

AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM: THE BALANCE OF JUSTICE

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The first hard part of membership in our Holland Professional Club is that we have to present papers. The second hard part is that we have to wait three-and-a-half years to get our next chance to give a paper, and have to decide which of our varied interests we want to talk about.

I thought that, for this year's paper, I'd like to examine traditional beliefs and the development of more scientific realities related to baseball strategy: judging the value of a player, managerial choices in game situations, and so on --- and maybe connect baseball decisions to the ways people use traditional beliefs versus scientific information in deciding things like political stances. But I haven't done that.

I thought that, this time in our three-and-an-a-half year rotation, I'd tell the story of my solo wilderness canoe trip last year, as a way to open up conversation around how we bring a sense of adventure into our lives, and to consider the value to society of protecting wild places. But I haven't done that, either.

The title of the paper I am presenting is "American Individualism: The Balance of Justice." The birth of the United States was strongly mated to claims that individuals deserved rights to which even the King should bow; that individuals (well, land-owning men who weren't slaves) owned liberties above the power of any state; and that free individuals united in community could demand and win the justice of their common cause.

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines "individualism" to be "the moral state, political philosophy, or ideology that emphasizes the moral worth of the individual."¹ Individualism promotes the exercise of one's goals and desires, values, independence, and self-reliance, and values the interests of individuals over those of the individual's surrounding group or society. Individualists oppose external interference upon one's interest by society or institutions such as government.²

American Individualism has been nourished by the market economic theory and structures we inherited from England and modern Europe, in which each individual, acting in self-interest, is responsible for sustaining himself and his family. Further, the Europeans who came to American shores were very often driven here by internal or social needs to separate from conformity with their traditional home communities. The American character of the Outlier, the adventurer-rebel, was born from a unique mix of

non-compliers, renegades, and activists, intent on religious freedom or religious extremism, hoping for escape from authoritarian dominance or economic oppression, eager to make new fortunes for themselves. Americans must constitute a somewhat selected gene pool, skewed away from identity with community and *toward* individualism.

And Americans came to a land that seemed to have been created, its destiny manifest, for the accentuation and fulfillment of individual priority. Given the limitless vastness of the American frontier, American Individualism expanded, single family by single family, into primitive wild forests, hills, and prairies, very often each man for himself.

Horatio Alger's 19th-century rags-to-riches novels popularized the enduring American faith that anyone can – and by logical extension *should be expected to* – achieve the American Dream of wealth and success through hard work, determination, and courage.

Given the infinite bounty of American natural resources and oceanic isolation from foreign invasion, American Individualism has flourished, freed from confining limitations and fed by security. American Individualism has fed inventiveness, self-reliance, and sense of responsibility.

American Individualism has gained mythical status, despite such contrary realities as slavery that denied individual worth, terrible wars that commanded communal allegiance over individual, national economic disasters in which worthy individuals lost all liberty and worth, and vast canyons dividing the well-being and freedom of some individuals from those of other individuals.

How did our Western civilization develop its concepts of individualism? What forces have fostered its priority? And how can we understand the relative value of individualism in the development of a just American society for our children, grandchildren, and future generations?

When we humans were aboriginal hunter-gatherers, communal concern dominated individual freedom. Survival demanded priority of the common good. When decisions required authority, aboriginals turned to trusted elders. The South African concept of Ubuntu captures this ethic of human relatedness and priority of community. Ubuntu asserts "I am who I am because of who we all are together." Ubuntu is the opposite of Individualism. Individualism values the individual over society. Ubuntu values the community over the individual. Ubuntu recognizes the dependence of each person on the well-being of his or her surrounding society. This is the communitarian ethic that governs all successful small groups -- including successful families in our own culture.

In families, we make decisions together, resolve conflicts without winners and losers when we can, and we share blessings and hardships together. Families – happy, successful families – honor individuals within an *Ubuntu*-like community ethic.

When hunter-gatherers developed agriculture, they settled in one place, their populations mushroomed, and every agricultural society in history quickly spawned hierarchical government in which pharaohs and kings concentrated all individual liberty unto themselves. Nearly all people became subjects without individual value. Absolute monarchs accreted religion to their power, including the Christianity with which we're so familiar. Feudalism emerged as a regionalized variant of monarchy; only a rare elite possessed individual worth and freedom, while the mass of people had none. Wealth and its twin, liberty, were severely unequally distributed.

