Individualism is not atomism [1]

Written by **Sam Bowman** [2] | Friday 7 September 2012

A post on ConservativeHome this morning [3] wrote about the differences between individualism and conservatism:

> *While the concept of personhood is central to philosophical conservatism, so is the connectedness of each person to other people within the organic institutions of family, community and nation, each of which of which stretch out beyond ourselves not only in space, but also in time through the traditions that sustain a living culture.*

The post sparked an interesting discussion on Twitter about the differences between conservatism and libertarianism. I think the writer's main point is that small-c conservatism places a lot of emphasis on tradition and community cohesion in a way that libertarianism does not. I think the writer is talking about a sort of atomism ('men are islands') that is rare in most libertarian thought. [*Note: I had thought this was a Tim Montgomerie piece, but in fact it's a group blog that's written anonymously. I've changed this post to reflect that ? Sam]*

Adam Smith may not have been a libertarian by modern standards, but he was one of the first great liberal individualists, and he was certainly not a conservative. Yet his work was all about the power of cooperation and compassion to better the human condition. The great achievement of*The Wealth of Nations* was to show the productive powers of individuals working in peaceful cooperation with one another, specializing and trading with one another to both people?s benefit. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, similarly, emphasised the social nature of morality and decency. We are good because we see ourselves in others, and empathise with their plight.

Modern libertarian writers carried on this emphasis on cooperation, most notably Ludwig von Mises and FA Hayek. In *Human Action*, Mises is clear that all the achievements of man that we call civilization have been the result of peaceful cooperation between human beings. The ?feelings of sympathy and friendship [4] and a sense of belonging together ? are the source of man's most delightful and most sublime experiences.They are the most precious adornment of life; they lift the animal species man to the heights of a really human existence.?

Mises?s (and my) individualism lies in his view of individual people as being the most basic unit of analysis in human affairs ? only the individual acts [4]:

> *The individual lives and acts within society. But society is nothing but the combination of individuals for cooperative effort. It exists nowhere else than in the actions of individual men. It is a delusion to search for it outside the actions of individuals. To speak of a society's autonomous and independent existence, of its life, its soul, and its actions is a metaphor which can easily lead to crass errors.*

The questions whether society or the individual is to be considered as the ultimate end, and whether the interests of society should be subordinated to those of the individuals or the interests of the individuals to those of society are fruitless. Action is always action of individual men.

This does not mean that the fabric woven by individuals acting together is not valuable, but simply that we cannot understand society except as the product of many individuals acting together to achieve their own ends. Those ends might be selfish or they might be altruistic.

FA Hayek is even stronger about the importance of tradition and social cooperation in understanding society and individuals. The latter period of his life ? in works such as *The Constitution of Liberty*, *Law, Legislation and Liberty* and *The Fatal Conceit* ? was devoted to studying the importance of tradition in society, and the pitfalls of a rationalism that tries to fix or improve on tradition that ain?t broke.

Hayek, again, was an individualist and favoured libertarian or classical liberal institutions. He understood the power and importance of tradition as phenomena that emerged as the result of human action, not of human design ? in other words, as ?organic institutions? that hold people together and establish very bonds of trust and empathy that allow market institutions to flourish. Hayek was an arch-skeptic of grand plans to improve the human race.

Ayn Rand?s celebration of selfishness is the aberration in the libertarian tradition, not the rule. (Indeed, she didn?t consider herself a libertarian and didn?t like people who did.)

The sort of atomism that ConHome's writer is rejecting is, I think, quite different to the sort of individualism that I and many other libertarians adhere to, and is very rare. Even the most grisly caricature of a selfish libertarian would have to admit that she could only get rich by trading with others.

The core of libertarianism is the belief that people can only prosper by cooperating*peacefully* with each other, socially, economically and spiritually. Individualism, yes ? the interests of individual humans should always be our ultimate concern. But atomism, the idea that men are islands? No.

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