

# INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY: TOWARD A NEW 'BRAVE NEW WORLD'<sup>1</sup>

**Kyung Hee Lee**

Yonsei University, Seoul, Korea

## **Abstract**

*Any consideration of Western culture includes an examination of Western modern thought. Contemporary Western thought is based upon not only scientific thought but also on an individualistic thought which renders the civil liberties of democratic society possible. However this highly developed science and technology, and the extreme claims of individual freedom have deteriorated into fetishism and selfishness and have become objects of severe criticism. Today, a regional or state selfishness occasionally conflicts with the entire human community so that some Eastern philosophers attempt to search for a solutions in the ancient Eastern thought which emphasizes relation and holism. But there have also been negative cases of totalitarianism, and the suppression of the freedom of the individual as is the case of Korea. Thus I would like to investigate the original meaning of individualism in Western modern thought and then find out how to harmonize Western ideas with Eastern ideas. Finally, I shall try to find a way of harmonizing individual and community for the coming global society, the new 'brave new world'.*

## **Prologue**

Human beings, in the West or in the East, are confronted with a problem which is, perhaps, the most important and fundamental problem from the standpoint of history. Ever since human beings appeared on earth, they have tested their own civilizations, from the smallest region to more extended areas, and they have finally formed two main streams, which are the Eastern and the Western civilizations. Each has developed their

respective civilizations to the utmost. In their struggle for survival, each civilization had to take up challenges from other civilizations and to find their own forms of life and thought. Whenever the scope of life was expanded, be it by conquest or conciliation, peoples had to consider what would be the most advantageous terms for their survival in these new situations. Thus civilizations, diverged in such a fashion, gradually establishing the various different civilizations we recognize today in the East and the West. And today, these remaining civilizations have reached their final barriers. Today, the partition wall between the two, the East and the West, is breaking down, positively or negatively, and compulsorily or voluntarily. At last human beings have come to be faced with the possibility of a single final civilization. Hence globalization<sup>2</sup> is a pressing subject for all mankind. What makes us very conscious of the inevitability of globalization is the infinite mutual communication based upon the high Information Technology (IT), of which the Internet is representative. However, the problem rises as to what sort of globalization this is. If we cannot solve this problem successfully, we can't take a rosy view of the future and we are put in the position of Oedipus, who put his fate at risk in order to solve the question of the Sphinx. That is to say, although globalization is inevitable, it is not yet definitively established as to whether this process is barbarous and violent or positive and desirable. Especially in Asia the globalization becomes a grave issue because its influence has been negative as well as passive from 20<sup>th</sup> century on. No one doubts that the present process of globalization has the West as its central axis. In face of such undesirable globalization under the sole leadership of the West, an anti-globalization movement is growing.

Today, we, Asians, stand at an important crossroads. It is a matter of fact that Asians have not been very successful in preserving their tradition in so far as they were unable to resist the infiltration of the Western culture into their own culture from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Asians have at times even considered Western culture and civilization as more reasonable and advanced than their own. And today, even Westerners criticize their own thoughts and attitudes. According to this reflective and critical current of the times, people even commit the error of embellishing and idealizing Eastern value as an alternative to Western one. I am of the opinion that now is the time neither to follow blindly, nor to criticize too

harshly these cultures but to evaluate them. We have to find out what makes values desirable by investigating the various modes of thought upon which cultures are based. I think that this is the task of philosophers.

Any consideration of Western culture, also requires an examination of Western modern thought. Contemporary Western thought is based upon not only scientific thought but also on an individualistic thought which renders the civil liberties of democratic society possible. However this highly developed science and technology, and the excessive claims of individual freedom have deteriorated into fetishism and selfishness and have become objects of severe criticism. Today, a regional or state selfishness occasionally conflicts with the entire human community so that some Eastern philosophers attempt to search for a solution in the ancient Eastern thought which emphasizes *relation* and *holism*. But there have also been negative cases of totalitarianism, and the suppression of the freedom of the individual as is the case of Korea. Thus I would like to investigate the original meaning of individualism in Western modern thought and then find out how to harmonize Western ideas with Eastern ideas. Finally, I shall try to find a way of harmonizing individual and community for the coming global society, a new 'brave new world'.<sup>3</sup>

