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For the Greater Good of All: Perspectives on Individualism, Society, and Leadership


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For the Greater Good of All

Perspectives on Individualism, Society, and Leadership

Edited by
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palgrave
macmillan

INTRODUCTION

Perspectives on Individualism, Collectivism, and the Greater Good

DONELSON R. FORSYTH AND
CRYSTAL L. HOYT

It has been called “the master problem” of social life: What is the connection between the individual and the collective, including groups, organizations, communities, and society itself? Healthy adult human beings can survive apart from other members of the species, yet across individuals, societies, and eras, humans consistently seek inclusion in the collective, where they must balance their personal needs and desires against the demands and requirements of their groups. Some never sink too deeply into the larger collective, for they remain individualists who are so self-reliant that they refuse to rely on others or concern themselves with others’ outcomes. Other people, in contrast, put the collective’s interests before their own personal needs, sacrificing personal gain for what is often called “the greater good.”

Many problems in modern life can be traced, at least in part, to the basic issue of the tension between the individual and their greater good. Leaders must make choices that will yield benefits for the constituents, but in most cases these choices will leave some members of the collective unsatisfied. In the political arena, those who occupy different positions on the liberal-conservative continuum have very different views on the rights of individuals, and the rights of the collective. In business, questions of corporate responsibility arise in debates over shareholder rights and responsibility to the community where the corporation is

located. In educational settings teachers must continually strive to meet the needs of the entire group of learners, realizing that their focus may leave some learners struggling and others unchallenged. Policymakers must continually struggle to keep their ultimate ends in view as they balance the welfare of all against the rights and wishes of individuals. Members of groups, including couples, families, teams, and even gangs, must weigh their own personal needs against those of the group as a whole. At every turn the variations in individual perspectives on human rights and potentials, contrasting philosophies on social justice and political structure, and even debates over the best solutions to pressing social problems reflect this vital tension between the one and the many.

A Multidisciplinary Perspective on Individualism and Collectivism

The current volume, in seeking to understand the origins and implications of an individualistic and a collective perspective on human affairs, turns to the collective for guidance; in this case, the collective of many disciplines rather than only one. Its chapters draw together conceptual insights and empirical observations from a wide range of disciplines; fields as different as psychology, anthropology, history, philosophy, political science, and biology examine key questions about the individual-collective connection. Each chapter offers its own unique, but informative, perspective, and so they could be sequenced in any order. The arrangement that we selected is somewhat arbitrary then, starting as it does with biological and psychological approaches, shifting toward more historical and interpersonal perspectives, before concluding with analyses of practical implications.

Sarah Brosnan, a primatologist, begins the analysis by drawing insights about collective effort from studies of cooperative behavior of primates. Her work illustrates the conceptual clarity to be gained by linking the relatively ambiguous idea of the "collective good" to a more biologically discernable end state: evolutionary fitness. To promote one's own outcomes over that of others is self-serving, but so are actions that increase the chances for the survival of one's genes in future generations. Cooperation, rendering aid, and even self-injurious altruism may appear to require invoking evolutionarily atypical motivations, but in reality these actions may all be adaptive

ones in certain social environments. Brosnan, going down to the biological level of analysis, suggests that altruistic actions require no special explanation evolutionarily speaking, for in many cases the overall fitness of the individual is enhanced when he or she cooperates with others. Moving beyond early conceptions of general instincts and motivations, Brosnan's work makes it clear that these inherited tendencies are nuanced ones—finely tuned adaptations to specific situations involving interdependent outcomes. Brosnan and her colleagues have created, in a sense, situations requiring leadership in their studies. In one study, for example, two capuchin monkeys must work collaboratively to secure a reward, but the reward is given to only one of the monkeys who could keep it all for herself. She does not, however: she shares. Although this action can be due to a wide range of instinctive and learned factors, it suggests that the capuchin who controls the resources recognizes her dependence on the other. It accounts for two of the great riddles of leadership: Why would anyone accept the influence of another individual? And why do those who acquire the resource, and could keep it all for themselves, nonetheless share?

