

Individualism - Encyclopedia Britannica

individualism, political and social philosophy that emphasizes the [moral](#) worth of [the individual](#). Although the concept of an individual may seem straightforward, there are many ways of understanding it, both in theory and in practice. The term *individualism* itself, and its equivalents in other languages, dates—like [socialism](#) and other *isms*—from the 19th century.

[Individualism](#) once exhibited interesting national variations, but its various meanings have since largely merged. Following the upheaval of the [French Revolution](#), *individualisme* was used pejoratively in [France](#) to signify the sources of social dissolution and [anarchy](#) and the elevation of individual interests above those of the [collective](#). The term's negative [connotation](#) was employed by French reactionaries, nationalists, [conservatives](#), liberals, and socialists alike, despite their different views of a [feasible](#) and desirable social order. In [Germany](#), the ideas of individual uniqueness (*Einzigkeit*) and self-realization—in sum, the [Romantic](#) notion of individuality—contributed to the cult of individual genius and were later transformed into an organic theory of national [community](#). According to this view, state and society are not artificial constructs erected on the basis of a [social contract](#) but instead unique and self-sufficient cultural wholes. In [England](#), individualism [encompassed](#) religious nonconformity (i.e., nonconformity with the [Church of England](#)) and economic [liberalism](#) in its various versions, including both [laissez-faire](#) and moderate state-interventionist approaches. In the [United States](#), individualism became part of the core American [ideology](#) by the 19th century, incorporating the influences of New England Puritanism, Jeffersonianism, and the [philosophy](#) of natural rights. American individualism was universalist

and idealist but acquired a harsher edge as it became infused with elements of [social Darwinism](#) (i.e., the survival of the fittest). “Rugged individualism”—extolled by [Herbert Hoover](#) during his presidential campaign in 1928—was associated with traditional American values such as personal freedom, [capitalism](#), and limited government. As [James Bryce](#), British ambassador to the United States (1907–13), wrote in *The American Commonwealth* (1888), “Individualism, the love of enterprise, and the pride in personal freedom have been deemed by Americans not only their choicest, but [their] peculiar and [exclusive](#) possession.”

The French aristocratic political philosopher [Alexis de Tocqueville](#) (1805–59) described individualism in terms of a kind of moderate selfishness that disposed humans to be concerned only with their own small circle of family and friends. Observing the workings of the American democratic tradition for *Democracy in America* (1835–40), Tocqueville wrote that by leading “each citizen to isolate himself from his fellows and to draw apart with his family and friends,” individualism sapped the “virtues of public life,” for which [civic virtue](#) and association were a suitable remedy. For the Swiss historian [Jacob Burckhardt](#) (1818–97), individualism signified the cult of privacy, which, combined with the growth of self-assertion, had given “impulse to the highest individual development” that flowered in the European [Renaissance](#). The French sociologist [Émile Durkheim](#) (1858–1917) identified two types of individualism: the utilitarian egoism of the English sociologist and philosopher [Herbert Spencer](#) (1820–1903), who, according to Durkheim, reduced society to “nothing more than a vast apparatus of production and exchange,” and the [rationalism](#) of the German philosopher [Immanuel Kant](#) (1724–1804), the French philosopher [Jean-Jacques Rousseau](#) (1712–1788),

and the French Revolution's [Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen](#) (1789), which has as "its primary [dogma](#) the [autonomy](#) of [reason](#) and as its primary rite the doctrine of free enquiry." The Austrian economist [F.A. Hayek](#) (1899–1992), who favoured [market](#) processes and was distrustful of state intervention, distinguished what he called "false" from "true" individualism. False individualism, which was represented mainly by French and other continental European writers, is characterized by "an exaggerated belief in the powers of individual reason" and the scope of effective social planning and is "a source of modern socialism"; in contrast, true individualism, whose adherents included [John Locke](#) (1632–1704), [Bernard de Mandeville](#) (1670–1733), [David Hume](#) (1711–76), [Adam Ferguson](#) (1723–1816), [Adam Smith](#) (1723–90), and [Edmund Burke](#) (1729–97), maintained that the "spontaneous collaboration of free men often creates things which are greater than their individual minds can ever fully comprehend" and accepted that individuals must submit "to the [anonymous](#) and seemingly irrational forces of society."

Other aspects of individualism pertain to a series of different questions about how to conceive the relation between collectivities and individuals. One such question focuses on how facts about the behaviour of groups, about social processes, and about large-scale historical events are to be explained.

According to methodological individualism, a view advocated by Austrian-born British philosopher [Karl Popper](#) (1902–94), any explanation of such a fact ultimately must appeal to, or be stated in terms of, facts about individuals—about their beliefs, desires, and actions. A closely related view, sometimes called ontological individualism, is the thesis that social or historical groups, processes, and events are nothing more than complexes of

individuals and individual actions. Methodological individualism precludes explanations that appeal to social factors that cannot in turn be individualistically explained. Examples are Durkheim's classic account of differential suicide rates in terms of degrees of social [integration](#) and the account of the incidence of protest movements in terms of the structure of political opportunities. Ontological individualism contrasts with various ways of seeing institutions and collectivities as "real"—e.g., the view of corporations or states as agents and the view of [bureaucratic](#) roles and rules or status groups as independent of individuals, both constraining and enabling individuals' behaviour. Another question that arises in debates over individualism is how objects of worth or value (i.e., goods) in moral and political life are to be conceived. Some theorists, known as atomists, argue that no such goods are intrinsically common or communal, maintaining instead that there are only individual goods that [accrue](#) to individuals. According to this perspective, [morality](#) and politics are merely the instruments through which each individual attempts to secure such goods for himself. One example of this view is the [conception](#) of [political authority](#) as ultimately derived from or justified by a [hypothetical](#) "contract" between individuals, as in the political philosophy of [Thomas Hobbes](#) (1588–1679). Another is the idea, typical in economics and in other social sciences influenced by economics, that most social institutions and relationships can best be understood by assuming that individual behaviour is motivated primarily by self-interest.

Individualism as Tocqueville understood it, with its endorsement of private enjoyments and control of one's personal [environment](#) and its neglect of public involvement and communal attachment, has long been lamented and criticized from both the [right](#) and the left and from both religious and [secular](#)

perspectives. Especially notable [critiques](#) have been made by advocates of [communitarianism](#), who tend to equate individualism with [narcissism](#) and selfishness. Likewise, thinkers in the tradition of “republican” political thought—according to which power is best controlled by being divided—are disturbed by their perception that individualism deprives the state of the support and active involvement of [citizens](#), thereby impairing democratic institutions. Individualism also has been thought to distinguish modern Western societies from premodern and non-Western ones, such as traditional [India](#) and [China](#), where, it is said, the community or the nation is [valued](#) above the individual and an individual’s role in the political and economic life of his community is largely determined by his membership in a specific class or caste.