

Identity and the struggle between Individualism and Collectivism

Over the years, there has been a fundamental debate about humanity that has been discussed among philosophers, economists, politicians, and even scientists. It's called Individualism vs. Collectivism, and as humans, we instinctively are drawn to each. We are born individuals with our own ambitions and abilities, but at the same time we're naturally drawn together into groups.

I would like to talk specifically about a topic of this debate concerning identity. There are two different arguments when it comes to identity and cultural differences. On one side, you have those who argue that we should celebrate our differences, and on the other side, those who say that we shouldn't judge or evaluate each other at all based upon ethnicity or nationality. Let's refer to the first theory, the "celebrating differences theory," and the second, the "citizen of the world" theory. As we will see, it's not very cut and dry. Both sides of the issue show signs of collectivism and individualism.

To illustrate the relationship between these things, you should imagine a linear spectrum. On one end, you have the individual, and on the other end you have humanity as a whole. Between the two, you have a number of other types of social organization (nation, tribe, etc.). Collectivism encompasses all of these except for the individual end, which individualism covers. Meanwhile, the "celebrate our differences" theory encompasses all of these except the humanity end, which the "citizens of the world" theory covers.

Celebrating our differences when it comes to ethnicity means that we should celebrate and acknowledge our uniqueness, as members of nations and families, but especially as individuals. Most people think of ethnicity as only a racial term, but in my opinion, it can refer to any shared background (national, tribal, religious, linguistic, or cultural, etc.) Those in favor of

the CoD theory would contend that we naturally categorize ourselves, not just by broad terms ("black", "white") but also by nationality or by region. The CoD theory can be narrowed down to tribes, families - all the way down to the individual. The CoD theory argues that diverse people with different ideas are a great thing and that one reason we humans have come up with so many brilliant technologies and developments is because we come from a wide array of climates, regions, and lifestyles. By celebrating our ancestral heritage, we keep unique perspectives. A world in which no one was willing to acknowledge each others differences might result in a less innovative and vibrant society. (I plan on using The Color of Water to support this side)

On the other hand, you have the Citizen of the World theory, which would be on the opposite side of the spectrum. Don't define yourself by race or nationality, but rather just as a citizen of the world or a human. Just as Individualism is a small portion of the CoD theory, the Citizens of the World theory is a small portion of collectivism.

Being a citizen of the world is an ultimate form of collectivism, in that there is but one group that everyone belongs to. Sometimes, in regards to race at least, the CoW theory is called "colorblindness," meaning, one shouldn't take into account or judge a man based upon the color of his skin, but rather by his character. Similar to the Blank Slate theory, mentioned in Steven Pinker's book, The Blank Slate, CoW proponents would say that all humans are the same at birth and that if we didn't categorize ourselves in the first place, we wouldn't be prejudiced. By finding the fundamental commonalities between all humans, proponents would suggest, there wouldn't be as much prejudice or discrimination. (I plan on using Nussbaum to support this side)

In my conclusion, I want to describe how I think that a balance needs to be struck between the two ideologies, as both have strengths and weaknesses.