The European Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment, was a long, flowering revolution of art, religion, economics, and thought. Individual freedom and value tore loose from the old order in every direction. John Locke wrote, "No one ought to harm another in his life, liberty, or possessions." Shakespeare wrote, "What a piece of work is man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god!?" Descartes asserted, "Cogito, ergo sum" – "I think, therefore I am"; and Oscar Wilde later amended, "A man who does not think for himself does not think at all." Henry Brooks Adams penned, "Absolute liberty is absence of restraint; responsibility is restraint; therefore, the ideally free individual is responsible to himself." Isaiah Berlin said, "Those who have ever valued liberty for its own sake believed that to be free to choose, and not to be chosen for, is an inalienable ingredient in what makes human beings human." John Donne turned the wave of individualism from self-interest toward concern for all individuals: "No man is an island, entire of itself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. . . . Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

The Enlightenment explosion of humanist ideas expanded hand-in-hand with democratization of economic power. Merchants and craftsmen gained individual independence, and labor gradually emerged from serfdom and slavery into employment. Capitalism gained shape, and with it new expressions of social philosophy that tried to identify the just relationship of individual and society.

The American *Declaration of Independence* echoes Locke's revolutionary claims of human freedom and independence: "We hold that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to insure these rights, governments are

instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

In 1789, in England, Jeremy Bentham presented his philosophy of utilitarianism, based on the “greatest happiness principle,” in which the highest principle of social morality is to maximize happiness, the overall balance of pleasure over pain. Bentham derided natural human rights as “nonsense upon stilts,” and posited that what is right equals whatever will maximize utility, that which delivers pleasure or happiness and prevents pain and suffering. We paraphrase utilitarianism as “the greatest good for the greatest number.” For Bentham, this would include rounding up beggars and locking them in a workplace, thus making life more pleasant for most people.³

In 1859 John Stuart Mill wrote *On Liberty: Individual Rights and Freedom*, modifying utilitarianism to add concern for human dignity and to counter utilitarianism’s simplistic calculation of what is good. Mill’s philosophy introduced libertarianism, in which each individual’s fundamental right to liberty is the right to do whatever we want with the things we own, as long as we respect others’ rights to do the same.⁴ Libertarianism argues for unfettered markets and against government regulation, paternalism, morals legislation, and redistribution of wealth or income. Ayn Rand’s twentieth-century novels worship libertarian free markets. Libertarianism presents an individualist utopian vision.

An individualist enters into society to further his or her own interests without acceptance of responsibility or obligation to the communal interests of society. The economic correlate of individualism is free-market capitalism. The primary tenet –the core belief – of capitalism, as described by Adam Smith, is that every person acts in his or her own self-interest. Inevitably, the social justice benefits and weaknesses of individualism are closely mated to the social justice benefits and weaknesses of free-market capitalism. It may seem off-axis to suggest that the world’s dominant economic system might be connected to justice concerns. But economic relationships dominate social and political relationships among people, and thus are part of the core foundation of how society works. The nature and operation of our economic system are inseparable from our hope for a good, thriving society – for justice.

Concepts of justice have progressively evolved over the past century-and-a-half since Mill to deal with the defects of utilitarianism and libertarianism, recognizing three crucial realities: 1) that any calculation of a society’s overall “happiness” will fail to accurately weight various benefits and will only reveal the viewpoint of the scorekeeper;⁵ 2) that most people do not have real “freedom” of choice, but instead struggle with severe undeserved limits that have not come from their own choices; and 3) that civic virtue and the common good are very often not served by unfettered markets.

The central question of justice, says Harvard's Michael Sandel, is: **“What are our obligations to others as people in a free society?”**⁶

The inherent conflict between individual self-interest and what's good for everyone all together is captured by Garrett Harden's “Tragedy of The Commons,” presented in *Science* in 1968. Harden asks us to “Picture a pasture open to all. It is to be expected that each herdsman will try to keep as many cattle as possible on the commons [--his cows are his wealth]. Such an arrangement may work reasonably satisfactorily for generations, even centuries, because tribal wars, poaching, and disease keep the numbers of both man and beast well below the carrying capacity of the land. Finally, however, comes the day of reckoning,” when the grazing on the common pasture reaches its maximum capacity. “At this point,” writes Harden, “the inherent logic of the commons remorselessly generates tragedy. As a rational being, each herdsman's sensible course is to add another animal to his herd, thus increasing his future wealth. The added value of the animal belongs to that herdsman alone. But the pasture's degradation from overgrazing will be shared by all the herdsmen, each only bearing a small fraction of that cost. The conclusion reached by each and every rational herdsman sharing a commons is clear: add as many animals as possible to graze on the commons. Therein is the tragedy. Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit – in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all.”⁷ [emphasis mine]

