

Lesser known individualism

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As an exercise in rendering down a bare-bones definition of anarchist practice, I've come up with: the tension between resisting (*anti-*) and/or avoiding (*a-*) being controlled on the one hand, and letting go of control on the other.

I find a collectivist foundation incompatible with this definition. Ill define collectivism as a logic that prioritizes the goals of an abstract *we* over those of unique beings.¹ The abstract *we* can be given an endless number of names: group, community, the people, hairdressers, Italians, zoomers, etc. Or it can be simply *we*, with the speaker assuming that they and their audience are all a *we*. This abstract *we* lives in the realm of the ideal, as something external to the beings it claims to be. The collectivist logic uses categorization to make all sorts of determinations based on singular beings as units of measurement, or numbers on papers and screens. While fundamental to politics (strategies and tactics to manage large numbers of people), I find this logic detrimental to a liberatory anarchist practice that isnt willing to deny the unique contingencies of beings, and desires to let go of control.

Regarding the individualist perspective, I think there are two conceptions to grapple with. The first is the more commonly known individualism found in liberalism.² I find it individualistic in name only: conflating an atomistic separateness with individualism. This perspective insists on independent self interest as a foundational principal, yet depends on abstractions to motivate interests: rationalism, humanism, progressive teleology through technology, and perhaps the most emphasized—economic relationality. This creates a conflicting existence for the atomized: wanting, but never fully able to own themselves. The ideals of this perspective also alienate beings from the ecology they find themselves in, leading to metaphysical extremes such as hard materialism (the denial of mind). The result is endless civilizational growth through resource extraction and servitude through work. Individuals are understood as economic agents and rational subjects: not in service of themselves, but economics and rationalist philosophy. I see this form of individualism not as individualist as it claims to be, and more collectivist than it admits.

¹ For now, Im choosing *unique being* to describe what could be also called *person*, *individual*, or the overly complicated *singularity*, but the appropriate term (or if there should be one) is up for debate.

² This is by far the most familiar understanding, which is why almost any discussion of individualism immediately points to it. This creates a predicament: drop the term *individualist* for something lesser known, or fight for it. Im undecided, since both options seem to mislead either way. Since collectivist tendencies dominate the general discourse, the same predicament applies to *anarchism* as well.

The second understanding is the lesser known radical ownness of individualist anarchism. I find this to be truer to the name in that it also emphasizes self interest as a foundational principle,³ but seeks to shed the abstract demands that liberal individualism clings to. In the text, *The Individualist Anarchist Discourse of Early Interwar Germany*, Constantin Parvulescu puts it this way:

“the power void [left by revolution] brought to the fore a disoriented being, one frightened by freedom and addicted to transcendent guidance. Stirner’s predictions proved to be true: liberalism had failed to produce a free subject; instead it created a monad that conceived of itself as incomplete, as part of something bigger than him or her: an order, a body politic or a mission.”

In contrast to this monad, the unique being (or individualist as *individualist* anarchist) rejects the abstract subjecthood defined by the polis, preferring instead the embodied real defined through lived experience. This perspective also seems more compatible with ecological principles: with beings not static, determined, or separate from their ecology. It recognizes that unique beings are composed of other unique beings, in both mind and matter, yet retain their uniqueness. The unique being is both singular and plural. Singular in that every being is the unique set of contingencies that only it can be made up of, and plural in that they are continuously in flux: becoming something they weren’t prior in potentially many ways at once. This capacity is the liberatory potential of the unique being as practiced through the creative unlearning of assigned values: the power to not only transform oneself, but to lose oneself. This is the freedom of forgetting, of letting go of control. It is anti-humanist in that it rejects the determined ideal of the *Human*, in favor of the indeterminate living of human beings. It is a passion for being. It values difference over sameness, and finds disagreement more interesting than agreement. It values heresy and play, and takes seriously laughing at itself.

“The universe, in its greatness, can seem to want to crush me, but it cannot penetrate me, I, who am a formative and indispensable part, and the further the unique strives to spread itself out and its aim and its action, the more deeply it understands its situation and its need for the cosmos.” – Anselm Ruest and Salomo Friedlaender, *Contributions to the History of Individualism*

³ Self interest does not imply that others are not taken into consideration or separate from the self, in fact the opposite: it is in one’s self interest to highly consider and not neglect the mutuality between beings, for they are composed of each other. It emphasizes that acting for oneself in turn benefits those with whom one is interacting, and by the *wants* of desire, not the *shoulds* of duty.

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