

Individualism

from the Anarchist Encyclopedia — S. Faure

Raoul Odin

1934

Individualism: Along with their partisanship and insufficiencies, I love the very stupidities of dictionaries. So I went through the small and great Larousse dictionaries looking for the definition of the word individualism. In both dictionaries I found this by the same author: System of isolation of individuals in society. But in the great Larousse the author specifies: ENCYCLOPEDIA. SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY. Subordinating the good of others to one's own good, living as much as possible for oneself is to be an individualist. He adds a few superficial notes in order to show that he has read Spencer and Nietzsche.

In the first place, all of this proves that it is permitted to certain men to teach the French language, something they're in ignorance of, since this (anonymous) author doesn't know that there are no synonyms, which leads him to give the word individualism the definition that applies to a certain egoism, this word being taken in its strictest, most unfavorable, pejorative sense.

This proves that certain men are capable of reading philosophical works without understanding them...unless we are dealing here with bad faith. Anything is possible. In any event, bad faith is nothing but a consequence of stupidity.

Like the word anarchy, the word individualism is a victim. Scribbling watch dogs malevolently use the one for the other the words egoism and individualism, and only give of individualism a skimpy, restrictive and petty conception.

We will here attempt to restore to the word its true meaning.

When the meaning of words isn't vitiated, individualism is a system that has the individual as base, as subject or as object. Listen to the individualists and you will see that the three aspects of this definition are good. Individualism is thus a system based on the individual, which has the individual as end and the individual as agent.

Let us put that phrase in the plural and think it through. We want humanity's happiness. But humanity is not a real entity, only the individuals who make it up are real entities. Thus, when I say I want humanity's happiness I am implicitly saying: I want happiness for individuals. The individual is thus my object. I say individual, I don't say me.

It could perhaps be opposed to this that looked at in this way all systems are individualist. This would be true if individualism were nothing but that. But in individualism the individual is not only the object, he is also the subject. But before dealing with the individual subject, let us finish with the individual as object.

I believe that everything having to do with the crowd is ephemeral, superficial, illusory and vain. If I were a talented orator it would be easy for me to have a crowd of three thousand people adopt my ably presented opinion. These three thousand people would applaud me "like one man."

At that moment it is possible to have this crowd commit enormous acts, either heroic or odious. But I would have done nothing that was lasting, because once the enthusiasm had passed and the crowd dispersed, the individuals regain control of themselves or are once again taken over by their cowardice. Thus, if I want to do something lasting I must aim, not at the crowd but among these three thousand beings, at the few humans capable of becoming individuals. Individualism thus applies itself to seeking out, discovering, perfecting individuals.

Let us pass now to the individual agent or subject. It's hardly necessary to say after what has preceded, that it is not crowds, or societies, but individuals who, each one working with the consciousness of his means and responsibilities, aim not at the entire society but at individuals for the realization of the greatest sum of happiness and the greatest sum of means.

It can be seen that the final goal is the happiness of all through the happiness of each.

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