

## Finding Yourself

Dear Reader,

It has come to my attention that you lack a certain something. I am not sure what that something is nor could I, since I don't know who you are. As such, it puts me in a difficult situation to help you with your dilemma. You could be a strong, young man or a wise, old grandmother. Whatever the case may be, I cannot ignore your problem. I hope to serve you a bowl of perspective and perhaps serve it with a pinch of wisdom. However, it is up to you to choose to eat it.

Forget about your problem for a little bit; I will return to it later. First, I would like to explain the concept of individualism and my philosophy of it. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines individualism as being, "The belief that the needs of each person are more important than the needs of the whole society or group ...[ and] ... The actions or attitudes of a person who does things without being concerned about what other people will think" ("Individualism"). From these two definitions, it may be concluded that individualism is being oneself and placing one's needs above others. This is a horrible way of looking at individualism, and I have a different view.

As a small child my favorite way to spend my time was to play with friends. Often, when I was preparing to travel to a friend's house, my mother would say these parting words, "Have fun and be yourself." These words contain a sliver of wisdom. It is important to try to be one's self, but what does that actually mean? According to WorldOMeter, "The world population ... was 7.244 billion as of July 2014" (WorldOMeters). Each person is a distinct person. Frederick Douglas, in a letter to his former master, asserted this brilliantly when he wrote:

I am myself; you are yourself; we are two distinct persons, equal persons. What you are, I am.

You are a man, and so am I. God created both, and made us separate beings. I am not by nature bound to you, or you to me. Nature does not make your existence depend upon me, or mine to depend upon yours. I cannot walk upon your legs, or you upon mine. I cannot breathe for you,

or you for me; I must breathe for myself, and you for yourself. We are distinct persons, and are each equally provided with faculties necessary to our individual existence. (Douglass)

Despite everyone being a distinct individual, each part that makes up who one is can be found in someone else. I may live in a place where I am the only one who likes to eat shrimp, but there is probably at least one other person that likes to eat them too. So, if I like to eat shrimp, am I being myself or am I imitating this other person? It is odd to think about.

Let's assume for a moment that individualism means making decisions based on one's likes and dislikes regardless of outside forces. This seems like a great thing on the surface, but it comes with unexpected side effects. According to this definition, if every person in the world adhered to individualism, we would be like animals, only influenced by their own instinct and whim. The world would fall into anarchy. This is an extreme example and is unlikely to happen. However, this example shows what this current definition is lacking. It is important to understand that, as humans, it is in our nature to care about what others feel and think. As we grow up, we begin to create a sense of values and standards for ourselves. For example, just because I think killing someone might be fun doesn't mean that I will do it. We tend to give up some of our individuality in order to help the common good and be well liked by others.

The ideology that best shows this is collectivism. Collectivism is the opposite of individualism. In *The Objective Standard*, Biddle described collectivism as, "the idea that the individual's life belongs not to him but to the group or society of which he is merely a part, that he has no rights, and that he must sacrifice his values and goals for the group's 'greater good'" (Biddle). Each country's culture in the world today can be described as an individualist or collectivist society. The United States is an example of an individualistic country. The individual's rights and privileges outweigh the majority good. Japan is an example of a collectivist culture. Certain rights are withheld in order to help the majority. In collectivist

cultures, each person is seen as being a part of a group and their success or failure is tied to this group. For example, if a Japanese person is working for a business, then it is the business that they want to see succeed. They will be less likely to be motivated by individual benefits such as individual pay raise, reserved parking space, and higher position in the business. In *Zur Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie* (A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy) Karl Marx states "It is not men's consciousness which determines their being, but their social being which determines their consciousness" (Marx).

When looking at individualism vs. collectivism, I see reasons why a country may want to adopt either ideology. A country will become individualistic if the people believe that the individual is most happy when given individual freedoms and will be able to contribute better to society through personal initiative. Also, the individualistic country most likely believes that the individual is the source for moral reasoning and should be able to act according to their own beliefs. A country will become collectivist if the people believe that an individual is most happy when he is able to contribute to society and that moral concerns should be determined by a group of people and not the individual. Collectivist most likely would believe that individual freedoms should be restrained so that the entire country may benefit.

My own definition of individualism, as it relates to collectivism, would include this additional statement, "and that individuals will sacrifice some of their freedoms, of their own volition, for the common good, based on their own set of beliefs." This merges some of the ideas of both into one. However, it is still individualism because the decision power is retained by the individual and not given to a group. The difference of my definition and the original is that, in individualism, the individual is responsible for obtaining success without breaking their own set of beliefs.

Now I ask the question, so what? How does this apply to me? Why is that small change to the accepted definition important? While looking at individualism on a broad scale, the change I made doesn't seem to matter very much. Don't worry about that too much. The key idea that I want to

communicate is that to be individualistic, one must sacrifice some of their individuality. This statement seems to contradict itself, but that is because I still have more to explain.

Individualism has two parts. I have already written about the first. The second part deals with individuals acting despite what other might think, say, or do. I agree with this interpretation, but I would add a little more to it. I see individualism as being the ability to make decisions based on an individual's values and beliefs despite any outside influences. Previously, I had posed the question "What does it mean to be one's self?" Being one's self is synonymous with individualism.

There are many ways to show one's individualism. For example, I believe that I should not see R-rated movies. Let's pretend that my friends invite me to go see an R-rated movie with them. I would be embarrassed to decline their offer. I could make up an excuse as to why I can't go, but this would not show my individualism because it hides who I really am. Instead, I would need to decline the offer and explain that it is against what I believe.

Many believe that in order to be individualistic, they must stand out from the crowd. I see this manifest itself in many different ways: hairstyles, tattoos, clothing. However, this is not true. There are some instances where blending into the crowd is a way of showing individualism. For example, I am a musician. Music is very important to me and I love being part of my school's marching band. In marching bands, each wind player is dressed in the exact same uniform. The idea is that when the members are marching on the field, they will all look the same. While I am just one person of the marching band, I am still showing my individualism out on the field. This is because I am doing something that I believe in. This is what I meant when I stated that one must sacrifice some of their individuality to be individualistic.

Now, in response to your problem, I believe the best approach for you is to do whatever you believe is right. Others may mock you for your decision and others may hate you for it. What you believe

in could get you into a lot of trouble and cause you only grief. However, despite all of this, I know that you will never be happy if you are not doing what you believe in.

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