## **The Modern Western Individual**

“What, then, is the postmodern?” Lyotard asks. “Undoubtedly part of the modern. A work can [now] only be modern if it is first postmodern. postmodernism . . . is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant.”<sup>4</sup> It's been a long time since 'transcendence of the modernism' became the topic for contemporary cultural discussion. Though, as Lyotard says, we have to understand the movement better known as 'postmodernism' in terms of a prolongation of modernism. So postmodernism plays the role of criticizing and reconsidering the viewpoints of Western modernism. However, the more serious problem at issue for some non-Western societies such as in Korea is the fact that they, Koreans and the Eastern peoples, are faced with postmodernity before they actually understand the essence of modernity. Hence it would be too hasty to talk about postmodernism under the

circumstances where modernism is still unripe. Therefore, we have to, first of all, find out what the core of modernity is.

One of the most controversial terms in postmodernism is subjectivity. We may call the 'end of philosophy' the 'end of subjectivity'. And subjectivity is the subjectivity of the individual. "...the postmodern conception of subjectivity can be distinguished by its opposition to the Cartesian notion of the subject : a strongly bounded agent of rational self-legislation conceived in traditional epistemology (from Descartes to Kant) as the counterpart to the object. Despite diverse and sometimes oppositional formulations, postmodernist and poststructuralist critics share an impulse to "deconstruct" the humanist subject as the intending source of knowledge and meaning. Such accounts redefine the human self as an entity constructed by, and not simply reflected in a culture's social discourses, linguistic structures, and signifying practices."<sup>5</sup> Thus the subjectivity criticized by the postmodernists is traced to Descartes in Western modern age. Erich Fromm holds that the idea of the individual endowed with subjectivity has its birth at the beginning of the Modern age. "European and American history since the end of the Middle Ages is the history of the full emergence of the individual."<sup>6</sup> Moreover it is this individual's subjectivity that became the most important foundation of Western thought ever since then down to contemporary times. The subjective individual is rated the origin, the foundation and the master of thought, judgment and activity. The Western modern individual is the being who will lay down a rule and a principle for him/herself starting from his or her own reason and will, not willing to accept God's regulations and laws. Many things unprecedented in history, such as the Modern natural law and regal humanism came into being. And it goes without saying that these positive elements now form the basis of most contemporary societies.

We can show the meanings of the subjectivity and the freedom of the individual through the theory of social contract of Modern thinkers, such as Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau. The French Revolution and the American Revolution, basing upon that theory, formulated the foundation of modern European and American thoughts. And we can conclude that the realization of the free democracies founded on human rights, freedom and equality is really the purpose of modern Enlightenment. Furthermore, Enlightenment can be actualized only when the freedom of the individual

endowed with autonomous reason is secured. Foucault asks : “How did “man” come to know himself? What is (was) Enlightenment? How in fact did the modern European turn himself and every human or animal he came across in his adventures, his conquests, into a knowable species and individual- object and subject of knowledge?”<sup>7</sup>

Now I shall turn to examine first Descartes’s individual, which the postmodernists criticized as being the ‘metaphysics of subjectivity.

### **Descartes’ Cogito**

It was Descartes who inaugurated a new type of human being, that is the ‘Individual’. Descartes substituted the question ‘what am I?’ for the Ancient Aristotelian question of ‘what is man?’. Furthermore he defined the ‘I’ as a thinking thing.<sup>8</sup>