Tragedies of the Commons are everywhere, all around us in modern life, wherever one's liberty endangers the well-being or future of all. One example is the purported right of U.S. individuals to carry guns, an individual interest that many believe sacrifices the safety and well-being of society at large. The evidence is overwhelming: existing handgun and machine gun liberties for individuals, together with the freedom to manufacture and sell these weapons, wreaks severe losses on the community at large. A second example of a Tragedy of the Commons is the accelerating degradation of the global environment caused by humans burning fossil-carbon fuels. Energy uses that promote current, short-term advantages for individuals, businesses, and even at-large societies are driving us, like doomed lemmings, toward communal disasters that overwhelm our imaginations. In a multitude of ways, we each act in our individual interests, in a world that cannot sustainably survive the accumulation of our individual appetites. **“Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all.”**

James Madison, in *The Federalist*, wrote, “If men were angels, no Government would be necessary.”⁸ That is, if all men were angels. But in a world in which all resources are limited, even a few non-angels in the commons will end up spoiling the environment, or

the market economy, or the peace, for all. **What are our obligations to others as people in a free society?**

American twentieth-century philosopher John Rawls has elaborated the most eloquent case for fairness as the ground of justice⁹ – fairness evidenced in equality of opportunity.^{10,11,12} Rawls recognizes that people’s individual lives are governed by un-earned, un-deserved, un-chosen injustices and advantages based on everything from race and gender to family connections and heredity to injury, abuse, and disability. Rawls dissociates himself from any utopian impossibility, but looks for an approach to a “fair system” just process, a forward-moving philosophy of social, political, and economic justice.^{13,14,15,16}

Rawls posits a hypothetical initial condition of equality derived behind a “veil of ignorance.”^{17,18,19} If we made our society’s rules and policies without knowing how we’d be affected personally by those rules and policies – if we could not know what race or gender, what family connections, what intellect or health or disabilities or income would be ours – what rules and policies would we make to govern society? What regulations would produce fairness of opportunity for every individual – fair opportunity to participate in the decisions that affect our lives, fair opportunity for betterment?²⁰

I want to slow down here to consider Rawls’s veil of ignorance and what he calls the “original position,”²¹ this hypothetical situation of organizing society based on having no self-interest to protect.²² This is essentially a hurricane-force exercise of empathy. If I were not this person, with this history and these assets, but were instead a little African-American girl, the fourth child of a single mother living in a chaotic urban slum, what government policies would serve my life’s opportunities? What if I knew that I might be an emotionally disabled person, or a man who wanted to work hard but lacked the mental facility to operate technical equipment, or a young sales clerk whose child would develop leukemia and need a bone marrow transplant and years of intensive medical care? What kind of society – shaped by what particular goals, priorities, and policies – would I hope for?

What about merit? What about the justice of meritocracy, in which excellence and accomplishment earn advantages? Rawls sees meritocracies as flawed in that they guarantee increasing advantage for those who already hold the best cards. He describes and discusses what he calls the unfair “lottery” of entitlements and endowments that fall to the already-advantaged.^{23,24} According to Rawls, we don’t earn intelligence, family connections, good health, race, and so on – the very attributes that largely determine excellence and accomplishment. For example, I am white, male, healthy, fairly bright, the son of educated parents who could afford to send me to college, who taught me open-

minded critical thinking, and who brought me into the rarified society of this Holland Professional Club.

Rawls also critiques the moral limits of contracts. Contracts are rarely agreements between equals; people come to deals from unequal, sometimes severely unequal positions, and many consents are much more unfair than “free.” For Rawls, the social contract that is the foundation of society must arise from the hypothetical original condition of equality, from behind this veil of ignorance.²⁵

Rawls recognizes that individual human conditions – benefits, honors, assets – are inevitably unequal. He does not argue for everything to be divided up and distributed equally. Instead, Rawls proposes what he calls “The Difference Principle.”^{26,27} Human history has used distribution justice based on:

- 1) hierarchy determined by birth,
- 2) unregulated markets with supposed but false equality of opportunity, and
- 3) meritocracy in which unearned “lottery” advantages determine opportunity.²⁸

Rawls’ Difference Principle insists that every inequality produced by a rule or policy must benefit the least advantaged²⁹ – must *decrease relative inequalities*.³⁰ Not “trickle down,” but “last first” – because advantaged injustices come with their own inherent momentum for growth.

John Rawls’s Veil of Ignorance and Difference Principle sculpt a justice strikingly different from a justice founded on traditional American Individualism. He advises a society with profoundly different priorities and goals from ours – a society dedicated to democratic justice of opportunity rather than a society in thrall to the protection of privilege and the religion of unfettered markets.

