

# The Concept of Individualism in the Liberal theories of Locke, Kant and Mill

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**Abstract:** The present paper deals with the theory of liberalism given by philosophers like John Locke, Immanuel Kant and J. S. Mill. Locke, being often credited as the father of modern liberalism, advocated individualism. He made right to life, liberty and property as basic rights. Kant further developed the theory of liberalism in terms of autonomy, tolerance and sovereignty. Lastly, Mill included Utilitarianism in order to support liberalism. Hence, liberalism as a philosophical concept embraces beliefs and opinions of almost two centuries.

**Keywords:** liberalism, individualism, liberty, autonomy, tolerance, utilitarianism.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I have made an attempt to discuss and develop the liberal notions of Locke, Kant and Mill. Liberalism is a political movement that stressed on the values of liberty, autonomy, justice, rationality, equality and property that started during the period of Greeks. The Age of Enlightenment made liberalism a distinct political movement. Liberals opposed the absolute power that the government possessed and tried to replace it with participatory democracy where everyone abides by the law. The method I have adopted here is comparative, critical, and evaluative.

## 2. THE CONCEPT OF INDIVIDUALISM

This section examines the notion of individualism given by three theorists- John Locke, Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill. Even though the fundamental concept remains the same, each of them gave their own theory of individualism which examines the human nature and criticizes the inequalities or activities that prevailed during their times. 'Individualism' is a nineteenth century term which is used in great many ways and in various contexts. It has played a dominant role in shaping the ideologies of Europe and America.<sup>1</sup>

Locke's theory of individualism was a critique of the feudal system. Kant's individualism gave sanctity to individual autonomy and freedom to come out of the dependence on guidance of another person and be enlightened. J. S. Mill argued that one needs to be allowed to choose her own course of action. Interference should be considered as unnatural. The seventeenth century saw the havoc created by the feudal system in a massive scale. There existed a section that was in an advantaged situation and could afford all the luxuries like education, holding lands etc. It was a social injustice on the part of the peasants as they sold their labor and lived under their feudal lords. All they can do is to change their master and could not actually come out of that system. This led Locke to come up with his theory of individualism where he put forth the natural rights (life, liberty and property) theory.<sup>2</sup>

In a state of nature or a situation prior to the civil society, first, an individual is free as no one has authority over him other than the creator; second, he is naturally rational; third, he is equal in the sense that since everyone is endowed with the same rational faculty, nobody can overpower him. They have the same needs and the same rights to pursue them; and last, being equal, individuals need to respect each other. They have a state of liberty but not license:

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<sup>1</sup> Lukes, Steven, (1971), "The Meanings of 'Individualism'", in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 32, No. 1, University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 45-66.

<sup>2</sup> Locke, John, (1990), *Second Treatise on Government*, Prometheus Books, New York, p 19

“...one of license: though man in that state have an uncountable liberty to dispose of his person or possessions, yet he has not liberty to destroy himself, or so much as any creature in his possession, but where some nobler use than its bare preservation calls for it”<sup>3</sup>

The state of nature has a law of nature to govern which everyone must obey. Anyone violating the law would be punished by the other individuals. Men have natural right not only to freedom and property, but also to punish those who violate the law of nature. One must restrain from pervading others' rights. Coercion is only allowed when one's property is at stake.

In the state of nature, people live by the laws of reason. And when they fail to follow this law, their interests clash and they enter into a state of war. In a state of war, the offended party declares war against the other party. Since everyone is equal and no one has authority over another, one can kill another person if he feels his justice is pervaded by someone. For Locke, one needs to cultivate and develop and regulate their lives in terms of reason to avoid entering into a state of war. For Locke, state of nature is a situation where men live by abiding to the laws of reason and without a superior authority over them on this earth.