Daniel Batson, a social psychologist, extends the analysis to the psychological level, positing the central importance of a specific psychological mechanism—empathy—in producing actions that benefit others. Batson's intriguing experimental work illustrates, again and again, that altruistic actions are not exceptional ones: that they occur when individuals experience empathic concern for others. He distinguishes between individuals who contribute to the collective to reduce their own personal distress, and those who help only because they recognize others' needs. Both egoistic and empathic helpers become upset when they see others suffering, but empathic bystanders describe themselves as concerned, softhearted, compassionate, sympathetic, and moved. Distressed helpers, in contrast, feel alarmed, grieved, upset, worried, disturbed, or perturbed. These differing emotional reactions also lead to differences in helpfulness, for egoistic people are not particularly helpful if they can easily escape, physically or psychologically, from the distressing situation. Empathic people, in contrast, suffer because someone else is suffering, so their help is more enduring. Through a series of studies Batson identifies, repeatedly, the key role that empathy plays in elevating cooperation, altruism, and devotion to the needs of others.

Cultural neuroscientists Joan Chiao, Lisa Hechtman, and Narun Pornpattananangkul examine the role of cultural and biological forces

involved in empathy and other capacities that promote the collective good. As cultural neuroscientists, they consider both cultural and genetic selection when trying to understand how the human brain has evolved to facilitate social group living. Chiao and her colleagues integrate recent research, demonstrating that the neural responses underlying empathy, altruism, and fairness demonstrate robust cultural variation. They describe the evolutionary process as bidirectional with genetic and neural processes both facilitating the emergence and transmission of culture as well as being shaped by culture. Chiao's research group finds that this bidirectional, culture-gene coevolution process applies to the cultural values of individualism and collectivism and the serotonin transporter gene. Individualism and collectivism are cultural values that differ in how people define themselves relative to their environment, ranging from thinking of people as independent to highly interconnected, respectively. Chiao's research supports the argument that collectivist cultural values have persisted, at least in part, to buffer individuals who have a genetic predisposition to experience heightened negative emotion from affective disorders. They also review research demonstrating that these cultural values of individualism and collectivism appear to shape the neural responses humans have when thinking about themselves in relation to others. After demonstrating how individual capacities that promote the collective good are by-products of both cultural and biological forces, the chapter ends with a discussion of how cultural neuroscience can shed light on three important issues of the collective good: interethnic ideology, international aid, and philanthropy. The important and risky role of philanthropy in the greater good is taken up in a later chapter by Moody.

Eric Daniels, a historian, examines the complex mutation of the concept of individualism from the initial founding of America to its more contemporary expression in the work of philosopher and novelist Ayn Rand (1957/1992). Daniels, taking a historical perspective, explores the meaning of the term individualism, and traces its use and misuse in American politics and civil discourse. Americans are often thought of as "rugged individualists," due in part to the founders' emphasis on individual rights, autonomy, and freedom, but also because of the use of this word by the political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville (1835/1990) in his famed book *Democracy in America*. As Daniels explains, Tocqueville's conception of individualism was complex and nuanced, for it recognized the unique combination of American independence, concern for family, willingness to join local

community groups and organizations, and commitment to shared governance. To Tocqueville, individualism did not mean isolation or selfishness, but rather a furthering of one's own outcomes through service to others. Over time, however, this particular concept of individualism changed, particularly as used by U.S. President Herbert Hoover, social philosopher and educator John Dewey, and the novelist/philosopher Ayn Rand. Daniels concludes that individualism is a largely misunderstood notion, for it is both a descriptive account of interrelated themes that define some societies, and a prescriptive theory that recommends how a society should be best organized. He concludes that, depending on the final resolution of these perspectives, individualism may be consistent with, rather than antagonistic to, the concept of shared values and the collective good.

