

Revisiting an Old Predicament: Primacy of the Individual or the Community?

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We live under the assumption that the most important task for us humans is to shape our own lives and take responsibility for them. It is the call for authenticity and self-determining freedom. In this sense, people prioritize what we have come to call the individual — a concept that encapsulates some of the moral goods deemed important for human flourishing: human dignity, self-responsibility, initiative, authenticity, and difference.

How have we come to this? Why do we feel drawn to our present understanding of the self and find it almost impossible not to think in terms of “the individual”? What is the place of community in all this? Of course, individual and community are concepts to help us make sense of our lives and the moral goods we consider important for human flourishing, not ontological entities with a life of their own.

HOW HAVE WE COME TO THE MODERN INDIVIDUALISM?

To answer this question it is necessary to undertake a task of retrieval. Charles Taylor, Emmanuel Mounier, and Paul Ricoeur will assist us in this task. In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor traces the major facets of the present understanding of human identity.¹ In particular, he points out three aspects important for our purpose.

Modern inwardness: Augustine begins a process of inwardness — I as a *first person standpoint*, the way the world is for me — that although he conceived as a path to go upward (to God), becomes with further developments especially through Descartes and Montaigne the source of the modern individualism that regards human life as a personal quest of inner control and/or exploration and/or commitment. The modern idea of an independent individual making sense of human life within is in sharp contrast to previous views in which the individual was just a part of a cosmic (community) order. Thus our internal experience — no the external authority — becomes the final judge. Autonomy becomes the ultimate moral ideal as described by Kant: the agent gives himself his moral law. Montaigne develops another strand that stresses the particularity of each human being and reacts against the universalism of some of the other views. In all this, the concept of responsibility becomes important since we are “anchored in our own self.”

Affirmation of ordinary life: The affirmation of ordinary life is brought about mainly through the Protestant Reformation and its idea of sanctification of daily life. Deism continues this path stressing the importance of feelings and attacking the ascetic ethics of self-denial. These ideas have also shaped our modern understanding of the self. They have allowed us to discover the potentialities of ordinary life creating a powerful idea of equality. However, the affirmation of ordinary life has also contributed to the current distrust of community as a threat to the individual’s private life. It deepens the rebellion against community as an external pressure that has to be resisted.

Expressivist view of the self: the Radical Enlightenment — the free thinkers only believe what they find for themselves and Romanticism — living according to our inner nature revealed by our inner voice — bring the idea of inwardness to new depths through their emphasis on trusting our inner nature. Tradition and authority are regarded with suspicion. Modernism continues this path radicalizing the sense of inwardness with the concept of the multileveled self — the fragmentary character of our experience. Nevertheless, the subjectivist twist of these movements also presents a problematic aspect: it denies the moral sources that make sense of its liberationist force. Similarly, the radical Enlightenment and Romanticism open a path in which community is regarded with suspicion as an external authority that hinders the path to inwardness. A great deal of the current animosity against community seems to be grounded in this development. It tends to be regarded merely as an obstacle to the individual — as an external influence.

The concept of the modern self has opened for us some important potentialities: self-responsible individuals who are aware of their dignity, who have learned to pay attention to their feelings; who know that human life is a task opened to new possibilities. Even controversial developments such as Descartes' disengaged reason or the idea of self-fulfillment, have opened up for us great possibilities expressed in modern science and the richness of inner life. All these potentialities are captured in the moral ideal of authenticity: being true to oneself. To be sure authenticity can turn into atomism, narrow self-fulfillment or extreme subjectivism. These forms empty human life of its moral sources and often end in nihilism and despair.²

COMMUNITY UNDER ATTACK

From the perspective of the predicament between the community and the individual the rise of the modern self has led to a weakening of the idea of community to the point in which it is regarded only as a means for the well-being of individuals. This is grounded in the idea that we can only be fully humans when we define ourselves *within* without allowing "external" influences to interfere with our authentic selves. Of course, as Taylor points out, there is a tragic paradox here: in denouncing community as an external interference, even more, as a hostile force to the flourishing of the individual we deny the very fact that the language of individuality has been the result of a particular social experience, in this case the experience of Western societies.³ No wonder some people today denounce the loss of the sense of community in modernity as one of the biggest problems that we still do not want to face.⁴