For Locke, reason is the connecting link between ideas which leads us to knowledge or lead us away from mere opinion. Men have the right to punished in the state of nature but such a decision needs to be made with conscience and calm mental faculty. This power is only retributive. Moreover, this faculty of reason needs to be cultivated over the time and none is guilty till the time they are aware with the law. Till then they are under the guidance of an expert who helps one to build the capacity to understand the laws of reason. Locke wanted the individuals to follow certain laws of reason and avoid any form of monarchy which will eventually lead the individuals to self- rule. In those situations which exceed an individual's capacity to decide, the responsibility goes into the hands of majority.<sup>4</sup>

Locke made property the necessary foundation of human rights and liberal democracy. But there was a fear of invasion and enjoyment of property was unsafe and unsecure. This led the individuals to form a civil government which took care of their rights and properties and punish those who violate any law. They entered into a civil society by compromising a little bit of freedom unlike the state of nature.<sup>5</sup>

The formation of the government should be consensual whose aim must be to protect the rights of life, health, most importantly, possession or property. For Locke, Justice meant rightful ownership of lands whereby the harmony between individuals and the civil society is maintained. One is taken away from his justice when his labor is beyond his power. By doing so the feudal lords invited a state of war from their servants. In state of war the offended party can resolve the situation by killing the other party or if the offending party admits defeat and requests a ceasefire.<sup>6</sup> Use of force leads to the violation of laws of reason and hampers one's liberty and property. It destroys the peace and harmony that should prevail in a society. For Locke “whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed.”<sup>7</sup> According to it, the peasants had the right to kill their masters for injustice done on their part.

Locke's notion of the property rights involved various debates and contestation. According to Locke, first, one may only appropriate as much as one can use before it spoils; second, one must leave ‘enough and as good’ for others ; and third, appropriate property by mixing one's own labor. However, C. B. Macpherson felt all of the above requirements were problematic. The first requirement got refuted with the invention of monetary system. The value can be stored in a medium that does not spoil. Regarding the second one, Macpherson states that “as the private property increases productivity, everyone can accumulate more than what is necessary.”<sup>8</sup>

The gist of Locke's individualism can be explained in the following- men are free and equal because the creator grants life. No one has authority over another other than the creator. The fear of invasion led men to enter into a state of war which necessitated the formation of a civil government. It took away the liberty of the individual which in turn provided security to their rights. However, Locke considered the state of nature to be an ideal society where people would abide by the laws of reason and cooperate with other fellow members without the interference of any government.

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p 19.

<sup>4</sup> Locke, John, (1990), *Second Treatise on Government*, p. 32.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 10-18.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 12

<sup>8</sup> Macpherson, C. B., (1962), *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*, Clarendon Press, pp. 204-213.

Even though Locke's theories helped in removing slavery and led to enlightenment, it had its own shortcomings. C. B. Macpherson in his book *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* claimed that Locke's liberalism formed a capitalist market where societies are market relations. The rights and interests of the members of such a society are taken care by the political society.<sup>9</sup> Mill attacked Locke's individualism in his work *On Liberty* where he gave sanctity to human life even in conflict with the majority. He argued that Locke's individualism gave importance to the rule of majority which led him to come up with a theory supporting the sovereignty except in the instances of harm. He considered that government to be the best that governs the least. Men are naturally rational who can decide what is best and i.e. without any coercion from government. Social justice can only take place when men are allowed to pursue their form of good life which in turn may not harm others' lives.<sup>10</sup>

Kant being a political liberalist and an individualist gave prominence to the welfare of the individuals over any values and principles. His works have been related to an "allegiance to the inviolability of the individual and a prioritization of personal autonomy."<sup>11</sup> In his work "Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" he claims that a person is naturally free. An individual's freedom is restricted by prejudices, dogmas, social pressures etc. In order to claim his right for freedom, he needs to rise above those prejudices and dogmas and must express freely. He needs to think for himself and take decisions without the influence of any external or internal forces.<sup>12</sup>

Regarding the notions of freedom and autonomy of individual at an individual level, Kant gave his model of Categorical Imperative. Even though Kant's categorical imperative can be seen as a necessary principle of morality, there are certain dilemmas involved in it as it only takes into consideration the people at a private level.