Descartes did not rely upon established usages and old standard authorities but upon the individual innate ability of reason to achieve true and certain knowledge. It is ‘the natural light’ or ‘the light of reason’ that substantiates Descartes’ individual. And everything known by that natural light does not come under the body or the composite of the body and mind but under the mind alone. Moreover, the mind consists of the intellect and the will. The question is how the natural light bears on the intellect and the will. When we hold fast to the views that the natural light is merely the cognitive power through a narrow distinction between the passive intellect and the active will, we will place the meaning of the modern Individual under restriction. We can say that the criterion of truth is the clearness and the distinctness. When we perceive certain and objective knowledge, it means that our perception is transparently certain. But the knowledge of its being true can be produced only when the will assents to that. Now we can maintain that the natural light is closely connected with the act of will. When the intellect perceives a certain proposition clearly and distinctly, the will comes to feel that it cannot but maintain that the proposition is true. It is at that time, Descartes says, that the natural light shines on. We can find that the subjective and autonomous will and the necessary and objective world can be compatible in Descartes’ Individual, placed at the zenith of the modernity. The free will and the clear and distinct truth can

coexist under the natural light. Descartes' Individual is not a narcissistic subject.

## **The Criticism of Individualism**

Thus freed from fetters of established power and the larger community, the individual and its growing power has led to the current crisis in the West. The problem is that the stronger we make the individual as an absolute being, the more the individual's life becomes isolated and impoverished. Erich Fromm described this state of things as 'Escape from Freedom' and indicated the dark side of this situation. He writes, "though giving the individual a new feeling of independence, at the same time made him feel alone and isolated, filled him with doubt and anxiety, and drove him into new submission and into a compulsive and irrational activity."<sup>9</sup>. The worst of it is that when the individualism resulting from the maximization of individual transmutes into the shallow selfishness, this selfishness should encroach on the civil mutual confidence which is the foundation of community. The selfishness means that though sacrificing the public good and disregarding other people, the individual is only willing to pursue his/her personal interest. Moreover this selfishness mistakes liberalism as 'making the individual's right absolute.' Taylor maintains that the individual isolated from societies is not the true individual.

This is the sense in which one cannot be a self on one's own. I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors: in one way in relation to those conversation partners who were essential to my achieving self-definition; in another in relation to those who are now crucial to my continuing grasp of languages of self-understanding - and, of course, these classes may overlap. A self exists only within what I call 'webs of interlocution'. It is this original situation which gives its sense to our concept of 'identity', offering an answer to the question of who I am through a definition of someone's identity thus usually involves not only his stand on moral and spiritual matters but also some reference to a defining community.<sup>10</sup>

MacIntyre also denounces the dark side of individualism and insists on a communitarian ethics. He recollects the eudaimonic (Aristotelian) conception of the virtues. “This was a conception that equated the good with a full and unimpeded exercise of whatever activities conduced to our all-round wellbeing as citizens, thinkers, artists, soldiers, politicians, or creatures whose happiness is at every point bound up with our role as members of a flourishing cultural community. It also included a certain narrative elements, that is, a capacity to view our own life-projects as contributing to a story whose meaning and significance derived from its enactment within that same context of communally sanctioned purposes, values, and beliefs. But again we have lived on, as MacIntyre argues, into an epoch of splintered value-spheres which set up a false dichotomy between what is good for us as private individuals in quest of personal fulfillment and what is good for “society” (or the public interest) conceived as imposing a stern moral check upon our “lower, self-seeking, unregenerate instincts and desires.”<sup>11</sup>

However it is in the societies like America, blessed with individual freedom, from which communitarian ethics emerged. That is to say, it was not until the individualism planted its roots deeply in each society that the modern individual’s limit was revealed and the criticism of the individualism became possible. And it is to be noted that the true knowledge and realization of the individual through the new interpretation of subjectivity has equipped the European to develop the postmodernist view. They have learned the meaning of the individual through years of experience. We can take Levinas’s theory of ‘responsibility’ of the subject as an example. “Levinas’s focus (in *Otherwise than Being*) shifts the description of the genesis and structure of subjectivity. He uncovers a dimension of the subjectivity that precedes and undoes the *arché* or origin of all beings. This dimension is responsibility. He asserts that the subject’s responsibility for what the other goes to the extreme point of substitution for the other.”<sup>12</sup> Now he does not insist on the narrow meaning of subjectivity but on the broad sense of subjectivity implying communitarian thought. And his affirmation is established on the society and the history that the individual’s right and freedom was ripe for theorizing.