Organizational psychologist Edwin Locke is not so sure. Drawing on his years of study of the circumstances that promote and impede human productivity, as well as the insights provided by Ayn Rand, Locke is, to use perhaps too mild a word, suspicious of the potential alignment of a concern for the common good with an individualistic orientation. Locke's chapter begins by comparing and contrasting the notions of collectivism and individualism from metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and political perspectives. Locke takes a different view on individualism and collectivism from others in this volume: to Locke, individualism refers to every individual in society having the right to pursue their own self-interest without violating others' rights, whereas he defines collectivism as the subordination of the individual to the group. Locke then argues that true individualism has never been realized and that even in the most individualistic country in the world, the United States, both the philosophical and economic systems represent a compromise of individualism mixed with collectivism. In addition to championing individualism in governments, Locke highlights the importance of individualism in the business world explaining that there is no conflict between working for oneself and for a company and that good company leaders are duty-bound to be selfish. He ends the chapter with a cautionary note of the potential disastrous outcomes of an overly altruistic and collectivistic society and warns that the United States may be approaching the dystopian society found in Rand's (1957/1992) *Atlas Shrugged*.

Brian Hayden is concerned with a fundamental anthropological question: Why did humans shift from a relatively communal orientation characteristic of the bands in hunter/gatherer societies to a

more hierarchical, class-based, centralized form of social organization seen in tribes, chiefdoms, and states? He traces his research and thinking on this puzzling question, as he moves from a systems view of social organization to one that seeks to consider the evolutionary functions and foundations of society. Anthropological investigations indicate that humans survived, for 99 percent of the species' history, in small mobile groups whose flat, communal organization regulated population, mandated fairness in resource distribution, and increased each individual's chances of survival in the difficult and unpredictable ecological niche humans occupied. As the climate shifts calmed and generation after generation faced a stable environment in the upper Pleistocene and early Holocene epochs, the land could support humans in larger numbers, and these larger aggregations required more in terms of social organizational structures. Those individuals who found themselves at the hub or center of these networks of association took on the duties required of their position to benefit the community, but Hayden's field studies also suggest that these emerging leaders often used their position to exploit, rather than support, the greater good. Hayden concludes that each individual, and each society, has within it the capacity to shift from a communal focus to a more self-centered, self-protective focus depending on circumstances and internal as well as external threats.

Political scientist Neil Mitchell uses the distinction between actions taken to promote personal interests over collective ones to clarify fundamental questions about leaders and their commitment to the greater good. He examines the basic problem inherent in civil war: violence, on a large scale, when the collective is splintered and finds itself at odds with itself. Mitchell addresses the very real harm done to millions of people, both civilians and combatants, by comparing two periods of political unrest: England's civil war involving Cromwell's attack on Charles I and Lenin's revolution, which resulted in the overthrow of the Romanovs. He explores the motives and methods of the leader of the collective, and how a leader who acts in ways that are consistent with those advanced by Machiavelli (1977) in his treatise *The Prince* might cause greater harm to the collective than one who acts with restraint and, perhaps, a more collectivistic orientation. The chapter also introduces the very basic problem of the leader's uncertainty when regulating the actions of his or her agents, for the leader cannot be certain that they will act in the collective's best interests (assuming the leader is so acting). Mitchell compares two great leaders of the recent era, Cromwell and Lenin, to conclude

that their differences in concern for social justice and ethics led to very different outcomes for the collectives they supposedly served.

The final chapters of the book consider the practical implications of humans' capacity to function as both independent, autonomous individuals and as cooperative, collaborating members of collectives. Michael Moody, a sociologist, explores the nature of philanthropy, which he defines broadly as voluntary, freely done action that serves the public good. He recognizes, and even champions, the work of the humanitarian philanthropist, and provides several examples of good works that have benefited the many. He suggests, however, that philanthropists must be ever mindful of the harm that their efforts may cause, suggesting that one must heed the Hippocratic Oath's dual emphasis on beneficence and nonmaleficence when engaged in charitable activities. Moody explores how this maxim to "seek to do good, but do no harm" helps shed light on both the goals and dilemmas of philanthropists by focusing on two prominent philanthropic organizations: the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Teach for America. Great good can result from philanthropy, but, as Moody demonstrates, attempting to do good is not easy and people often do not agree on what "good" means. However, it is these philanthropists, or moral leaders, who contribute to the ongoing debate, definition, and redefinition of what the greater good is in society. Moody demonstrates that doing good is much more than having good intentions and his list of possible harms is sobering—corruption, malfeasance, unintended harmful side effects, dependency and strained relations, reinforcement of the status quo, paternalism, moralization, and failure—suggesting that in some cases fools rush in where angels fear to tread. Moody ends the chapter offering suggestions to help these moral leaders minimize harm and maximize good with an ultimate admonition for philanthropists to not lose sight of the central element of the Oath: seek to do good.

