



Individuality vs Individualism: Balancing Personal Freedom and Social Responsibility

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Abstract

In contemporary discourse on human behavior and society, the concepts of individuality and individualism have gained considerable attention. While individuality denotes the unique traits, talents, and perspectives that define a person, individualism a philosophy rooted in Western thought prioritizes personal freedom, autonomy, and self-interest, sometimes at the expense of collective welfare. Exploring these concepts is crucial for understanding the interplay between personal growth and social responsibility. This study employs a qualitative approach, analyzing Qur'anic verses, Prophetic ḥadīth, and scholarly interpretations to examine how Islamic thought harmonizes individuality with communal well-being. Key concepts such as nafs (self), Ummah (community), Tarbiyyah (personal development), and Ta'lim (education) highlight a framework where personal development is ethically guided and socially responsible. Islamic teachings encourage self-discipline, moderation, respect for family, pursuit of knowledge for societal benefit, and prioritization of collective welfare. Findings reveal that, unlike Western individualism, which often emphasizes self-centered autonomy, Islam integrates individual growth with ethical accountability and social cohesion. The study concludes that the Islamic model provides a balanced pathway, enabling individuals to flourish personally while actively contributing to the moral, social, and spiritual advancement of society.

Keyword: Individuality, Individualism, Islamic Thought, Nafs, Ummah, Social Responsibility, Personal Development, Ethics, Western Philosophy, Collective Welfare



Introduction

The concepts of individuality and individualism, while closely related in language, embody distinct meanings and carry different implications for human thought and society. The term “individuality” refers to the unique qualities, characteristics, and identity that distinguish one person from another, encompassing personal traits, talents, and perspectives. In contrast, individualism is a social and political philosophy that emphasizes personal liberty, autonomy, and self-reliance, often advocating for the primacy of individual interests over communal. (Hodges, 2018)

In addition to the above-mentioned perspective of both terms, Islamic thought presents a nuanced understanding of individuality and the individual’s role in society. While acknowledging personal freedom and uniqueness, Islam emphasizes accountability, social responsibility, and ethical conduct in accordance with the Qur’anic guidance and Prophetic teachings. Concepts such as *nafs* (self), *Ummah* (community), and *Tarbiyyah* (personal development) highlight a balanced framework where individual growth is harmonized with collective well-being. Islamic teachings advocate self-discipline, moderation, respect for family relations, pursuit of knowledge for societal benefit, and prioritization of communal welfare over selfish interests. (Tekke & Ismail, 2016)

Thus, the essential aim of this academic endeavour is to investigate the distinctions and intersections between individuality and individualism. By analyzing these concepts in relation to personal autonomy, social responsibility, and ethical conduct, the discussion aims are designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how individuals can thrive, prosper and flourish in their personal capacities while contributing positively to broader society.

Understanding of Individuality and Individualism

It is not uncommon for people to mix up these two terms (individuality & individualism) since they share a strong similarity in their first ten letters, with only the final two separating them. However, the endings, “-ity” and “-ism,” lead these words in entirely different directions. (Hodges, 2018)

Individuality and individualism are related concepts, but they have distinct meanings and implications. Both terms can be defined as follows:

Individualism

Individualism is a social and political philosophy that underscores the significance of individual liberty, autonomy, and self-reliance. It holds that the individual is the most crucial unit of society and that individuals should have the freedom to pursue their own interests and goals without undue interference from others or the government. This philosophy values personal freedom, self-determination, and individual rights, often advocating limited government and community group intervention in personal affairs while emphasizing personal goals and achievements. (Manaher, 2009)

Individuality

Individuality refers to the unique and distinct qualities, characteristics, and identity of each person, encompassing personal appearance, beliefs, talents, and quirks. It is the expression of one's uniqueness and authenticity, celebrated for promoting diversity and creativity. This concept goes beyond personal traits and extends to one's talents, skills, and abilities, highlighting the individual's strengths and weaknesses, setting them apart from the crowd. (Manaher, 2009)



Every person has his own unique qualities; it is natural. Humans are quite remarkable on this planet because each of them is so different from the others. Some are quick but not very strong, while others are slow but really strong. Some are great at talking, and others excel at meditation. We cannot all be amazing at everything, but from the perspective of the community, there are always at least a few people who are talented at any given thing. (Hodges, 2018)

Some Examples of Individuality & Individualism

Every person possesses individuality, yet not everyone embraces a culture of individualism. In various societies, the requirements of the community have a more immediate and profound impact on individual lives, while individualism can sometimes lead to a competitive or self-centred society where people prioritize their individual interests over collective welfare. It can be associated with economic systems like capitalism, which prioritize individual economic success. For example:

S. No.	Individuality	Individualism
1.	An artist might wish to show his special way of looking at things and his own style without completely disregarding societal norms or expectations.	An artist might aim to make art that questions the usual rules and what people expect, supporting personal freedom and independence.
2.	Workers could be motivated to share their one-of-a-kind thoughts and viewpoints, promoting a culture that values new ideas and imaginative thinking.	A company may prioritize individual success and competition, which only brings promotion and fame to themselves or their company.
3.	Individuals may want to express their unique perspectives and values, promoting a diverse and inclusive society.	People can emphasize personal freedom and independence, supporting policies and regulations that enable them to experience various freedoms within society. (The Content Authority, 2009)

As we can see, the decision to focus on individuality or individualism depends on the situation in which they are used. It is important to understand the nuances of each term. Usually, we think of individualism in terms of freedom it claims for an individual. However, like giving with one hand, it takes away from the other. Societies that emphasize individualism often make it challenging to work together in groups. Most people in such societies prefer to follow their own path and concentrate on what they are good at and passionate about. (Hodges, 2018)

Islam on Individualism

In the realm of Islamic thought, the discourse on individualism is multifaceted and intricate, as it intertwines with the collective fabric of society. Recognizing the potential challenges posed by unrestrained individualism, Islamic perspectives offer insightful remedies aimed at fostering a harmonious balance between personal autonomy and communal well-being. This intricate interplay invites a closer examination of the ways in which the principles of the Qur'ān and Hadīth guide solutions to mitigate negative societal impacts arising from unchecked individualism.

The Qur'ān also refers to the concept of individuality. In Arabic, the word commonly used for "individual" is "نفس" (nafs), which is often translated into English as "soul" or "self." This term denotes the unique essence or identity of a person, and it is employed in various contexts throughout the Qur'ān to highlight the freedom of the individual with personal



responsibility, accountability, and spiritual growth. The self (nafs) in Islām is often associated with base desires and inclinations. Consequently, the presence of individuality within Islam is unmistakable. (Tekke & Ismail, 2016)

Usually, people are never entirely on their own, they are part of a home, a neighborhood, a city, and a larger society. They are also connected to some religion, like being a Muslim and a part of the Muslim Ummah. This means that our actions are related to other and influence them, to some extent in one way or the other. While Islām values individual freedom and growth, it also emphasizes that these should not harm society. The Qur’ān and Ḥadīth instructs individuals to ensure that their desires and freedoms do not have adverse effects, not just on themselves but also on others. It encourages them to engage in activities that will bolster their faith and contribute to the development of an ideal society. It also encourages them to avoid selfishness and fulfill their moral duties. In Islām, it is all about balancing personal growth with the well-being of the community. (Tekke & Ismail, 2016)

This understanding emphasizes that in Islām, individual growth is inseparable from social responsibility and moral accountability. Personal development is encouraged, but always in harmony with the well-being of the community. Such principles provide a foundation for exploring the key pillars of individuality in Islām.

Key Pillars of Individuality

Within the intricate tapestry of Islamic teachings, specific foundational principles act as pillars, shaping the ethos of societies devoted to this faith. These principles serve as guiding beacons, influencing the values and conduct that characterize Islamic communities. Foremost among these principles is accountability, underscoring individual responsibility for actions. Another integral pillar is the interconnectedness of individuals within the Muslim community, referred to as Ummah, prioritizing collective well-being over individual interests. Islām places significant emphasis on respecting individual rights, fostering personal growth across spiritual, intellectual, and physical realms. Moreover, the fundamental concepts of individual development in Islām aspire to nurture individuals who positively contribute to the broader social framework. Collectively, these principles form the foundation of Islamic societal values, steering communities toward a harmonious and equitable way of life. A detailed exploration of these core values follows below.

The Concept of Accountability

As people think about their lives and make choices, they may not always consider the consequences of their actions. In the pursuit of personal freedom and autonomy, the idea of being accountable for their actions is often pushed to the background with the mindset of "I make my own choices, and no one dictates how I should live." However, it is crucial to recognize that all our actions, whether we acknowledge it or not, have repercussions, and they affect others at various levels. (Why Islam, 2023) The Islām emphasizes that each individual is accountable for their own actions and will be judged accordingly. This underscores the importance of responsibility. Allāh says in the Qur’ān:

"And We have made every man's action to cling to his neck, and We will bring forth to him on the Day of Resurrection a book which he will find wide open."
(Qur’ān, Al-Isrā 14)



Another relevant verse is found in the Qur'ān:

"So whoever does an atom's weight of good will see it, and whoever does an atom's weight of evil will see it." (Qur'ān, al-Zilzāl 7–8.)