I, Tom Arendshorst, am pretty happy with my life as it is. I’d like to lose thirty pounds, wish my younger son’s life were easier, and would prefer to not be growing more forgetful. But I’m thankful that I live in the United States and have an advantaged prosperous existence. I value that I am free to make important choices that direct my life. I appreciate the benefits and entitlements that have come to me in our American Individualist society, through heredity, my own hard work and decisions, and by way of blind luck. I drive a car that burns gas; I pay only occasional heed to poor and hurting people outside my little circle; and I do things every day to advance my personal, individual comfort. I basically live by society’s rules, am grateful that those rules almost always work in my material favor, and do not long to live the life of a downtrodden or afflicted or homogenized American Individual. American Individualism – our amalgam of utilitarianism, libertarianism, market capitalism, with some leavening of socialism – has been very good to me.

But I worry. Maybe it's my nature to worry. Where is our system headed? Are we basing our rules of the game on the right kind of justice? It's my experience that injustices grow, and make things worse. Attempts to relive injustice don't really fix anything 100%, but they either slow the downhill degradation of society or even make the world a little better.

During our lifetimes I believe we've seen a shift in the relative priorities of American Individualism and American Common Good. The First Great Depression, World War II, the Marshall Plan, labor unionization, the emergence of human and civil rights movements, and the dismantling of global colonialism gave rise to a United States very different from that of the 1920s, an America blessed with growing awareness and active provision for the Common Good. We were concerned with our individual self-interest, yes, always – but we were also concerned with Tragedies of the Commons: DDT and the explosion of technology's unintended consequences, the military-industrial complex, nuclear weapons and potential holocaust, the vulnerability of the entire economy to unemployment, and more. Through the post-World War II era, different democratic societies have searched for a balance between Individualism and Common Good, and for strategies to effectively avoid or deal with tragedies of the commons. Many European societies have blended these priorities, while our American society has held more tightly to the values of individualism. Political and economic forces have swung the balance between American Individualism and American Common Good strongly away from communal concerns. Away from a vision of just society whose goal is fairness of opportunity and long-term sustainability.

At the same time, a peculiar shift has developed among the American people. At the same time that American governing decisions have swung more strongly toward the ideology of individualism, American citizens' actual practice and faith in that individualism appears to be waning, fading. The International Social Survey Programme, which has tracked social values annually for three decades, reported in 2006 that, when grouped with Western European societies, people in the United States were least likely to affirm that in exceptional circumstances they should follow their own consciences rather than the law; Americans were nearly the least likely to say that “right or wrong should be a matter of personal conscience;” and people in the U.S. were least likely to disagree with the statement, “People should support their country even if the country is in the wrong.” While our culture touts American Individualism, average Americans have become compliant group-followers, more bovine than Western Europeans and Japanese people. What do these realities suggest about American Individualism?³¹

Most of my growing up (as much as that has happened) occurred here in Holland. The

earliest concept I can recall of the American political-social divide was that conservatives believed in conserving what was – rules and patterns – and liberals believed in changing rules and patterns.

Over time I've encountered other characterizations of the American political-social divide. One suggests that conservatives approach issues from an “*authoritative* parent” mindset, while liberals see those same issues from a “*nurturing* parent” set of values. People feel divided over the willingness to be taxed, over what taxes should pay for, over attitudes about racism and inclusion, over big business versus labor, over militarism versus limitation of the military.

But the most crucial divide among U.S. Americans, I believe, is between differing concepts of justice, a division centered on where a just, right society finds the balance between Individualism on one hand and Common Good on the other --- between the priority of individual liberties and the priority of the overall community's needs. Knowing that social, economic, and political systems are inextricably woven and fused together, what is social, political, and economic justice?

Thomas Jefferson wrote: “Yes, we did produce a near-perfect republic. But will they keep it? Or will they, in the enjoyment of plenty, lose the memory of freedom? Material abundance without character is the surest way to destruction.” I can read in Jefferson’s warning a strong vindication of a libertarian priority of individual liberties. But I can just easily read in Jefferson’s warning his concern “for liberty and justice for all,” an admonition to rise far above self-interest, above “material abundance.” What is “character”? What is “freedom”? Whose freedom?

It may be impossible to do this right. Even our Founding Fathers, when they creating the U.S. Constitution, one of humanity’s greatest governing achievements, screwed up. The Constitution is a document and process that changed human history, but it was also deeply flawed and cobbled together in order to gain the approval of a bunch of wealthy landowners at a particular moment. In guaranteeing the legality of human slavery, the Constitution doomed our nation to near annihilation and enduring racism. The individual value and freedom of some was chosen over the value and freedom of many others. Privilege and property were protected.

