

Individualism and the Impersonal Nature: When to Focus on Individuals (and When Not to)

Nobo Komagata
insi2.org
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As we are well aware, we live in an individualistic society. Our individual freedom and right are highly regarded and we try to defend them at any cost. At the same time, we often experience the lack of individual attention on many occasions. For example, when we receive medical care, we often feel that healthcare professionals are overly consumed by numbers and tend to forget who they are treating. Government policies at all levels tend to prioritize certain corporations, organizations, and ideologies and forget about us, i.e., each constituent. Education systems are increasingly preoccupied with measurable outcomes and forgetting those who are supposed to learn.

We could easily see that there is a sort of imbalance between what we aspire and what are happening. For a variety of social contexts, e.g., medical care, government, and education as mentioned above, we can all benefit if we are actually treated as individuals. And in many respects, there are such movements. For example, outside *and* within the conventional medicine, more and more healthcare professionals are becoming “holistic,” i.e., emphasizing the inner healing power of each individual. Although governments lag greatly in this respect, there are various organizations and individuals, mainly outside the government proper, which keep standing up to protect our individual rights. Within the current top-down, overly competitive educational environment, many educators, especially progressive educators, and their supporters are still emphasizing the importance of attending to each student.

However, when we look at each individual, we wonder whether it would be a good idea to push individualism to the end. Such a move may well turn out to be narcissism. A blind emphasis on ourselves could lead to unhealthy competitions and unintended aggression toward others. If we forget that we are always mutually supporting, we end up taking advantage of others. The history has told us that that kind of individualism would eventually destroy not only the oppressed but also the oppressors.

This is where an objective stance would be helpful. That is, we can try to be objective, without the prejudice of our own backgrounds, without being overwhelmed by our own feelings, and without being clouded by our own beliefs. With an objective understanding of our surroundings and ourselves, we could figure out what would be the best course of action. In other words, our individual approach can be couched in this kind of attitude based on “the impersonal nature.” And with this kind of attitude, we may be able to solve various problems in the world.

At this point, we might notice that we can easily misunderstand where individualism is to be applied. The area where we need to be individualistic is toward others. Then, toward ourselves, instead of being individualistic, we need to cultivate the impersonal nature as described above.