Ancient and Medieval thinkers took the idea of community as a natural part of what a human life is. Conceiving life without a community was not possible. To be sure, there were many disagreements about what kind of community better suited human beings. Nevertheless, the modern path inaugurated by Descartes problematizes the role of community in human life, in the sense that it begins to be identified with "outwardness:" something outside us. Community begins to be regarded as opposing the individual's path to his/her inner richness or authenticity. The Contract theory of the seventeenth century apparently makes the shift to a new understanding of community; "previously that people were members of a community went without

saying ... But now the theory starts from the individual on his own;”⁵ individuals are previous to the community and only their consent founds social life. This is the Copernican revolution that modernity introduces: the individual becomes the center of human life replacing, in a way, the role that community played in the former political theories. As Etzioni claims the individual becomes “the sun, moon and the stars of the new universe.”⁶ Community becomes then, an instrument to the individual’s well being.

The problem with the instrumental view is, Taylor explains, that: (1) at a political level it weakens the commitment necessary to make political life possible; after all, what is really important is that *I* can be myself; thus, the person invests so much time and energy in his/her own projects that the kind of strong social involvement needed for citizenship is weakened, leading to the danger of *soft despotism*. (2) At a personal level, this instrumental view makes people think that the only good of a relationship is its contribution to personal fulfillment; thus, the only criterion becomes “how much can I get from this relationship?” This makes it hard for people to struggle to keep a relationship or a community when bad times come because there is no sense that relationships or communities are goods in themselves, that is, that they also constitute human flourishing in the form of solidarity, sense of belonging and connectedness. For instance, citizenship in a political community, membership in a religious community, friendships, are not reducible to the benefits they give to a particular person; they are important for themselves. There is a great paradox here: the instrumental view impoverishes human life even though it promises a more self-fulfilling life for the individual; life becomes flattened rather than enriched.

The rise of the modern self makes communities (kinship, local, religious, and political communities) problematic because they are accused of hindering the flourishing of the autonomous self. Many modern thinkers, for instance Rousseau and the free thinkers, thought of their historical communities as chains from which individuals had to be liberated. Many of our contemporaries feel the same way as well. But, as Taylor argues, the problem with some strands of modernity is that they do not want to recognize all the goods that are part of the “package” of human life.⁷ I want to say something similar about the predicament community/individual. Both community and the individual are part of the “package” of human flourishing; and we cannot make it without them. But the idea of the package also seems to encircle another important consequence: both community and individuality are equally important; they are neither prior nor secondary to one another since one cannot be sustained without the other. Thus, modernity has made an important contribution to the debate: individuals cannot be seen as mere means for the good of the community, as traditional views argue. The liberation of the individual from some of the oppressive communities of the past is a welcome event that could not have happened without the language of autonomy, inwardness, affirmation of ordinary life, and inner moral sources that modernity brought.

THE HARMONIOUS SOLUTION

Some strands of modernity responded with a harmonious solution to the predicament community-individual. For Francis Hutcheson working for one’s

own sake is best accomplished working for the whole.⁸ This idea becomes part of the official doctrine of Deism in which “everything is made so that the good of each serves the good of all; so our best interest must be to act for the general good.”⁹ Promoting the happiness of others leads to our own happiness. However, I would like to extend the Enlightenment objection to the Deistic providential order to this harmonious solution; as Taylor explains in the *anti-Panglossian objection*: “[it] made the structure of all things a bit too tidy and harmonious for our experience.”¹⁰ In other words, the harmonious solution — even if this is kept as an ideal — is against our common experience of the conflict between them. The harmonious solution is “too good to be true.” It cannot make sense of the conflicts that many people experience today between their allegiance to their communities and their personal aspirations. For example, many women and gays know the terrible conflicts they will face when they decide to bring equality to their communities. Many of them experience that the solution cannot be just to leave their communities because they are important part of what life is about. Thus many decide to stay and fight.

