

When is a Collective?

An Address to High School Students

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It is unusual for school students to be worrying about the “collective”. But, then, yours seems to be an unusual school. When I was here the last time, you were pondering the “continuum”. I find it truly remarkable. To grapple with issues and concepts that are deeply philosophical and at the same time of immense practical value – and doing so at a young age – is an ingredient that goes into the making of great civilizations. In a world that seems to revel in everything that is crass and commercial, and in a country that appears like a continent of cacophony and shallowness, this is not expected of you. You and your teachers must be congratulated for swimming against the tide.

Collective is something that falls between a *collection* and the *composite*. There is ample space between these two categories, and where exactly does a *collective* fall in this space depends on what kind of collective we are talking about. But let us first talk a bit about the endpoints of this space.

A *collection* can be gathering together of arbitrary and distinct elements as in a mathematical set. A set comprising of a frog, a princess, a pencil and a magic wand will qualify as a collection. A collection can also be of identical but distinct elements. A collection of four identical horses pulling Raja Dasharath’s chariot – or ten identical horses pulling King Solomon’s chariot – is also a collection, although you could also call it a team of horses. You may notice that we are already shifting from the concept of an arbitrary collection, although you would still not say that the chariot is being pulled by a *collective* of horses.

A *composite*, on the other hand, is like a diamond or like a bucket of water. The tightly bound crystal of carbon atoms – otherwise known as diamond – makes it impossible for the atoms to assert their individuality. Similarly, the molecules of water, each comprising of two hydrogen atoms and one of oxygen, make a bucket of water only by losing their individuality. Diamond is not a carbon collective, nor is water an H₂O collective.

Humans are very different from horses and certainly very different from atoms and molecules. They should not be harnessed into chariots, nor should they be nailed or dissolved into a composite humanity in a manner that they lose their freedom and individuality. Unfortunately, humans are yet to attain such a simple and eminently reasonable goal. For a vast majority of them, being harnessed into exploitative and unjust systems has been their fate. Of course, systems have changed – generally for the better, although sometime for the worse – and seen over a long span of history the reins of the harness have loosened somewhat. But, being harnessed into the chariot of someone else is still the fate of a vast majority. Similarly, they are still tethered to oppressive customs and traditions. Dissolution of individuals into communities that submerge identities and enforce myriad forms of unfreedom remains the fate for a large majority of humans.

This morning I wish to make an argument – and hope to convince some of you, if not all – that *collectives* have played an important role in weakening the reins of oppression and unfreedom and the *desirable collectives of the future* will play an even more effective role in humanity's march to collective prosperity and individual freedom.

But I should not run ahead of myself. We should first try to draw a map of the conceptual terrain covered by the word *collective*. We started delineating its boundaries by referring to *collections* and *composites*. We will stay at the boundaries for a while before moving in to the central meaning and in this process we will hopefully uncover some of the tensions within this concept that endow it with richness and power.

Individual is the ruling figure in the concept of a *collection*. Distinct elements make up a collection, but their inclusion in a set does not impose any modification on their nature and characteristics. Elements remain unchanged even after becoming a member of the *collection*. The *sovereignty* of the *individual* remains untrammelled by the act of inclusion.

An actual collection of physical entities – such as the collection of air molecules in this hall – is not exactly a mathematical set. Molecules are mobile, hitting each other incessantly, and in the process giving rise to temperature that makes us feel warm and pressure that keeps our blood vessels from bursting. Thankfully, they are not hitting each other too hard. That is why temperature and pressure are in the normal range and we do not have to worry about the air catching fire or the nitrogen and oxygen molecules being transformed into something else through chemical or nuclear reactions. If the molecules do not change themselves, the air in the hall still qualifies as a *collection* despite the chaos of collisions.

Extrapolating from the physical to the social world is always a risky proposition. But it does have pedagogical usefulness. There are viewpoints or ideologies that consider *human individuals* as the primordial and immutable *atoms of humanity*. Individuals make up the society; the society does not make the individual nor does it affect the individual's basic character in any significant way. An extreme version of such a libertarian-individualist ideology was expressed by Margaret Thatcher when she once said, "...there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families."

Lady Thatcher does not seem to have learned her Aristotle very well. This is rather curious for a person who would otherwise take great pride in the western civilization. As you know, Greek philosophers – Aristotle having a preeminent position among them – are considered to have laid the intellectual foundations of that civilization. We all encounter in our early school days the Aristotelian aphorism – man is a social animal. But the full quote can be read far more fruitfully,

"Man is by nature a social animal; an individual who is unsocial naturally and not accidentally is either beneath our notice or more than human. *Society is something that precedes the individual*. Anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god." (Aristotle, *Politics*, emphasis mine)

Many things can be said about the *individualist* understanding of the *individual*. Let me take up just one aspect of it. Do individuals change due to external causes – causes that lie outside themselves? Have they changed in the course of history? Does society play a role in effecting such a change?