Mark Snyder, a social psychologist, provides a fitting conclusion for the volume, for he seeks answers to the question "why do people volunteer?" Researchers have spent considerable time and energy examining when people respond in dire emergencies, but Snyder focuses on situations that require long-term and continuing assistance, care, and support. As Snyder notes, volunteerism is a remarkable form of behavior, for it seems so inconsistent with the self-focused rational decision-maker model of human beings. Volunteers donate their time and energy, and make considerable personal sacrifices, to help people. They act without coercion, and in many cases no one

would think worse of them if they did not volunteer. Volunteering is also an action that is rarely rushed into thoughtlessly, for it requires careful planning and strategy, and volunteers, by definition, serve without the prospect of financial recompense. Snyder examines the motivations of the followers, searching carefully for the motivational and situational factors that keep volunteers returning again and again to their work, and those who work to undermine volunteers' commitment to their cause.

Leadership and the Collective Good

The insightful analyses of the contributors to this volume underscore the practical complexities of the very notion of individualism and the common good. One thing that is apparent from this collection is that the relationship between individualism and the greater good is complex and highly dependent on the definition of individualism, a term that is largely misunderstood and debatable. Understanding the nature of the greater good is no less, and perhaps even more, complicated. These chapters point to a number of situational factors, including social organization and culture, that influence the extent to which the collective good is supported and the extent to which various prosocial behaviors, such as altruism, are adaptive. Likewise, prosocial behaviors are also shown to be impacted by individual-level factors including genetic predispositions, emotional reactions, collectivistic orientations, and individual actions. The practical importance of these situational and individual factors on both the willingness and effectiveness of people to contribute to their collectives is demonstrated through their impact on both philanthropy and volunteerism.

Each of these chapters also details, sometimes indirectly but in many cases explicitly, the close association between leadership and an understanding of and commitment to the collective and its welfare. Scholars are by no means in agreement when it comes to defining leadership, but many would accept as a working definition one that suggests it is a process of exchange and influence between individuals who are, in many cases, united in their pursuit of a common goal. Although those who use their position within a group, organization, or society to compel others to act, without regard to those others' desires and interests, could be called *leaders*, the dictator, the tyrant, and the despot are barred by some from the category of leader precisely because they ignore the interests of the collective. Those individuals who seem to

epitomize the rare but nonnull category of “great leader” are those who consistently act in ways that further the interests and outcomes of those they lead. One popular approach to leadership, known as servant leadership, stresses the selfless nature of leadership, as does—with a bit more finesse—James McGregor Burns (1978) who suggests that one who fails to act morally is not worthy of the label leader.

Moral righteousness is often in the eye of the beholder, but leaders are assumed to be motivated by their concern for others rather than their own needs. Although in both contemporary and evolutionarily older times leaders tended to prosper relative to those who followed, in some sense a life spent leading others is one spent in “public service” to others and sacrifice. In earlier times leaders put themselves at great risk, and although the advantages they accrued in terms of fitness were substantial, they stood to lose a great deal by taking on extra responsibility for helping others collaborate in the pursuit of shared goals. Leaders must, in many cases, also ask their followers to sacrifice for the good of the group. Is their success in such an undertaking more likely if followers recognize the rationality of such an undertaking; that by helping the collective they help themselves? Or is something more needed: must followers be able to empathize with other, less fortunate, individuals, or with the leader himself or herself? The chapters in this volume seek to illuminate the nature of the greater good, and in so doing illuminate the nature of leadership.

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