Prophet (ﷺ) said in a place:

"Every one of you is a shepherd, and each one is responsible for his flock. So, the leader is a shepherd over the people, and he will be questioned about his responsibility." (Muslim, Ṣahīḥ Muslim, ḥadīth no. 4496)

Emphasizing personal accountability, notable hadith relayed by the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) declares:

"The feet of the son of Ódam will not move on the Day of Judgment until he is asked about five things: his life and how he spent it, his youth and how he used it, his wealth and how he earned it and how he spent it, and what he did with the knowledge he acquired." (al-Tirmidhī, Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī, ḥadīth no. 2416)

This sense of accountability encourages individuals to act responsibly, make ethical choices, and fulfill their obligations towards God and fellow human beings. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) said:

"All of you are guardians and responsible for your charges: the Ruler (i.e. Imam) is a guardian and responsible for his subjects; and a man is a guardian of his family and is responsible for his charges; and a lady is a guardian in the house of her husband and is responsible for her charge; and a servant is a guardian of the property of his master and is responsible for his charge." (al-Bukhārī, Ṣahīḥ al-Bukhārī, ḥadīth no. 2751)

The abovementioned teachings of the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth establish a direct link between human action and divine accountability. They assert that every individual's free actions are meticulously recorded and will be subject to Allāh's judgment in the hereafter.

The Concept of Ummah

Society is more than just a group of individuals; it is like a living organism. Just as the parts of a body are interconnected, individuals and society are closely linked. They influence each other. Developing one's personality does not mean disconnecting from social matters. In fact, an individual's value is determined by how they enrich society through their thoughts and actions. According to Iqbāl, individuals should be willing to make sacrifices for the benefit of society. In Islām, there is no separation between spiritual and social aspects; they are intertwined. A true Muslim is inseparable from the Islamic society. Iqbāl emphasized the concept of "ego," with both individual and collective dimensions. He refused materialistic secular ideals, emphasizing the unity (Tawhīd) taught by the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) as the core of the Islāmic community. He believed that Muslims, driven by a just cause and devoid of selfish motives, had a strong historical sense of purpose and fought vigorously for their faith despite their small numbers. According to Iqbāl, the fundamental pillars of the Muslim community are Tawhīd (the unity of Allāh), Risālah (the concept of prophethood), and Ukhūwwah (the bond of brotherhood). (Āfza, 2013)

In Islām, unity and harmony within the Ummah (Muslim community) take precedence over individual interests. It emphasizes collective well-being, discourages material dominance and arrogance, and fosters a shared bond in faith and moral duties among Muslims. Allāh says in the Qur'ān:



“You are the best community ever raised for humanity—you encourage good, forbid evil, and believe in Allah. Had the People of the Book believed, it would have been better for them. Some of them are faithful, but most are rebellious” (Qur’ān, Al-Imrān 110)

In some other verses Allāh says:

“There is no good in most of their secret talks—except those encouraging charity, kindness, or reconciliation between people. And whoever does this seeking Allāh’s pleasure, we will grant them a great reward.” (Qur’ān, Al-Nisā 114)

“Cooperate with one another in goodness and righteousness, and do not cooperate in sin and transgression” (Qur’ān, Al-Mā’idah 2)

Qur’ān connects individuality to the Ummah, highlighting social responsibility. Obligations like Zakat, Hajj, and fasting in Ramadan shape individual character, fostering the spirit of self-sacrifice crucial in Islamic society. (Lāluddin, 2014) The Qur’ān says:

“They give ‘the emigrants’ preference over themselves even though they may be in need. And whoever is saved from the selfishness of their own souls, it is they who are ‘truly’ successful.” (Qur’ān, Al-Ḥashar 9)

The foundation for addressing social problems lies in the mutual acknowledgment of shared responsibility between individuals and society for common interests. Any attempt at bringing about positive change would be ineffective without this understanding as a prerequisite. A compelling example of the principle that society bears responsibility for an individual's conduct is evident in this parable narrated by the Prophet (ﷺ):

“The example of the person abiding by Allāh’s order and restrictions in comparison to those who violate them is like the example of those persons who drew lots for their seats in a boat. Some of them got seats in the upper part, and the others in the lower. When the latter needed water, they had to go up to bring water (and that troubled the others), so they said, ‘Let us make a hole in our share of the ship (and get water) saving those who are above us from troubling them. So, if the people in the upper part left the others do what they had suggested, all the people of the ship would be destroyed, but if they prevented them, both parties would be safe.’”

(Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 2493)

In short, in Islām each person is important for the community, and the community is important for each person. They help and support each other. This mutual care is crucial for making society better. Islām teaches individuals and the community to look out for one another, ensuring a happy and productive life for everyone in a united and equal society. It also emphasizes social responsibility, encouraging cooperation among Muslims using terms like "nation" and "ummah" to promote a just and equitable society.

Respect for Individual Rights

Islām urges personal growth in spiritual, intellectual, and physical aspects of life. It is not just about worship but also respects individual rights. The idea of piety stresses the personal bond with Allāh and moral development, promoting individuality within a strong community and shared values. (Tabataba’i, 2010, p. 10) Prophet (ﷺ) described the importance of individual in these words:

“O ‘Abdullāh! Have I not been informed that you fast all the day and stand in prayer all night?” I said, “Yes, O Allāh’s Messenger (ﷺ)!” He said, “Do not do that!



Observe the fast sometimes and also leave them (the fast) at other times; stand up for the prayer at night and also sleep at night. Your body has a right over you; your eyes have a right over you and your wife has a right over you." (Ṣahīḥ al-Bukhārī 5199)

In this Ḥadīth, the Prophet (ﷺ) advised maintaining a balanced attitude in worship, stressing that it is not necessary to fast continuously or to worship all night. He highlighted the rights of one's body and family, emphasizing a balanced lifestyle that fulfills religious obligations and responsibilities to self and others.

Foundations of Individual Development in Islām

From an Islamic perspective, there are three concepts we need to consider for an individual and his development: Tarbiyah, Ta'dīb (training, disciplining yourself for good behaviour and manners) and Ta'lim relating to individual development, understanding of society along with the inculcation of right social behavior, and the right process of learning and knowledge transmission, respectively. Islām aims to promote such individual freedom that is geared towards the betterment of society and harmony in the community. (Khan 2013) One of the Ḥadīth of Prophet (ﷺ) states:

Abū Burdah (رضي الله عنه) narrates: "The Prophet (ﷺ) sent my father, Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī, and Mu'ādh bin Jabal to Yemen and said (to them), Live together, do not turn against each other, make things easy for others and do not put obstacles in each other's way". (Ṣahīḥ al-Bukhārī 7172)

Similarly, He (ﷺ) said in another place:

"The best amongst you is those who have the best manners and character." (Ṣahīḥ al-Bukhārī 3559)

Muslims are encouraged to cultivate good manners and ethical behaviour in their interactions with others, reflecting the moral principles of Islām. Moreover, the concept of individuality is also finely displayed in the five pillars or obligations of Islām, declaration of Īmān, Ṣalāh, Ṣawm, Zakāh and Hajj. These principles of Islam not only lead to individual progress but also helps in developing a civilized society. (Lāluddin, 2014, p. 13)

Limitations and Duties in Accordance with Islāmic Tenets

Based on the Qur'ānic verses and Ḥadīth mentioned earlier, certain limitations and duties regarding individual values are outlined below:

Mastery Over the Self (Nafs)

The concept of Mastery over the Self in Islāmic Teachings involves self-discipline, self-reflection, and spiritual growth to control negative desires, avoid excessive materialism, cultivate humility, and submit to Allāh's will. The Qur'ān identifies three types of the self, known as nafs: the ego inclined towards wrongdoing (nafs āl amārah bil su'u), the self-blaming ego (nafs al lawwāmah), and the tranquil self (nafs al muṭma'innah). These will be referred to as the lower self, the self-incriminating ego, and the self at peace, respectively. (Āl-Yāgout, 2020, p. 12) Allāh says in the Qur'ān:

"But as for he who feared the position of his Lord and prevented the self from [unlawful] inclination, then indeed, Paradise will be [his] refuge" Qur'ān, An-Nāzi'āt 40–41.

In another verse Qur'ān says:



“And [by] the soul and He who proportioned it, And inspired it [with discernment of] its wickedness and its righteousness, Truly, he succeeds that purifies it. And he fails that corrupts it.” Qur’ān, Al-Shams 7–10.