Of course, this is a vast subject and it covers much of the social sciences and the humanities. But the answer is surprisingly obvious. Individuals may not change their identities, but they keep on changing all the time. And a great deal of this change happens under external impact. We all learn the stories of Valmiki and Buddha. Valmiki changed from being a robber and a killer to a sage and a poet after Narada asked him to check with his family members – for whom he robbed and killed – if they would share in his sins. Their refusal to do so made him a different person. Similarly, encounters with an old, a sick and a dead man are said to have triggered the process that changed Prince Siddhartha into Buddha – the enlightened one.

Real causes have real effects – both in nature and in society. But human mind is a curious object – perhaps the most mind-boggling thing that we come across. Here unreal causes can have real effects. This strange phenomenon creates a great deal of trouble for philosophers, theorists and psychiatrists, let alone the individual who is actually affected by those unreal causes. Real inspires you to imagine the unreal and the imagined inspires or forces you to do something that has real consequences. Philosophers become befuddled – they feel like Alice in the Wonderland where the boundaries between the real and the imaginary become obscure.

In any case, my purpose here is to underline the malleability of the *individual* who is prone to change not only due to real causes but also due to unreal causes. Take the phenomenon of *babas* and preachers. Aided by the electronic media tens – may be hundreds – of millions attend their sermons, which are usually clever concoctions of plain truths, pious vacuities and outright lies. On top of it, the *baba* himself, in many cases, may be a greedy businessman or even a murderer and rapist. But, his sermons have a real effect nonetheless. Millions who cannot afford a professional counselor feel cured of their confusions and infirmities. Many become a better person by listening to the sermons of a far worse man.

If you put everything together that goes on in the society, it would appear as a seething cauldron of causes tossing the *individual* violently into the chaos of uncontrollable changes. Of course, this does not happen. If you are equally affected by everything that you experience or encounter, you will certainly go mad. But, fortunately or unfortunately, most people adjust. Nearly everyone finds a balance. The point here is that adjusting to the external world, or grappling with it, is the main factor behind the making of a person. Of course, the person arises in a biological body, but biology itself does not make a person. That is why Aristotle said that *society* is prior to the *individual*. Margaret Thatcher should have known better.

Of course, one can go to the other extreme and end up saying that society is everything. Individual is nothing but an indistinguishable and inert part of the social whole, just as a drop of water is nothing but water. Putting it this way may give you an impression that no one would subscribe to such an obviously erroneous viewpoint. But you would be wrong to think that way. Extreme holism and excessively communitarian ideologies have been only too

common. They have inflicted much more damage, erected far too many structures of bondage and subjugation, and subjected humanity to far greater violence than extreme individualism, although, it could be the case that being an ideology of a more recent vintage, the latter hasn't had enough time to outdo the former.

If you are surprised to hear that nice words like holism and community could be sources of subjugation and violence, you ought to remember the brutalities communities have inflicted on each other in the name of race, caste, ethnicity and religion. You should also remember the way communities have subjugated their own members, especially women, to oppressive customs and practices in the name of traditions, norms and values. Communities of the ancient types are invariably *totalitarian*. They take every aspect of life under their control.

Those who romanticize communities of the distant past – when humanity is supposed to have lived harmoniously and wisely – forget that ancient humans spent far more time and effort in killing and violating each other. It was fortunate that they did not have the modern weapons of mass destruction. And, the romantics, who lament that the ancient paradise has been lost, have the good fortune of not living in those times and with those communities. Those who are forced to live in similar totalitarian communities of the present day – villages ruled by Khap Panchayats and communities governed by medieval customs and religious edicts – are still paying the price of malignantly communitarian ideologies and practices.

It seems to me that in our long voyage through history we have moved towards the middle ground starting from the communitarian end. The flight to the other end of extreme individualism has occasionally taken place – more often in ideas than in practice – but the actual history, by and large, has been a history of subjugation of the individual to the community. The good thing is that this hold has progressively weakened.

As I said earlier, humans are very different from animals and more so from inanimate matter. Many of their characteristic features arise from biology and natural history and many others are constructed by the society and their personal history. However, not everything about humans is completely determined in advance. They possess agency – they can make a choice and they can act on their own volition. There is a part of *being human* that is not covered by natural as well as social determinism.

Humans have made progress through their agency. It is on the strength of having a mind and the will and the capacity to act that they walked out of the animal kingdom. Their story has been a saga of fighting against Nature for self determination. Of course, they are a product and a part of Nature. They cannot defy Her and they will never be free from Her. But they have managed to carve out their own kingdom within the empire of Nature. The laws of the empire apply to this kingdom, but humans have made use of these laws to gain relative autonomy in conducting their own affairs.

