

In Defense Of The Individual

Edmund A. Opitz

THE AUTHOR, for nine years a parish minister, formerly directed the conference program for Spiritual Mobilization, and in that capacity held a number of two-day seminars for clergymen and laymen designed to promote a better understanding of the libertarian philosophy. Similar questions recurred at many of these conferences, and experience suggested ways of clearing up certain persistent misunderstandings. The following dialogue is a reconstruction of many conversations. Mr. Opitz is now a member of the staff of the Foundation for Economic Education.

A: From what I have heard of your philosophy, it represents a position of extreme individualism. I disagree with that position; I doubt that the individual has any right to ignore society or other people. I take my stand with the injunction of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, "We are members one of another."

B: I will try to tell you something of our position, and then you can decide whether it represents what you would label "extreme individualism." A word like individualism is not easy to define. It is, in fact, another of those turncoat words whose meaning has become completely inverted. You seem to speak of individualism as a doctrine which presses a man to ignore society. Is that your understanding?

A: That is approximately correct. An individualist is one who insists upon living his own life in his own way; he feels no obligation to help another person, and he tells the rest of the world to go hang.

B: You have laid several ideas on the table as descriptive of the individualist or individualism. I am not sure that they are consistent with one another. Taking them in order, you mentioned first the right to ignore society or other people.

A: Isn't that part of the creed of individualism?

B: It is part of the creed of all free men! It is conceivable, but certainly most uncommon, for a man to want to withdraw from human-

kind and live by himself. In the history of Christianity there are several familiar examples, from the eremites of the Egyptian desert to what might be called communities of solitaries like the modern Carthusians. And there are occasional secular hermits who take themselves off to the woods for private reasons difficult for the rest of us to fathom. If you declare that a man does not have a right to do this — that he has no right to ignore society — then you must believe that those of us who constitute society have a right to use coercion on this reluctant individual to force him to stay. Do you believe that a person who wants to choose other company than ours, as in the case of Thoreau at Walden, should be treated like a soldier A.W.O.L., pursued, brought back in irons, locked up, tried for his defection?

A: No, I didn't mean quite that.

B: But if a man doesn't have a right to ignore society, the ineluctable corollary is that society must enforce its right to frustrate any effort on his part to ignore society.

A: My words were not well chosen. I certainly don't want to be in the position of comparing society to an army in which men are to be held by force if they have a desire

to withdraw. I would aim to encourage men to recognize their obligations to other men.

B: Well, that is quite a different matter. Using coercion to force a man to associate with people raises problems of one kind; using persuasion to help a person perceive his obligations to other people raises issues of another kind. Even when using persuasion one ought not invade another's privacy, but rather ought to respect every man's right to choose his friends, his church, his club, the persons he will admit into his home, the people he will permit to use his machines and premises if he owns a factory, the teachers he selects to educate his children, the doctor he selects when he is ill, and so on. A man is entitled to live the life of his own choosing in accord with his own will and conscience. But he has no right to live at the expense of any other person.

A: That is about what I had in mind; individualism is the doctrine that some men have a right, if it suits their purposes, to live at the expense of others.

B: If that is the common understanding of individualism today, then the word, like liberalism, has undergone a complete change. Individualism once meant the phi-

losophy that each person, regardless of race, creed, or education, has the right to follow the promptings of his own conscience provided only that he allows every other person this same right. This is close to the second definition you offered, "An individualist is one who insists upon living his own life in his own way." But that definition leaves off the important proviso that all other persons be granted the same right.

A: That qualifying clause throws a different light on the matter.

B: Indeed it does. We honor men who have chosen to obey the dictates of their conscience rather than the customary ways of their contemporaries, when they were forced to choose one or the other. To quote St. Peter's words, "We ought to obey God rather than men." Martin Luther said, "No man can command my conscience." When a man is led to conclude that the promptings of his conscience are a closer approximation to the voice of God than the moral maxims of his fellows, then most of us would agree that he ought to follow his own conscience; and this means living his own life in his own way.

But this is completely dissociated from the rest of your definition. A man may both live his own

life and feel a strong obligation to help other people. Not only do some men feel these as compatible obligations, but also they feel them as the same obligation having two phases.

