**individual/己(Jǐ)**

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| European Perspective | Michel Espagne | 17 Feb 2022 |

In ancient Roman times the term individuum translated the Greek word “atomon” (Cicero), and referred to the indivisible elements of matter. Subsequently individuum means exactly the opposite of “atomon”. It is no longer a question of the indivisible element of matter but of the indivisible personality. Two forms of indivisibility face each other: that which concerns matter and that which concerns consciousness. The word individual names since the Enlightenment or even since Cartesius the human being as a subject that cannot be divided. It refers therefore to the unity of consciousness, to the human person, who exists because he thinks and thinks of himself. The individual is the subject of all actions. He is called to dominate a natural world transformed into an object. Certainly this definition of the subject goes against what happens in different anthropological contexts where nature can also be a kind of subject. But there is no doubt that the separation between the subject as individual and the nature-object remains dominant in the western context. There has been in the history of European philosophy since the Enlightenment a call to assert the individual against the constraints of religion, the state or traditional social hierarchies. In Leibniz's philosophy, monads have a reflective awareness of their perceptions, and the human universe boils down to a juxtaposition of monads.

The individual is then considered as a principle of creativity. On its freedom to act rest the benefits of civilization. Kantian philosophy, by limiting the ambitions of reason, makes individual understanding one of the limits of possible knowledge. It is the individual who creates the world and this tendency is found among the Kantian philosophers up to neo-kantism which gives representations by the individual a central place.

By producing everything from its own resource, the Fichtean subject, an extreme form of individuality, gives history a revolutionary dimension of the future to be constructed. Indeed, if the subject produces reality it does not consider it as a given phenomenon but as a reality susceptible of improvement. Fichte inspired the political turn of the Hegelians.

Humboldt was one of the heralds of this individual freedom which in the first half of the 19th century would become political liberalism. Each individual must have his specificity, his own talents, in a word his individuality. The full development of individual freedom results from education, “Bildung”. As founder of Berlin University Humboldt considered that education has to shape individuality. But Bildung aimed only to actualize what exists in the depths of the individual consciousness. The individual as a notion is less present in Hegel's philosophy, but we must still observe that the idea of alienation is defined as a loss of the essential freedom of the individual.

While the notion of the individual often refers to a desire for freedom, it rarely refers to a principle of equality. The equality in the masses that John Stuart Mill, in the early days of liberalism and in his essay *On liberty*, viewed with certain suspicion, is a threat to the individual. Of course, individuals who identify with a democratic political system admit a principle of subsidiarity which allows them to be represented by other individuals, but this relative dispossession is already a danger. Rights of men as defined by Thomas Paine (1791) concern mainly free individuals and not so intensively the social group and in no way the social class they belong to.

The freedom of the individual leads to a form of political exacerbation with the anarchism of Stirner or Bakunin which in the middle of the 19th century calls into question any form of social constraint limiting the individual. The *Unique and Its Property* (1844), widely criticized by Marx in the *German Ideology*, is a long indictment against what limits the display of individual freedom. Phenomenology takes up the tradition of the uniqueness of the individual in his perception of the world and his relationship to it.

From the point of view of economics the Condorcet paradox, later enunciated by Kenneth Arrow in the form of an impossibility theorem, testifies to the inability of the individualistic priority to objectify a legitimate collective choice. Doubt is thus cast on any procedure for aggregating individual preferences.

A certain contradiction arises, however, between political and economic liberalism. On the level of political life the individual seems unable to adapt to any comparison with his peers, from an economic point of view on the opposite, individuals seem interchangeable so that they could in most cases be represented by a single and paradigmatic agent. Individuals are agents, actors, interchangeable entities whose action is deployed according to the expected usefulness, to the pleasures and the pains, quickly transformed into monetary costs and benefits. The individuals of economic liberalism should in no case be confused with national, family, religious groups, and never with social classes. They have no history and are not defined in relation to any group membership. Economic agents are nevertheless interchangeable only in the abstract scheme of neoclassical economics. They actually have a financial, cultural heritage, social habits which precisely define a good part of their individuality.

The presupposition of an equivalence of individual economic actors and their common search for maximizing their utility (often confused with the consumption of market goods) remains an essential theoretical reference to the idea of general market equilibrium, and to the heart of liberalism and it still survives today. However, it is internally refuted by the recent economists (Sonnenschein, Mantel and Debreu) who demonstrate the absence of uniqueness as well as of stability of such a general equilibrium, in other words the absence of an invisible hand.

Thus the individual is defined only by his relationship with the social. This relationship takes extreme forms in certain linguistic systems, such as Vietnamese for example, where the subject's expression is replaced by the indication of the place occupied by the speaker in a social system (little brother, big sister, elder, younger, etc.) In general, the individual marks on one side his difference from the society that surrounds him, he does not agree with the idea to be simply an element. On the other hand, he is indistinguishable from this social context insofar as he is the speaker of a language, marked by a history, determined by aesthetic categories and possibly religious beliefs or the recognition of a certain number of political laws. Language is a particularly effective revealer of the limits of the notion of individuality. This is probably one of the reasons for the tension between Kant and his pupil Herder, the tension between philosophy and anthropology.

Individuality is highly claimed by a subject who expresses his originality and the distance which separates him from society as from objectified nature. On the other hand, the words he uses to assert himself as an individual subject, as an embodied particularity, are the same words as those used by the whole group to which he is attached.

If we are interested in the history of the humanities, sociology is a science of the collective. Suicide in Durkheim's thought is not an individual's crisis but a phenomenon that must be analyzed collectively. In contrast, psychology emphasizes the individual psyche. However, the full explanation of psychic facts involves re-integrating data that goes beyond the individual. Initiator of empirical psychology Wilhelm Wundt in Germany came up with the idea of a peoples' psychology, confirming the complexity of the game between individual and collective. The individual is supported by a collective spirit in which he participates. The most individual positions are in fact determined by the masses they pretend to put aside.

The question of individuality in history is an important problem in historiography which sometimes tends to emphasize the action of isolated personalities, heroes and mostly prefers to emphasize communities as engines of history.

All the debates around nationality, the right of asylum and migrants clearly show that individuals are not equal, that they are assigned significantly different rights and duties. The question of national identities, defined since the end of the 19th century by identity documents, passports, residence permits and the right to cross borders or not, highlights the inequality of individuals, their state of dependence.

The individual is therefore at the same time an irreducible singularity and a direct expression of the historical collective in which he is inserted. Depending on the perspective or the moment, we will insist on his autonomy, his particularity or on the fact that he merges with the carrier group. In this there are no radical differences between the description, for example, of the animal world which evokes the individual and the species as two points of reference in the continuity of the living, and the description of the human world. The relationship of the individual to the species recalls the relationship of the individual to society. When the social individual is stripped of his individuality he can sometimes become a source of threats. It is therefore often by the term individual that we characterize the perpetrator of a crime, of an illegal act referred to its simple status as an undifferentiated member of a mass. Between autonomy and determination by the groups into which he fits the individual could be defined as an asymptotic curve, never completely free and never completely submitted.