The harmonious solution is also present in contemporary philosophers in opposite sides of the ideological spectrum. For example Alasdair MacIntyre thinks that the good of the community and the good of the individual must coincide; otherwise the whole quest for a good life will be threatened by the conflict.¹¹ In the same vein, John Dewey insists that the growth of the individual and the community are so intimately related that they cannot be opposed. For Dewey, tensions between individuals and communities are expressions of unresolved adjustments that can be overcome in the long run.¹² Thus, the harmonious solution enjoys a great popularity among thinkers, although for different reasons.

What is the alternative? In the final part of *Sources of the Self*, Taylor argues that the analysis of the conflicts of modernity allow for “a perspective critical of most of the dominant interpretations for being too narrow, for failing to give full recognition to the multiplicity of goods and hence to the conflicts and dilemmas they give rise to.”¹³ Taylor accuses the contending parts of being one-sided and ignoring that the conflicts come from the multiplicity of goods we now enjoy. As he explains in *The Ethics of Authenticity*: “the right path to take is neither that recommended by straight boosters nor that favoured by outright knockers. Nor will a simple trade-off between the advantages and costs.”¹⁴ Hence, Taylor claims, a mere *balance* between the different elements of the conflict will not do it. I want to extend Taylor’s argument to the account of the particular modern predicament about the community and the individual. The way to make sense of this predicament is to live in the *creative tension* brought to us by the multiplicity of goods that the concepts of community and the individual encompassed; goods that may conflict in some circumstances of our lives.

THE CREATIVE TENSION ACCOUNT (CTA)

We need to accept the inescapable conflicts (at least at the present time) involved in human life between the community and the individual. We can regard these conflicts as inviting us to attain a *creative tension* that has to be maintained in the particular lives of individuals and communities; conflicts that have to be

negotiated because the multiplicity of goods involved in them. However, as Taylor also claims for other conflicts of modernity this new understanding is an *epistemic gain* because they open up for us “real and important human potentialities” both for the individual and for the community.¹⁵ Many of the potentialities of the individual have already been emphasized by the idea of the modern self: human dignity, self-responsibility, importance of feelings, respect for individual differences and the richness of inwardness. However, we can also enjoy many other goods when the importance of community for human flourishing is adequately recognized and integrated: a deeper sense of human solidarity, a deeper appreciation of others, a sense of belonging, a sense of humbleness needed to get along with others and the environment, a sense of fullness as opposed to the individualistic emptiness of our present age.

The CTA provides a theoretical framework to understand the conflicts among these different goods; conflicts that in some way are new since only now, as a result of the understanding of the modern self, people have experienced the force and priority of the goods represented under the idea of the individual. It is possible to argue that goods such as self-responsibility and personal freedom were always present. For instance, someone like Socrates felt the conflict between following his inner voice and being a member of the community. Socrates solved this tension accepting the death penalty without backing off his personal views. But overall, the prevalent view was that communal goods outweighed by far those of the individual. The exaltation of the hero who sacrificed all for the community is found everywhere in the literature and the popular culture of the Ancient and Medieval times. For example, the Romans honored people like the brothers Gracchus and Horatius who risked their own lives for the good of the community. The English literature of the twelfth century honors a legendary hero like Robin Hood who robbed the rich to help the poor in the interest of social justice and community values. In the same vein, the Christian world exalted somebody like Saint Francis of Assisi who left behind his personal wealth and family for God’s call to form a community of service and poverty. The idea of someone like Robinson Crusoe, whose heroism is to live on his own without community, is unknown to the pre-modern world and it would have made no sense to them. Only when modernity develops its hostility to the idea of community is that such a hero becomes desirable. Nietzsche will give to this hero a distinctive moral force as someone with the valor to defy convention and face the solitude of living according to his/her own inner strength. These two different kinds of heroism point out to two distinctive conceptions of human flourishing in which the priority has changed. In the first case, it is belonging to a community and willingness to sacrifice all for its sake that is the source of a human life worth that name. On the contrary, in the second case, it is personal freedom and autonomy that are considered the primordial goods that can feed a true life. Nonetheless, as we saw before, these two pictures impoverish human life because they stultify important goods that can be in tension with each other.

