

2.1 Individualism

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of our own advantages.³

● Self-interest

Individualism sees people free to use their peculiar knowledge and skills with the aim of furthering the objectives and interests they care for. Individualism does not mean egotism or selfish behaviour driven by one's immediate needs. Self-interest is the universal mover, which need not be limited to self-love and can include one's family, friends and society.

Individualism's main principle is that no person or group of persons should have power to decide what another person's status in society ought to be. This sense of freedom is essential to an individualist and must not be sacrificed to some other sense of justice. Individualism places the individual above the community and places self-interest above the welfare of the wider community. Nonetheless, the self-interest and limited vision of the individualist is not to be interpreted in a narrow self-centred sense. One broader view of individualism is summarized by von Hayek:

True individualism...is primarily a theory of society, an attempt to understand the forces which determine the social life of man.... This fact should by itself be sufficient to refute the silliest of the common misunderstandings: the belief that individualism postulates...the existence of isolated or self-contained individuals, instead of starting from men whose whole nature and character is determined by their existence in society...its basic contention is...that there is no other way toward an understanding of social phenomena but through the understanding of individual actions directed toward other people and guided by their expected behaviour.⁴

Individualism contends that in cases where the coercive action of the state is usually invoked, voluntary collaboration among people would better achieve the aims. The traditions and conventions which evolve in a free society are flexible and allow spontaneous formations of groups or associations. Seemingly

³Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 1776.

⁴Frederich von Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948, p. 6.