

kind and live by himself. In the history of Christianity there are several familiar examples, from the eremites of the Egyptian desert to what might be called communities of solitaries like the modern Carthusians. And there are occasional secular hermits who take themselves off to the woods for private reasons difficult for the rest of us to fathom. If you declare that a man does not have a right to do this — that he has no right to ignore society — then you must believe that those of us who constitute society have a right to use coercion on this reluctant individual to force him to stay. Do you believe that a person who wants to choose other company than ours, as in the case of Thoreau at Walden, should be treated like a soldier A.W.O.L., pursued, brought back in irons, locked up, tried for his defection?

A: No, I didn't mean quite that.

B: But if a man doesn't have a right to ignore society, the ineluctable corollary is that society must enforce its right to frustrate any effort on his part to ignore society.

A: My words were not well chosen. I certainly don't want to be in the position of comparing society to an army in which men are to be held by force if they have a desire

to withdraw. I would aim to encourage men to recognize their obligations to other men.

B: Well, that is quite a different matter. Using coercion to force a man to associate with people raises problems of one kind; using persuasion to help a person perceive his obligations to other people raises issues of another kind. Even when using persuasion one ought not invade another's privacy, but rather ought to respect every man's right to choose his friends, his church, his club, the persons he will admit into his home, the people he will permit to use his machines and premises if he owns a factory, the teachers he selects to educate his children, the doctor he selects when he is ill, and so on. A man is entitled to live the life of his own choosing in accord with his own will and conscience. But he has no right to live at the expense of any other person.

A: That is about what I had in mind; individualism is the doctrine that some men have a right, if it suits their purposes, to live at the expense of others.

B: If that is the common understanding of individualism today, then the word, like liberalism, has undergone a complete change. Individualism once meant the phi-

losophy that each person, regardless of race, creed, or education, has the right to follow the promptings of his own conscience provided only that he allows every other person this same right. This is close to the second definition you offered, "An individualist is one who insists upon living his own life in his own way." But that definition leaves off the important proviso that all other persons be granted the same right.

A: That qualifying clause throws a different light on the matter.

B: Indeed it does. We honor men who have chosen to obey the dictates of their conscience rather than the customary ways of their contemporaries, when they were forced to choose one or the other. To quote St. Peter's words, "We ought to obey God rather than men." Martin Luther said, "No man can command my conscience." When a man is led to conclude that the promptings of his conscience are a closer approximation to the voice of God than the moral maxims of his fellows, then most of us would agree that he ought to follow his own conscience; and this means living his own life in his own way.

But this is completely dissociated from the rest of your definition. A man may both live his own

life and feel a strong obligation to help other people. Not only do some men feel these as compatible obligations, but also they feel them as the same obligation having two phases.

A: Perhaps individualism is the wrong label for what I have in mind. As you define it, the philosophy of individualism doesn't sound bad. I like the idea of every man following his own conscience provided he allows every other man the same right. But even this does not seem to stress sufficiently the social aspect of the person. I think that people fulfill themselves in society, and that you, with your stress on limited government and your analysis of political action, fail to stress the importance of social life.

B: If we do fail to stress the importance of social life, it is not because we fail to recognize the importance of social life. The limitation of government is not an end in itself; it is the means to an end, and the end is the enrichment of the personal and social life of people. Limiting the scope of government extends the scope of society and enlarges the sphere of creative activity. You remarked that persons find fulfillment in society, and I think your observation a true one. Even those who choose in ma-