mental attitudes that the school should help the child to acquire, not because they are in the interest of this or that regime, but because they are sound and will have the most fortunate influence on the general welfare.... The capacity for containing our inclinations, for restraining ourselves—the ability that we acquire in the school of moral discipline—is the indispensable condition of the emergence of reflective, individual will. The rule, because it teaches us to restrain and master ourselves, is a means of emancipation and of freedom.... Discipline is thus useful, not only in the interests of society and as the indispensable means without which regular cooperation would be impossible, but for the welfare of the individual himself.

We must be explicitly taught to consider collective consequences because individualism implicitly narrows the scope of our concerns.

Moreover, this moral education enables individuals to become cooperative free agents by teaching self-mastery. Like Rousseau, Durkheim argued that true liberty is found by fulfilling communitarian commitments, not by shirking responsibilities. His most innovative contribution is the insight that individualism must remain central to the communitarian perspective in spite of its atomizing tendency and precisely because embracing the concept of the individual can create solidarity in a disparate society.



*"We're from the Neighborhood Watch committee.
We've heard you're wearing a fake Rolex."*

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THE COMMUNITY BOOKSHELF

The Individual and the Community in Early America

Daniel Walker Howe

Barry Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Thought* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press). 416 pp.

Michael Zuckert, *Natural Rights and the New Republicanism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press). 397 pp.

J. David Greenstone, *The Lincoln Persuasion: Remaking American Liberalism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press). 352 pp.

For a long time it seemed indisputable that America was a nation whose constitution and politics were based on the belief that government exists in order to protect the rights of individuals. In recent years, however, a number of historians have undertaken to challenge this conventional wisdom. They have argued that the founders of the American republic were less interested in the rights of individuals than we had supposed, and more concerned with the welfare of the community. Their conclusions, although varying, run something like this: Early Americans were by no means unanimously and simply dedicated to an individualistic philosophy of natural rights. Instead, they were in touch with a multiplicity of political ideas, including some that were strongly communitarian in nature.