The heart is the seat of desires. Successfully controlling it safeguards a person from blindly yielding to numerous personal desires. As the Prophet (ﷺ) said:

“There is a piece of flesh in the body, and when it becomes good (reformed), the whole body becomes good; but when it becomes corrupt, the whole body becomes corrupt. That piece of flesh is the heart.” (Sahīḥ Muslim, Hadith 1599a)

In essence, Islām advocates discipline across life's facets, instilling the ability to manage desires and emotions.

Avoiding Selfishness and Greed

In the light of Islāmic teachings, fostering mutual relations in society involves guarding against excessive selfishness and greed. Islām encourages individuals to prioritize the needs of others, promoting the sharing of resources with the less fortunate. (Al-Ghazālī, 1982, Vol. 4, pp. 50–53)

Balancing Personal Freedom with Social Responsibility

While Islām acknowledges individual freedom, it emphasizes the importance of using that freedom responsibly and in consideration of the well-being of the community. Personal choices should not conflict with the broader social good. (Kassem, 2012, p. 167)

Maintaining Ethical Conduct in Individual Pursuits

Pursuits of personal success or goals should align with ethical principles in Islām. Unethical practices, dishonesty, or harm to others are discouraged, emphasizing the importance of maintaining integrity in individual endeavors. (Kassem, 2012, p. 172)

Respecting Family Ties and Relationships

Islāmic teachings emphasize the importance of maintaining strong family ties and fulfilling responsibilities towards family members. Individualistic pursuits should not come at the expense of neglecting familial duties. As Prophet (ﷺ) said:

“The Almighty and Exalted, said, 'I am the Merciful (ar-Rahman). I have created ties of kinship and derives a name for it from My Name. If anyone maintains ties of kinship, I maintain connection with him, and I shall cut off anyone who cuts them off.'” (Al-Bukhārī, Hadith 53)

This highlights that preserving family bonds is not only a social duty but also a spiritual obligation that strengthens both individual character and societal cohesion.

Seeking Knowledge and Personal Development for the Greater Good

Individual growth and education are valued, Islām emphasizes that knowledge should be sought not just for personal gain but also for the benefit of society. Individuals are encouraged to use their skills and knowledge to contribute positively to their communities. (Kassem, 2012, p. 168)

Exercising Moderation in Material Pursuits

Islām encourages a balanced approach to material wealth. While individual success and financial prosperity are not discouraged, caution is advised against extravagance and wastefulness. Individuals are urged to share their wealth and resources with those in need. (Kassem, 2012, p. 169)



Prioritizing Collective Welfare Over Self-Interest

Islamic values encourage individuals to prioritize the welfare of the community over narrow self-interest. This includes contributing to social welfare, supporting those in need, and working towards the common good. (Kader, 2021, pp. 102–123) Allāh says in Qurān:

"They give 'the emigrants' preference over themselves even though they may be in need. And whoever is saved from the selfishness of their own souls, it is they who are 'truly' successful." (Qur'ān, Al-Hashr 9)

Thus, selflessness and concern for others are central to Islamic ethics, guiding individuals to achieve both personal and societal success.

Conclusion

The exploration of individuality and individualism reveals a complex interplay between personal uniqueness and societal frameworks. Individuality celebrates the distinct traits, talents, and perspectives that define a person, fostering diversity and creativity within a community. Individualism, on the other hand, emphasizes personal freedom, autonomy, and self-reliance, often prioritizing individual interests over collective welfare. In essence, Islāmic teachings stress self-discipline, ethical conduct, and a balance between individual pursuits and collective welfare. This includes controlling desires, avoiding selfishness, respecting family ties, seeking knowledge for societal benefit, and exercising moderation in material pursuits. These principles collectively contribute to a harmonious and balanced society in accordance with Islāmic values.

Islamic perspectives offer a nuanced approach, integrating individuality within a framework of moral accountability, social responsibility, and ethical conduct. Concepts such as nafs, Ummah, Tarbiyyah, and T'alim highlight the balance between personal growth and societal welfare, stressing that freedom and development must align with ethical, spiritual, and communal obligations. The Qur'anic and Prophetic guidance encourages self-discipline, moderation, pursuit of knowledge for the collective good, respect for family ties, and prioritization of communal welfare over selfish interests.

In conclusion, the distinction between individuality and individualism underscores the importance of harmonizing personal development with social cohesion. While individualism in its extreme can challenge collective well-being, Islam presents a model where individual growth, ethical responsibility, and community welfare coexist. This balanced approach not only nurtures the unique potential of each person but also strengthens the moral and social fabric of society, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding the role of the individual in both personal and collective dimensions.

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