In this vein, the CTA portrays a different understanding of human flourishing in which the multiplicity of goods represented by the idea of community and the individual are preserved. This account invites us to overcome views that make the

multiplicity of goods incompatible, that is, the old view in which individuality had to be surrendered unconditionally to the welfare of the community; and the most modern view of the atomistic individualism, in which community is construed as a mere instrumental means for the sake of the individual. But, this view also rejects a mere harmonious view of the relationship between the individual and the community because this view cannot account for the fact that the goods involved in this relationship may clash; for instance, the good of self-determination and the good of solidarity to a group can easily be in conflict.

THE TENSION AS A SOURCE OF LIFE

We now turn to Mounier's and Ricoeur's contributions to the CTA. They will help us to grasp better the nature and consequences of this tension. Mounier recognizes that at a metaphysical level there cannot be a conflict between the person (individual) and the community because true communities and persons need and complement each other. In this sense, Mounier still holds a harmonious solution at the metaphysical level that presents the same problems we have pointed out before. Nonetheless, Mounier argues that at the practical level the theoretical harmony between the individual and the community is replaced by disappointments and tensions between the legitimate aspirations of the person and the limitations and aspirations of real communities. But, for Mounier, this tension is by no means something we should regret or avoid; on the contrary, it can open up new possibilities and enrich human life. Thus, in the practical level, there is tension not harmony. As Mounier argues: "Instead of harmony a *tension* always at the breaking point. But this tension is the source of life. It protects the individual from anarchy and societies from conformity."¹⁶

For Mounier the tension between the individual and the community becomes a source of life, of growth, it leads to a more fulfilling life. It is a *creative* tension. To be sure, it is a tension "always at the breaking point," that is, it is a tension never solved, but always there. Mounier's vision may be seen as rather too dramatic since there are many occasions in which the individual and the community are not opposed or should not be opposed; however, Mounier rightly points out that the tension can help both the individual and the community to overcome their dark sides. In this sense, Mounier's account allows not only for an *epistemic gain* in Taylor's terms, but it provides the reason why the tension is an important *moral gain*: it is the source of a more fulfilling life. It is precisely this insight that is denied in the harmonious solution. Thus, the tension is not a transitory stage that needs to be eventually balanced or the result of unresolved adjustments as Dewey argues, but rather a moment in which new possibilities are explored and achieved; and deviant forms of community and personhood are challenged. The tension does not threaten the quest for a good life, as MacIntyre claims, but on the contrary, it opens up new possibilities or a qualitative better life. In this sense, an ideal of harmony between community and individuals may hide and hinder the new possibilities and higher fulfillment promised by the tension.

Mounier is correct in arguing that tensions may be the result of, for instance, coercion and struggle for homogeneity on the part of the community, and the

demands of a self-centered, egoistic, and narcissist individual. In this sense the tension is a symptom of something that is not right in the community or in the individual. But in other cases, as Taylor's account suggests, the tension can be the result of conflicts between the multiplicity of goods represented by concepts of community and the individual. For example, the tension can be the result of the legitimate call for a strong sense of belonging to a community and the legitimate need for personal freedom in the individual. Moreover, in real life the boundaries between the two kinds of cases described above are often fuzzy. For instance, the case of a person who has to decide whether or not to accept a job promotion that will mean to leave a community that is not only important for her but also in which her participation is vital for the communal well-being. Thus, on one hand, the job promotion fulfills an important personal aspiration and opens up new and challenging opportunities for her and her family. On the other hand, leaving the community is a troublesome event since it is a significant part of who this person and this family are; in a way the professional success of this person is related to the support she has found in the community. In addition, her leaving would also threaten the well-being of the community, at least in the near future, because of the leadership of this person in the community. What to do? Which goods have priority? Could a compromise be reached? For example, taking the new job for a few years and then coming back to the community? No pre-arranged answer could address this difficult dilemma; it has to be lived and the answer find in real life. In this sense, we need to create a practical wisdom that can guide us through these tensions.