Of course, this has been a very long and complex process. It is still on and will not conclude for a very long time. It may even be endless. What is important here is to take note of the general direction of this journey.

Ingenuity and cooperation have been the twin factors in progressively liberating the human species from the blind forces of Nature – blind in the sense that these forces do not discriminate between the good and the bad, between the desirable and the undesirable. Of course, human ingenuity has not always been accompanied with cooperation. Conflict and competition have been as ubiquitous. This is what makes the process so complex and pregnant with uncertain outcomes. Looking at the big picture, however, one can say that, internally, humans have been a quarrelsome lot, but externally – faced with the blind forces of Nature – they have been united and ingenious. All the internal conflicts have, in the net, imparted a coherent momentum, and humanity has moved ahead in the direction of increasing autonomy, empowerment and freedom within the empire of natural laws.

Collectives of various kinds have been the embodiments of increasingly conscious cooperation among humans at various levels. Cooperation, to be sure, is not always conscious, nor is it always voluntary. More often it is forced by the conditions. Furthermore, cooperation may enhance the power and autonomy of a collective, but it may also put constraints on the individual member of the collective. Often, autonomy and constraints are distributed asymmetrically and unjustly among the members of a ‘collective’. I have put the word in quotes here because such ‘collectives’ are not yet real collectives.

An obvious example would be a factory where some commodity is produced by a ‘collective’ of workers. Workers have to work according to definite rules and under a strict discipline. Moreover, they are *forced* to work – they can make a living only by working. The factory owners, on the other hand, do not have these constraints, although they might have some other constraints. They might, for example, be constrained by the market conditions to extract maximum work out of the workers for minimum pay, if the factory has to survive. The factory, therefore, is not an example of a collective. Owners and workers form two different *classes* whose interests are mostly in conflict with each other. One class is exploited by the other and does not share in the wealth created at the factory. It only ekes out a living through hard work. The other class becomes prosperous not so much through work as through the ownership of the factory.

Collectives, in the real sense, must be voluntary and it must be a collective of individuals with equal rights and obligations. Traditional communities do not qualify as collectives because they are not voluntary. Modern factories, farms, and corporations are not collectives because individuals associated with them do not have equal rights and obligations.

We cannot build real collectives just because we wish to do so. Certain conditions must be met before collectives can emerge. For example, laws of the land should be such that collective ownership of the work place becomes the norm in the society. Also skills and capacities of the individual members should be such that they can have a moral claim to equal *rights* by sharing the *obligations* more or less equally.

We do not have time to go into the details of various kinds of collectives and the social conditions necessary for their emergence. But a few broad points about them can be stated.

Collectives will be the fundamental building blocks of a far more advanced civilization than any seen so far. This will be next stage in human history in which, within the empire of natural laws, humanity will be further empowered and become far more autonomous. This stage will witness not only unprecedented prosperity but also the end of exploitation and injustice. *Collectives* will also feed into the making of *individuals* who will be far more capable, creative, enlightened and equal.

Collectives, however, should not be seen as the final goal of humanity. They should be seen only as a means to enhance the realm of *human freedom*, which is the final goal of humanity. While we should not fall prey to *individualism*, we should not elevate *collectivism* to a moral value either.

Collectives are meant to create prosperity and distribute it equitably among its members. They are necessary for doing what must be done in order to live a good life. But they, by themselves, do not constitute good life. Prosperity is a necessary condition for good life – its material foundation. But, it is not the sufficient condition, nor is it the final goal.

After doing what must be done – that is, beyond creating the material conditions of good life – *collectives* must yield to *individuals*. *Collectives*, after all, entail rules, constraints and obligations. These are elements of the *realm of necessity* – the domain of what must be done in order to live a good life. But good life also means that beyond the realm of necessity lies the *realm of freedom*. *Collectives* cannot be a part of the *realm of freedom*. They cannot, therefore, take all aspects of life under their control. The domain of the collective and the domain of the individual must be clearly separated. Furthermore, while some freedoms can be enjoyed collectively, freedom ultimately falls largely in the domain of the individual.

The job of the *collective*, therefore, does not end with creation of prosperity and its equitable distribution. It must also help create the *individual* who is capable of enjoying freedom, and it must yield space to this individual. The domain of the collective must shrink progressively so that the domain of the individual enlarges.

I hope you do not take all this as a philosophy of individualism and a prescription for turning the society into a *collection* of individuals alienated from each other. Free individuals make up the best society and the best society creates individuals who are creative and free and in solidarity with each other. *Collectives* are a means to accomplish that. They create the material conditions for this happy situation to arise.

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