Now how do things stand now in non-western societies, for

example in Korea. Especially in Korea, there has been a movement towards the opposite direction of the West, that is, from the communitarian thought to the individualistic view. Broadly speaking, they become conscious of their own individualistic value and have begun to discard old communitarian habits. Judging by the present situation, it would be still premature to talk about the negative meaning of individualism in Korea. In other words, we find it difficult to consider postmodernism in a situation where modernism is not yet ripe. Furthermore there still remains a more fundamental matter in the method of understanding others in the West, in addition to the above Oriental ideas.

### **Eastern Communitarian Thought**

The Korean people, as is generally known, opened the 20<sup>th</sup> century in a state of colonization and were involved in the Korean War at the mid-twentieth century. The time-honored traditions crumbled radically and many Koreans fell into utter confusion of ideas. Agricultural society was the traditional basis of economic activity and Confucian values its ideology. Communitarian thought rather than individualism controlled Korean thinking. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the picture of Koreans as they appeared to the Western, foreign, missionaries is a positive proof of that state of affairs.

That's just what the Europeans have to study with care in Asia. The Europe is not willing to find out the true origin of her lost power in religion. Our new legal system is not only atheistic but also disrespectful. Hence the Europeans think of themselves only and the result comes to no good. On the contrary in Chosun (Korea), the purpose of the regal system is to keep the family and it goes well on the whole. It is a matter of course that there are frequent occasions when the individual should be sacrificed within that society. But however hard I may think, isn't it that this situation is less tragic than the disorder caused by egoism.<sup>13</sup>

Thus we can find that Koreans of those days still maintained the traditional way of thinking, as foreigners saw it. As we see it, the community came before the individual in Korea. As a matter of fact it was not to be supposed that, under all circumstances, the individual and the community were two entirely different things. One missionary, Daveluy, understood that the Korean's mind of community and their mutual aid in the Korean customs and social life of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was superior to the European's. He wrote that this led him to an intense hatred and abomination against his own modern selfish egoism.<sup>14</sup> It is a case example that shows the positive aspect of the communitarian thought in Korean traditional society. This Western foreigner regarded this communitarian thought highly because he had already experienced the harmful influence of individualism. This communitarian mind is quite different from the monadic individual having a metaphysical independence, as described by Leibniz.<sup>15</sup>

Contrary to this positive viewpoint of the communitarian thought, the missionary insisted that if Koreans wanted to make the Korean civilization possible, they should enlarge the scope of the individual's freedom. Here the missionary continues to emphasize the Western values that placed the individual as the basic unit of all social activities and the subject of rights, and insists on its appropriateness for Korean civilization.

This is entirely different from the traditional Korean communitarian thinking that regarded as the subject the social relational network itself, and considered the family or the regional community as a unit.<sup>16</sup> The thing which tightens the union of the community is '정'(情, Jeong) in Korean. If we are to speak about '정', it signifies the deep emotions of relationship among the members of the community. As the Korean saying runs, namely "the hateful 情, the lovely 情", the '정' can be taken in either a good or a bad sense. As a matter of fact, we can say that communitarian thought was a desirable way of thinking in the traditional agricultural societies. But there was a rapid industrial conversion of the past agricultural society to the present westernized industrial society not only in the economic system but also in the political and the social system in Korea. Here lies the point.

There was a remarkable difference between the national characters before and after the switchover. Koreans had not autonomously directed the reorganization of its economic order. It was still directed by external powers. As a result, we can discover some unfavorable side of effects

where Koreans have been pressured into a certain kind of democracy, as well as an economic order of a liberal capitalistic nation. Thus the traditional communitarian thought in Korea should have gradually accommodated the new ideas befitting the changed circumstances. However, while the prototypical communitarian thought remained intact, only the social environment changed with rapidity. Koreans have yet to find an equilibrium between such thought and the actual facts. In the long run, because Koreans could not adjust effectively to this sudden change, they are nowadays in an awkward situation. Beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when Western ideas were planted in this country, the traditional communitarian thought excluding the individual have clashed with Western individualism. With the lack of such balance and integration, Korean communitarian ideas have been transformed into such liabilities as cronyism and mass-selfishness.