A: Perhaps individualism is the wrong label for what I have in mind. As you define it, the philosophy of individualism doesn't sound bad. I like the idea of every man following his own conscience provided he allows every other man the same right. But even this does not seem to stress sufficiently the social aspect of the person. I think that people fulfill themselves in society, and that you, with your stress on limited government and your analysis of political action, fail to stress the importance of social life.

B: If we do fail to *stress* the importance of social life, it is not because we fail to *recognize* the importance of social life. The limitation of government is not an end in itself; it is the means to an end, and the end is the enrichment of the personal and social life of people. Limiting the scope of government extends the scope of society and enlarges the sphere of creative activity. You remarked that persons find fulfillment in society, and I think your observation a true one. Even those who choose in ma-

turity to be hermits take with them into their solitude the social heritage that has rubbed off on them from their family and community. Society is the seedbed of persons; the person emerges from society as its fulfillment and perfection. Society, then, is a means; the person is the end.

A: You seem to imply that if human beings would only limit government, then the automatic result would be a civilized society with supermen emerging from it. I exaggerate a bit, but would you clarify for me?

B: Limit government among the Andaman Islanders and you won't produce a Dante, a Bach or a saint, not in the present generation, at any rate. What the future holds, no man can say. The quality of personal and social skills which people are able to bring to an association determines the level which individual and social living can reach. The mere limiting of government does not produce skills out of a vacuum immediately. But whatever the potential in people, they will do better with what they have if artificial impediments are not put in their way.

Even among people like ourselves of the West, with a rich social heritage and a comparatively high level of civilization, there is no

escalator carrying us to heights of personal fulfillment. In religious literature, what is called redemption, salvation, or being born again is not an automatic accomplishment; it is something that requires unremitting effort on the part of the individual.

These are matters of primary concern for churchmen and religionists, and some of them are handling these matters very competently. Also, in our time, psychologists are concerning themselves with personal and social problems that pertain to this area. But in spite of the expert ministrations of these people we observe anti-social behavior on the increase, together with widespread social dislocations. Surely one way to reverse this trend is through improved understanding of a philosophy which would keep government, that is, legal violence or threat of violence, limited to its proper function. It is the intrusion of legal violence into areas of society where government has no place which has already blighted some of our social skills and placed arbitrary restraints on others.

A: Before we go further, I should like to have you say something about the earmarks of a properly limited government. What are the minimum functions of government in your view?

B: I can give you an answer in a few words: Government is society's agent of coercion, and its proper function is to defend each person's life, his liberty, and his property. I believe this brief answer is accurate; but the understanding of it, like the understanding of a chemical formula, requires a bit of doing. This answer and your question have innumerable implications, and the exploration of these implications is what true political theory is all about.

A: I can see that there would be a number of implications, but I don't want to wander too far afield from the interest that prompted this particular conversation. You will recall that I was bothered by what I regard as your extreme individualism. I may have to amend that somewhat because you seem to share a concern for the enrichment of life in society, or social life as I like to call it. But in what you have just said about government, it seems to me that you have a completely nonsocial conception of government. You would limit government to the defense of the individual; I don't see why government cannot be used in a positive way to accomplish social goals. I was much impressed by what a certain theologian said on this score. He said that the Christian should rejoice "that by the mecha-

nism of government he can feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and love his brethren in practical ways." That seems to me like the practical application of Christianity to the social order.

B: I am not sure how Christian that idea is, nor how practical either, for that matter. No one can exercise another's personal responsibility for him; and it is difficult to twist Jesus' words, "Inasmuch as ye did it unto the least of these, my brethren, ye did it unto me," into the idea that men should erect an elaborate political mechanism to absolve themselves from the obligation that rests on each man to love his neighbor. As to the practicality of the idea that government can guarantee security by promising a minimum of food, clothing, and shelter — consider the fact that government on its own has no food, clothing, or shelter to dispense. Government cannot give anything to anyone without first depriving someone else of what is rightfully his.

A: The particular passage you cite from the Gospels seems to stress personal responsibility, and you could undoubtedly find many other texts which reinforce that idea. But, after all, Paul was closer to the picture than we are, and he said, "We are members one of another."