Kant claims that the immaturity in a man is not because of any lack of understanding; what it lacks is resolution and courage. And removal of such immaturity will lead to Enlightenment.<sup>13</sup> It was Kant who tried to give a definition of how a moral action ought to be in conformity with the Enlightenment Rationality. In order to define morality, Kant's Categorical Imperative is the only principle that can be taken into account. The principles or the maxims involved in it are:

First, "act only on those maxims through which you can at the same time will that it should become a Universal Law."<sup>14</sup>

Second, "act in such a way that you always treat humanity as an end."<sup>15</sup>

Third, "act as if you were through your maxim a law making member of a kingdom of ends."<sup>16</sup>

Kant presupposes freedom to be the primary moral right of a man that ceases if one interferes in others freedom.<sup>17</sup> Even though Kant's Categorical Imperative seems to be unrealistic in this globalized world, it is important as we need a certain model of morality to look upon at. Kant considered human freedom to be the prerequisite of rationality. And a person is rational if she acts according to the moral laws or the categorical imperative. One must be given enough liberty to participate in a social interaction, involving in agreement and disagreement etc., so that enhancement of knowledge takes place. Such a critical interaction is only possible when one make use of his reason. Unfortunately, people could not realize this natural right of theirs. Hence, it led him to preach freedom and equality.<sup>18</sup>

In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, he explained individualism as; a person by the faculty of reason can choose what is right and wrong and can decide to take the future course of action. Individual must be always considered as an

<sup>9</sup> Macpherson, C. B., (1962), *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism, Hobbes to Locke*, Clarendon Press, pp. 194-196.

<sup>10</sup> Mill, John Stuart, (1993), *On Liberty*, Bantam Classics, New York, p. 64.

<sup>11</sup> Jackson, Liz, (2007), "The Individualist? The Autonomy of reason in Kant's philosophy and educational views", Springer, USA., p. 335.

<sup>12</sup> Kant, Immanuel. "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" in (ed.) J. Schmidt, *What is Enlightenment? : Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Question*, University of California Press, California, 1996, pp. 58.

<sup>13</sup> Kant, Immanuel, (1986), *Was ist Aufklärung: Thesen und Definitionen*, Reclam, Stuttgart, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Paton, H.J., (1969), *The Moral Law: Kant's Groundwork of Metaphysics of Morals*, London, Hutchinson University Library, p. 67.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>17</sup> Kant, Immanuel, (1939), *Rechtslehre Einleitung*, p. 40, quotation take from Vaughan, C.E., *Studies in the History of Political Philosophy Before and After Rousseau*, Manchester University Press, p. 77.

<sup>18</sup> Jackson, Liz, (2007), "The Individualist? The Autonomy of reason in Kant's philosophy and educational views", Springer, USA, p. 336.

'end' rather than a 'means' because he is matured enough to formulate his own laws and follow them as well. Since, categorical imperative is an inward looking model of morality, one need to be free from external forces in order to follow it. For Kant, autonomous reason is the most valuable faculty a person has. One needs to follow or act on principles that have no 'ungrounded "authority"'.<sup>19</sup> Reason "is the principle of thinking and acting on principles all can freely adopt".<sup>20</sup>

For Kant, being autonomous or freedom is the most necessary thing an individual must possess. Accepting anyone's interference or influence would be to shed off one's "person hood". In a liberal state, according to Kant, the members must respect one self and others; violation of one's dignity is strictly prohibited. None (a single person, a group or for that matter the state) can force an individual to enslave someone. But, no matter how much dignity and respect is provided to person, if one cannot accomplish something by their own effort, no autonomy would be effective. One needs to get rid of external as well as internal conflicts. Hence, he needs to be free and think rationally.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, the major challenge facing mankind is to create a society where there is no interference or influence on the freedom or liberty of a person and a rational thinking prevails. For that matter, Kant says that a civil construction needs to be framed where by its role is to protect the rights of its members without any coercion. It may be allowed when the rights of its members are at stake, which will lead to the progress of the humanity.<sup>22</sup>

Kant's moral and political philosophy came under scrutiny when it was claimed that the role of state is only effective during invasion of freedom. In its absence, the role of the state is inactive. Moreover, Kant should not be viewed as an individualist because his theory could only defend individual freedom when it is enacted towards the interest of the society. It remains inactive when the interests of the individual and the society differ.