Since Hobbes, described the state of nature as “all against all”, Western thinkers have learned through years of bitter experience that they could establish a sound community only through the perfection of self, only when they overcome the selfishness of the individual. Hence it is absolutely necessary for Koreans to learn this lesson from their Western experience which was the bright side of modernism. And fortunately, it is a good thing that Koreans of today can also avert the harmful side of modern individualism through the teachings of the postmodern ideas. The postmodernist criticism of subjectivity is a valuable lesson to Koreans.

In Korea, foreign invasion was not the only difficulty. The reason why Korean people suffered a totalitarian history is not because, as Erich Fromm would say, they voluntarily embraced the totalitarianism to escape from freedom, but because there has been a history where it was difficult for the individual to mature (such as the partition of Korea).

Nevertheless many people are of the same opinion that the Korean communitarian thought has been the driving force of the present development of economy shortly after the calamity of the Korean War. But, as was said earlier, the communitarian ideas changed into the exclusive ideas, such as cronyism and mass-selfishness. And now the conflict between selfish groups and communities is a serious issue. Therefore, as of today, we need to investigate the true meaning of the individual. In other words, Koreans have to inquire into the various values of the Western modern individual, such as, the subjectivity, freedom, equality, and rationality of

the individual, in order to make up for the weak points in the current communitarian thought. It goes without saying that the complementary measures do not merely mean a simple comparison or mixture between Western culture and Eastern culture. Moreover, each country, including Korea, should develop her own methods in a fashion unique to herself from an independent standpoint.

### **Epilogue: Is the East the Other?**

The reason why we, Koreans and Eastern people, cannot readily accept the theory of Otherness is that there is too much uncertainty concerning the role of alterity, which the postmodernists use in criticizing the Western modernity. That is to say, besides the matter of the objective description of Western individualistic thought and Eastern communitarian thought, the subtle matter indwells both in modernity and the postmodernity. We can discover one of the matters in an example of so-called neo-colonialism. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak criticized the idea of benevolence suggestively and persistently. Benevolence is a category of bourgeois culture and morality rooted in modern humanist Enlightenment philosophy. Postmodern critiques of power and subject have approached benevolence in terms of the epistemological and moral-ideological production of a hegemonic humanist subject rather than a natural human disposition. For Spivak, Western humanist benevolence is an essential, constitutive part of the system and problematic of neo-colonial hegemony. Rather than representing or helping the subaltern, benevolent discourse performs the hegemony of the neo-colonial subject and constitutes his/her world as naturally superior. This blocks the possibility of talking with the subaltern. Benevolent humanism is not simply a legitimating ideology in the service of economic interests inscribed elsewhere. The International Monetary Fund's and World Bank's aid and development programs are instances of benevolence as forms of extraction of economic value. As these are essential to the system of neo-colonial exploitation, so called, the benevolent subjectivity and morality are inevitably politico-economic inscriptions.<sup>17</sup>

These new postmodern critical movements expressed in Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and Said shed light on alterity or otherness from the standpoint of

the Third World<sup>18</sup>, and not from Western point of view. However, this postcolonial project took advantage of certain trends in the Western thought. Although the postcolonialists maintain the otherness of ‘the subaltern’ and the margin through the postmodern body of theory, they are little removed from Western dualism of center and the other. According to this framework, the Orient is forever the other, and the object of charity for the Occident. Are the Eastern people the others? This viewpoint shows that the situation continues to be unchanged. That is to say, the situation is that the western Powers regarded Asia as the barbarous object to be enlightened, when they advanced into Asia. Therefore, first of all, Korean people should break away from the Western biases of modernism or postmodernism. Also, it is important that the Korean people produce their own body of theory befitting an advanced society and on a more realistic basis. Koreans should dismiss the ideas that they have used as models – both Western and Eastern - and search for what is needed now. There is no doubt that this thought should have both regional characteristics and the universal characteristics at the same time. These preceding remarks are merely preliminary considerations for entering the coming global world - a new ‘brave new world’

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> \*This work was supported by the Korea Research Foundation Grant (KRF-2003-074-AM0009).