B: Do you regard this observation of Paul as a general truth about mankind, or did it apply specifically to the early churches? It is certainly true that these early Christian communities were bound together by a common loyalty to Christ.

A: I think the observation, "We are members one of another," applied to the early church; but it also contains a larger truth. It has an application to the general condition of all mankind.

B: I too think that this observation applies to the human situation. Men do have a genuinely social aspect. But men also have two other aspects: the personal and the antisocial. There are certain aspects about each one of us that are undeniably individual. No one can assimilate our food for us, or circulate our blood. No one can think, or will, or believe for us. In each of us is a private self, an individual soul. One of the great practitioners of the inner life has told us, "To mount to God is to enter into oneself. For he who so mounts and enters and goes beyond himself, he truly mounts up to God." There are certain things that no one can do for us but ourselves. But we are not encapsulated monads which develop in a shell insulated from social contacts. We

are born into a family and a community. An immense social heritage is put at our disposal — a storehouse into which has been distilled the contributions of an enormous number of individual men and women, some famous and some nameless. Knowledge, wisdom, skills, and some of the very thought-forms by which we may avail ourselves of this treasure are handed down to us. The problem here is not analogous to rationing a given quantity of goods to a certain number of people; it is analogous to keeping a conduit open so that the spiritual accumulations of previous generations can flow unimpeded, to be enriched through understanding and application by this generation and passed on to those to come. Diminution of political liberty is comparable to the silting up of the conduit; freedom is the removal of obstructions to the flow of energy.

And we are social creatures in another respect. Other people are the most marvelous things in creation; we associate with them for our delight, for our instruction, for our entertainment, for our pleasure. Our minds are kindled by the minds of our friends, and we in turn kindle their minds and the minds of men we do not know. We take heart when others encourage us, and we are depressed by their censure. Even though we are suf-

ficiently individual to go it alone if our conscience demands it, nevertheless it is our nature to want to link arms in fellowship and friendship. There is nothing in mathematics to express the difference between one lonely individual — and two persons yoked together by a common loyalty. G. K. Chesterton has expressed this point well. Writing of one of his characters he said, "Through all his ordeal his root horror had been isolation, and there are no words to express the abyss between isolation and having one ally. It may be conceded to the mathematicians that four is twice two. But two is not twice one; two is two thousand times one."

The picture is not complete, however, if we mention only the private and the social aspects of personality. Each of us has an antisocial streak; which most of us can curb most of the time. The devilish thing is that some expressions of our antisocial nature have always enjoyed social approval and still do! One facet of our antisocial nature is our urge to gain a politically privileged position for ourselves at the expense of others, and then to cloak this in impressive legal forms and bolster it with religion, custom, and tradition. There is a tendency in each of us to economize our energy, to satisfy our needs and desires with a minimum of effort. This means, all too often,

that we satisfy our needs and desires as parasites on the rest of society. So strong is this tendency that it corrupts and perverts even our noblest ideals.

We embrace the idea of freedom, and twist it to mean the freedom of some to exploit others. We give lip service to the idea of equality, and act as if some men were more equal than others. We speak favorably of justice, and then write injustice into law. We embrace a religion which says that no man is beyond the reach of God's love and power, and then institutionalize it to prove that we are close enough to God so that we can play God for those who are further away.

This may seem like a sermon far removed from a consideration of the nature of the mechanism of government. But as Irving Babbitt has pointed out, "The political problem (will run) into the philosophical problem, and the philosophical problem itself (will) be almost indissolubly bound up at last with the religious problem." We have to come to some understanding of what man is before we can grapple with the question of the place the political agency, government, should occupy in his affairs.

We are social; we *are* members one of another. If this be so, it follows that we don't have to be coerced into being social.

A: I can follow you there; we don't have to be forced to be what we are anyway.

B: But a short while back you were advocating that government be used in a positive way to accomplish social goals. This rests upon a premise that man is not social, that he would not accomplish social goals without the coercive interventions of government to force him through his paces. In fact, the premise of every variety of collectivism, whether it be socialism, communism, welfare statism, or the Social Gospel, is that man's nature deters him from social performance unless violence or the threat of violence, cloaked in legality, be used on him. The premise is that man is asocial or even anti-social, and that he must be nagged and dragooned into acting socially.