John Stuart Mill's theory of individualism was a critique of Locke's individualism. Locke based his theory on theological concepts. Kant based his on metaphysical concepts like freewill. And Mill's theory is founded on psychological concepts regarding pleasure and pain. Mill rejected the concept of a "social contract" for solving any problems prevailing in the societies. Mill considered every individual to be naturally rational and they must act keeping in mind that their action must not harm anyone. As a result, the social contract would prove to be meaningless. Hence, his theory of individualism came into prominence.<sup>23</sup>

Mill believed that there is an ultimate principle in the actions of the humans which he termed as 'Greatest Happiness Principle':

"...actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain, by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure."<sup>24</sup>

Mill considered pleasures and pain to be the ultimate ends that everyone must desire. Men must desire those things that promote happiness and prevent pain.

Even though Mill did not provide any concrete definition of individualism, he nevertheless associated various goods with it. Mill gave sanctity to human life and considered well-being and happiness is only possible if men promote individuality. Mill argued that men must not act in accordance with the customs; he needs to act, pursue and live a life through deliberating and reflecting every aspect of life.<sup>25</sup> As a result, it brings enlightenment among men by not following and questioning earlier beliefs.

Individuality in a man, as Mill claims, also enhances one's capabilities and talents. By using his faculty of reasoning one can plan her life and attain her aims and goals. One must always decide and choose without any interference and influence of others. And men need to choose or decide according to their nature. Every individual has a nature that is unique and particular to itself. Since, it is very difficult to know one's nature, one must be allowed to carry out experiments regarding

<sup>19</sup> O' Neill, O., (1992), *The Cambridge companion to Kant*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 338-339.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Kant, Immanuel, (1981), *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Moral*, trans. by James W. Ellington, Indianapolis: Hackett, pp. 35-41.

<sup>22</sup> Kant, Immanuel, (1991), *Kant: Political Writings*, edited by Hans Reiss. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, pp. 45-46.

<sup>23</sup> Mill, John Stuart, (1993), *On Liberty*, Bantam Classics, New York, pp. 39-48.

<sup>24</sup> Mill, John Stuart, (1993), *Utilitarianism*, Bantam Classics, New York, p. 144.

<sup>25</sup> Mill, John Stuart, (1993), *On Liberty*, pp. 39-48.

their choices and decisions. It may not always lead to happiness but it may help the individual form what he may refrain from. It is necessary to choose or decide that which suits our nature. For that matter, a person needs to be provided with freedom of speech and action. Interference is accepted when there is a possibility of harming others by one's action or the choices and decisions have always led to worse consequences earlier.<sup>26</sup>

Further, Mill states that as an expression of his nature, his desires and impulses must be his own. In a nut shell, it can be stated that a person achieves individuality when his desires and impulses are his own and make decisions and choices by deliberating to attain certain ends that are in harmony with one's nature.

Now, the question arises: what about those who think that promoting one's individuality may not be beneficial for them. Mill would answer that they must learn to tolerate the individuality and freedom of others. Even though they may not agree with Mill, they must let others to attain their desired ends. They must refrain from invading one's liberty.

Unlike Kant who equated freedom with some metaphysical entity (like freewill), Mill considered freedom is a means to attain desirous ends after deliberation that can be useful in directing our lives. But if such liberty does not lead to any fruitful result or may harm another, then his liberty can be invaded. This invasion may not violate the liberty principle because invasion is only allowed when someone's life is at stake. Mill had realized that even though men may be naturally rational, their reasoning may get swayed by certain external or internal forces. Hence, they must allow their liberty to be invaded by a supreme power without actually violating the liberty principle

### 3. CONCLUSION

It is concerned with expounding and critically examining the contending claims on normative concepts like identity, right, freedom, equality, autonomy, dignity and so on in liberalism of Locke, Kant and Mill with individualisms at the centre of the normative discourse. For instance, Locke propagated individual's right to life, liberty and property, Kant developed individual right, autonomy, dignity, freedom, tolerance, etc. and Mill attempted to defend individual's right to his life, health, liberty, possessions/ property etc.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 39.