<sup>2</sup> “The term “globalization” emerged from management and business literature in the 1970’s to describe new strategies for worldwide production and distribution, entering the social sciences through geography and sociology, and the humanities through anthropology and cultural studies. Analytically, the term has been used in two ways. First, it functions as a response to earlier theories of capitalism, such as the world systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein and the world historical perspective of Fernand Braudel. Globalization scholars ask whether there is anything new about the current era of global capitalism, answering that question by directing attention away from mechanics or totalizing theories of capital and history, and toward the contingent metaphysics of movement entailed in global systems of production and consumption. Instead, emphasis is placed upon forms of identity construction and power, and incompleteness and indeterminacy. Second, it functions as a response to triumphalist narratives globalization put forth in business literature and by theorists of the “end of history”

of the “end of geography” who view three events as completing the modern project of bringing the peoples of the world under the benevolent mantle of one rational system: the global reach of capitalism, the demise of the socialist bloc, and the creation of new information technology. Critics respond to these narratives by challenging their tropes of dominance, totality, and penetration, and by directing attention to the problematic iconography in corporate rhetoric that recognizes globalization as the new idiom of power. As an alternative, such scholars present images of the globe in order to call attention to global civil societies emerging in tandem with or in response to global capitalism, highlighting hybridity, hyperreality, and paradoxical identity formations co-occurring with postmodernity.” Victor E. Taylor and Charles E. Winquist ed., *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 2001. p. 381-382.

<sup>3</sup> C.f. Huxley, *Brave New World and Shakespeare*, “How beautiful mankind is! O brave new World” (The *Tempest*, VI, 182)

<sup>4</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François, “Answering the question: What is postmodernism?” In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1982.

<sup>5</sup> Victor E. Taylor etc., *ibid.* p.133.

<sup>6</sup> Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960.

<sup>7</sup> Victor E. Taylor, etc., *ibid.* p. 133.

<sup>8</sup> Descartes, René, AT: *OEUVRES de DESCARTES*, publiées par ADAM Charles & TANNERY Paul, Paris: Vrin, 1974. VII 25: CSM: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes I, II*, Cottingham J., Stoothoff R., Murdoch D. trans, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. II 17.

<sup>9</sup> Erich Fromm, *ibid.* ch. 3. / “. . . for the realization of individuality in the sense just mentioned, while at the same time people have lost those ties which gave them security, this lag makes freedom an unbearable burden. It then becomes identical with doubt, with a kind of life which lacks meaning and direction. Powerful tendencies arise to escape from this kind of freedom into submission or some kind of relationship to man and the world which promises relief from uncertainty, even if it deprives the individual of his freedom.” *ibid.* ch. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, Charles, *Sources of the Self: The making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989. p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> Payne, Michael, ed., *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, p. 112-113.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor E. Victor, ed., *ibid.* p. 218.

<sup>13</sup> Antoine Daveluy, *Notes pour l'introduction à l'histoire de la Corée*, p. 62. re quotation from 『문명과 야만 : 타자의 시선으로 본 19세기 조선』 조현범 지음, 서울 (이책세상) 문고, p. 93.

<sup>14</sup> 조현범 위의 책 p.84-85.

<sup>15</sup> Leibniz, Robert Latta, trans., *The Monadology and other philosophical writings*, London: Oxford University Press, 1951. p. 217-218.

<sup>16</sup> 조현범 위의 책, p. 160-161.

<sup>17</sup> Taylor E. Victor, *ibid.* 32-33.

<sup>18</sup> Instead of the term, Robert Young uses the term 'Tricontinentalism'.