Is there a way to affirm both the core meaning of individualism – an insistence on the transcendent value of the person – and the core insight of communitarianism – the recognition that the richest forms of individuality can only be achieved in sustainable relationships with others? How can we “acknowledge the moral weight

of community while also giving scope to human freedom?”³²

This dilemma of how to divide priority between individual and communal rights and needs is resolved by each of us according to our personal understanding of justice. Perhaps for some people that resolution is consistently clear; we might call such deciders “extremists” on one end or the other. Maybe one end or the other is more wise than all the rest of us who wrestle with this dilemma of how much, and in what ways, to structure our society to favor the Common Good or Individual Autonomy, how much to protect the interests of the many together and the interests that each one holds. Knotted into this is the quandary of: How much should we prioritize today’s urgencies versus the future’s needs?

I believe each of the following current American issues that divide our nation’s intent and future are essentially divisions along the ridge-line of Individual Liberty versus the Needs of All, the Common Good. Each risks The Tragedy of the Commons.

- Handgun “rights”
- Public education
- Food and basic support for needy children, families, and the unemployable
- Environmental recovery and protection (*In a market morality, oxygen has no “value”*)
- Taxation, choosing between ownership of earnings and duty to common concerns
- Voters’ access to real decision-making process
- Criminal justice and imprisonment
- Structure of the economy
- Definition of “national interest”

How America defines Justice --- our governing concept of what is social, political, and economic justice – will determine how our United States will sort out and make the decisions that will determine our future. Just decisions demand that we find and know the perfect balance between individualism and communalism.

What will we decide?

¹ <http://www.britannica.com/individualism>: “Individualism” on Encyclopaedia Britannica Online

² <http://thefreedictionary.com/individualism>: “Individualism” on the Free Dictionary

³ Sandel, Michael, *Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do?*, (New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009) pp 34-37.

⁴ *Ibid*, pp 48-54.

⁵ Rawls, John, *A Theory of Justice, Revised* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. 160-168

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- ⁶ Sandel, Michael, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*, (New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009) pp
- ⁷ Hardin, Garrett, "The Tragedy of the Commons," *Science*: 162 (1968): 1243-1248.
- ⁸ Madison, James, *The Federalist No. 51*, "The Structure of the Government Must Furnish the Proper Checks and Balances Between the Different Departments," September 6, 1788; <http://www.constitution.org/fed/federa51.htm>
- ⁹ Rawls, John, *A Theory of Justice, Revised* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. 10
- ¹⁰ Ibid, p. 53
- ¹¹ Ibid, p. 63-65
- ¹² Rawls, John, *Justice as Fairness* (Cambridge, MA and London, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), pp 42-45.
- ¹³ Rawls, John, *A Theory of Justice, Revised* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. 12
- ¹⁴ Rawls, John, *Justice as Fairness* (Cambridge, MA and London, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001),
- ¹⁵ Rawls, John, *A Theory of Justice, Revised* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. 228-285
- ¹⁶ Rawls, John, *Justice as Fairness* (Cambridge, MA and London, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), pp 50-55.
- ¹⁷ Rawls, John, *A Theory of Justice, Revised* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. 11
- ¹⁸ Ibid, p. 118-122
- ¹⁹ Sandel, Michael, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*, (New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009) pp 141-142.
- ²⁰ Rawls, John, *A Theory of Justice, Revised* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. 73-86
- ²¹ Rawls, John, *Justice as Fairness* (Cambridge, MA and London, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), pp 80-89.
- ²² Sandel, Michael, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*, (New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009) pp 141-142.
- ²³ Sandel, Michael, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*, (New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009) p154.
- ²⁴ Rawls, John, *A Theory of Justice, Revised* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), pp. 62-65, 88-89.
- ²⁵ Sandel, Michael, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*, (New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009) pp 142-151.
- ²⁶ Rawls, John, *A Theory of Justice, Revised* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), pp. 65-73
- ²⁷ Rawls, John, *Justice as Fairness* (Cambridge, MA and London, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), pp 61-65.
- ²⁸ Sandel, Michael, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*, (New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009) p 157.
- ²⁹ Ibid, pp 151-153.
- ³⁰ Rawls, John, *A Theory of Justice, Revised* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. 86-93.
- ³¹ International Social Survey Programme 2006 (Role of Government IV); <http://zacat.gesis.org/webview/index.jsp?object=http://zacat.gesis.org/obj/fStudy/ZA4700>
- ³² Sandel, Michael, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*, (New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009) p 221.