Mounier calls for such a practical wisdom to help us in dealing with the tension: "It is necessary, therefore, more or less right, more or less wrong, to create, in this subject, a kind of practical wisdom according to our experience."¹⁷ That is, there are not outside criteria that can be applied to solve the tension. It is always a tension that has to be lived, and in this living we can build a wisdom that can help individuals and communities to find new possibilities and developments. In this way, the tension, as Mounier argues, becomes a source of a more fruitful life.

Ricoeur, however, argues that Mounier's two-term dialectic — individual versus community — needs to be reformulated in a three-term dialectic: self-esteem, solicitude, and just institutions. Ricoeur contends that two different levels of relationships are unified — and somehow lost — in Mounier's concept of community: (1) face to face relationships modeled under the ideal of friendship; and (2) the more impersonal relationships — institutional — governed by the ideal of justice. It is possible to argue that these two terms — solicitude and just institutions — can be captured in an expansive concept of community. In this vein, Ricoeur's correction of Mounier's account is that Mounier neglected these two different dimensions of our relation to others in his concept of community. A similar criticism can be aimed at Taylor since he does not distinguish them.¹⁸

Ricoeur's account points out to two dimensions that, it can be argued, are intimately related within the concept of community itself. Solicitude and justice coexist in the concept of community since it implies, at least, in most forms of community, a more intimate relation to some and a more institutional relation to

others. This is true, for instance, of any school conceived as community in which members are linked to others as friends — or in some kind of intimate way — or as members of a larger body in which institutional norms guaranteed a fear play. It is true, though, that Ricoeur's third term highlights the fact that relations in society are modeled by the ideal of justice rather than by the requirements of friendship; but still community seems to be a term that can accommodate both levels. In this sense, Ricoeur's distinction is a caveat to bear in mind in order not to confuse or neglect one of these two dimensions of our relationship to others. Hence, the dialectic individual vs. community still captures a central feature of the way we conceive human flourishing today; a dialectic that can be adequately addressed through the CTA.

CONCLUSION

In sum, Taylor's account of the modern self has helped to identify three main aspects of modern individualism: the sense of inwardness, the affirmation of ordinary life and the notion of inner nature as the moral source of human life. It shows why so many people find convincing/moving the modern identity. Individualism has really opened up new possibilities: human dignity, diversity, richness of inner life and the ethics of self-responsibility. It also shows some of the most problematic aspects of modern individualism: atomism, narrow self-fulfillment and some forms of egoism and narcissism.

Taylor's account has also helped us to discuss some of the consequences that the rise of modern identity has had for the idea of community, especially since the modern self raised itself in conflict and opposition to the historical forms of communities that it encountered. Thus community is portrayed as a hindrance to the modern individual, as an external authority that has to be overcome or as an instrument justified in terms of its role for the fulfillment of individuals. Some thinkers rebelled against these conceptions and designed a harmonious solution in which the good of the individual and the community coincided or at least, are reconciled in the long run. Nevertheless, in the face of the problems this solution raises I explored a *creative tension account* in which these conflicts are assumed as part of what human flourishing implies in order not only to preserve the potentialities gained by the modern self but to discover and enjoy the goods and potentialities that community can also bring to us.

Mounier's account — recreated by Ricoeur — points out the importance of community and individuality in human flourishing. Mounier helped to discover the dramatic and enriching character of the tension between the two, rejecting, at the same time, the dark sides of individualism and community that distort human flourishing.

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1. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).
 2. Charles Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).
 3. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*.
 4. Bellah et al, *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

5. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 193.
6. Etzione, *The Spirit of Community* (New York: Touchtone Book, 1993), 117.
7. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 511.
8. Hutchenson. Quoted in Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 261.
9. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 280.
10. *Ibid.*, 417.
11. Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 181-225, 258.
12. John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (Athens: Swallow Press, Ohio University Press, 1954), 191.
13. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 514.
14. Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, 11.
15. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 313.
16. Emmanuel Mouneir, *Écrit sur le Personnalism* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2000), 86.
17. Emmanuel Mouneir, *Refaire la Renaissance* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2000), 116.
18. Emmanuel Mouneir, *Lectures 2 La Contrée des Philosophes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992).