I would concede that freedom won't usher in Utopia, because man's social achievements are limited by his nature. He is a sinner, and he is always tempted to deny his finiteness in the effort to rule over the lives of other people. But, I might ask, if we are members one of another, how can some members arrogate to themselves the prerogative of riding herd on other members?

A: For the moment, at least, until I have time to think up some

arguments I can see some defects in the idea that government is the proper agency to use for the accomplishment of social ends. But what, then, is the proper role of government?

B: If men are naturally social as well as individual, their ingenuity and creative energies will lead them into forms of association where they hope to find joy and fulfillment — as well as into those associations which enable them to satisfy their creaturely needs, peaceably, by the smallest expenditure of energy. Government is the social apparatus of coercion. It is basically the agency to which we provisionally grant the right to use coercion on members of society under specified conditions.

A: If by coercion you mean actual physical violence or the threat of violence, do you admit the need of a social agency with the right to use coercion?

B: The answer is yes to both questions. Because all or nearly all persons have an antisocial streak which in some people issues in overt antisocial behavior, such as murder, theft, fraud, and defamation, we need an agency to cope with this aspect of human nature. We have seen that we cannot make men social by force; they are so-

cial by nature. But where the anti-social side of man breaks out in actual violence directed by one member of society against another, then we need a social agency possessed of enough force to neutralize or cancel out the private violence. This agency, performing its proper functions, acts as a curb to frustrate antisocial, aggressive, invasive, criminal acts. It restrains the aggressor by force, if other means do not avail; and it gives redress to the victims of aggression.

A: As I get the picture, individuals will take care of their personal and social needs by themselves or together and the government will keep hands off entirely. The need for the agency of government rests upon the fact that there is an anti-social side to human nature. Government functions within its proper sphere by curbing anti-social behavior. Do I follow your thought?

B: Correct! That is what is meant by limited government. I might add that curbing antisocial behavior is likely to be a full-time job for a good many generations to come, and that it is an exceedingly complex job. It is not always easy to tell who is the aggressor and who the innocent victim, but experience has deposited a great

body of law to render assistance at this point.

A: Then limited government is designed to defend the individual, and otherwise let him alone.

B: Correct again! I would have you note that the concept of limited government rests upon the premise that the individual, every individual, is worth defending. It is a secondary concept, derived from the primary religious concept of the dignity of the person. The concept of the worth of persons is, at least for us in the West, a heritage of Christianity, stemming from the teaching of Jesus. To reinforce the general understanding about Jesus and true individualism, let me quote from the latest book of one of the greatest contemporary Christian scholars, Kenneth Scott LaTourette, "Although Jesus had much to say of the kingdom of God, and in that must have meant, if not a visible social structure, at least the relations of men to one another, he was deeply and primarily interested in individuals and saw society, customs, and institutions only as they affected individuals. . . . He declared that he had 'come to seek and to save that which was lost,' and by that he meant individuals."

Security May Betray Us

Archibald Rutledge

I LIVE on a great river, and westward from my place, for some 60 miles, there is not a human habitation. Not far from where I live is a plantation, the owner of which is not satisfied with the size of the deer on his property. So he imported from Michigan a huge security-reared stag. This buck was kept for some time in an enclosure on the plantation, inside a 7½-foot wire fence. It was in the autumn, the mating season of the deer. A native buck from the man's own place jumped that wire fence at night, killed the great stag more than twice his size, and, once more leaping the fence, escaped into the wilds again.

When wild creatures are given the artificial security of parks, zoos, and circuses, they never fail to deteriorate — certainly in a physical way, and, in a sense, in a moral way as well. They become soft, careless, dull-witted, degenerate. All the incentive for them to achieve and to maintain physical perfection and mental alertness has been withdrawn. They have been made to pay a fearful price for their safety.

IN HUMAN LIFE, a review of the lives of most men of real eminence reveals that they had to overcome the obstacles and perils of insecurity. But for these insecurities, they probably would have remained mediocre. The greatest foe of attainment is *security*, which is foe to the constant exercise and development of courage, aspiration, and effort. Many men and women who are buds of genius never flower because they are protected from ever having to really exert themselves; they lose that vital spark.

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