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**A Critical Reflection on the Sociability of Individuality**

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**Introduction**

This paper focuses on individuality, which is often conceived as a unit of reality with the ultimate standard of value. I will use the term individuality and self interchangeably. This conception of individuality upholds the view that every mind should be true to itself, that individuals should use their capacities to achieve freedom. What I wish to reflect on here, however, concerns the sociability of individuality, especially when a person is largely involved in self-creation. To what extent should the foundational knowledge of individuality take into account the constitutive experience of our sociability and the psychological submission that goes with it? Will individuality make sense if its conception does not adequately account

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for human social aspirations? What does the idea of individuality as being connote as against the view of individuality as doing?

### **I. Individuality in Genesis**

Nothing can be truer about me than the story I tell myself about myself. The truth about me can be told correctly from the inside out. This, to me, is the bedrock of individuality, especially as it reflects the story of my distinctive being. This view proposes that the truth about myself must be told as appeared clearly to me in my deepest awareness. As much as this sounds like a self-evident truth, the question that confronts me is whether the deepest awareness of my individuality excludes all forms of social influences. By social influences, I have in mind, primarily my inmost intuition about me, my life as embedded in some sort of customs, patterns of interactions and facts of society which determines me. These guide my behavior and to these I must submit in order to make sense of my existence and identity. As I ponder on the process through which I gain awareness into my individuality, it quickly occurs to me the important role that the affective path of my being plays. The affective nature has gradually developed me, especially my preferences: my likes and dislikes. I realize the primacy of the affective nature, first from the standpoint of the crucial relation I have with those people in my community, and second from the fact that I interpret my relation with them through the affective. It is from this interpretation that I gain a deep sense of myself as an individual.

What occurs to me, therefore, is the need to account for the affective nature in my study of individuality. I would like to succinctly discuss this through an engagement with the conception of individuality as something that can be ultimately viewed in cognition and action. My conclusion is that this position highlights a delusive view of individuality which typically deceives us to think that we are ever in complete control of our existence and lives<sup>2</sup>. I will elaborate

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<sup>2</sup> See Fredrick Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power”, in Michel Foucault: *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, by Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). Rene Descartes, “Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason and Seeking Truth in the Field of Science”, in *Philosophical Essays*, trans. L.J. Lafleur (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill). Jean Paul Satre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel [Footnote continued on next page ... ]

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on why this is so shortly. I should acknowledge the truth championed in the above philosophy though, the fact that the very being of individuality is deeply entrenched in the free self. Nothing is wrong with the argument that we will only be true to our distinctive self when we are free from fear, control and suppression. The truth is that the essence of our reality is freedom. But, much as the capacity for freedom is the dominant nature of human individuality, my argument here is that the human capacity to pursue and realize the free self requires a submission which is social in nature. The reality of our relatedness to the other occurs to us in our inmost awareness of our self and this indicates to us that our absolute sovereignty differs from what some proponents of human autonomy suggest.<sup>3</sup>

The view of individuality that I wish to defend here occurs to me during my reflection on the *Genesis* story of man's creation. In the *Genesis* account, Adam was created by God but without a partner. Subsequently, Adam was given the invitation to utilize his capacities to formulate a clear life-plan for himself. Prior to this, the Biblical account highlighted the good condition of all of creation with the exception of Adam's condition. Adam was alone, and this condition was considered 'not good' in the mind of God.<sup>4</sup> God desired the opposite condition for Adam as it was necessary for him to enjoy a satisfying life and good existence. The condition of Adam describes

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Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956). Foucault, M. (1988) *Technologies of the Self*. (Eds. L. Martin, H. Gutman, & P. Hutton). London: Tavistock. Foucault, Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: *The Essential Works* (Ed. P. Rabinow, trans. R. Hurley) (pp. 253-280). Allen Lane: The Penguin Press. Kant, I. (1929) *Critique of Pure Reason* (trans. N.K.Smith) London: Macmillan/St. Martin's Press.

<sup>3</sup> I have in mind here those philosophers who define autonomy as total self-governing, the idea that an autonomous person has total freedom and independence over his/her existence. But, I do not disagree with the view of autonomy as the capacity of a rational person to make un-coerced decisions. For discussions about controversies concerning autonomy, see John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (USA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971). Gerald Dworkin, "The Concept of Autonomy," in John Christman (ed.) *The Inner Citadel: Essays on Individual Autonomy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). Charles Taylor, "Atomism," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974). Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> *The Holy Bible*, Genesis 2: 18-24.

what it means for a human being not to be at war with his/her own nature. From *Genesis*, we understand why the knowledge of one's individuality must be sought from the inside out and not the other way. Adam's condition of aloneness is not totally undesirable when individuality is viewed as an ultimate unit of value.

A stand-alone condition can be good for acquiring self-clarity, inward acceptance and endorsement. But, Adam's aloneness was different because it typifies a state of life that was not freely chosen. The removal of aloneness for Adam, therefore, exhibits an eradication of unfreedom. Adam must place an important focus on shaping his individuality through his own life's choices. What captures my attention the most in this account is that the choosing of individuality presents with it a sociable input. Adam's condition was diagnosed in the midst of some other social embeddedness. From the acknowledgment of some mutual relationship with the other and the realization of the authentic hold that the other has on him, Adam was able to find his authentic rhythm in life. But, what role does the capacity for reason play in Adam's attempt to truly define his condition? Locke, one of the major figures in the nineteenth century British philosophy, shed some light on this.

## **II. Locke, Descartes and Mills on Mankind**

Locke reflected on what it meant for Adam to be the son of God. One of his central goals was to present an authentic account of individuality using Adam as a case study. Locke proposed that the cultivation of individuality is good in itself. By this he wanted individuals to seek only what lies within them. To Locke, the light of reason planted in Adam by God was primarily for Adam to rule his own life. Adam was supposed to invent his own life, and in doing so define for humanity what it means to be an individual. Locke denied that the divine providence participates in the reason of man all together. The freedom that reason is capable of generating cannot be constrained or restrained by the creator. Man, according to Locke, is the ultimate arbiter of truth, especially the truth about how to rule his own life. God gives man the faculty of reason so that man can guide himself in matters that pertain to the truth.

Locke argued that we can only be free by following the law of reason.<sup>5</sup> A man that has not come to the knowledge of the law of reason within him and living within the limits defined by the law is not free. A free man must abide by the disposition of his own will.<sup>6</sup> Locke's general strategy was to propose reason as the ultimate arbiter in life's choices.<sup>7</sup> Locke's position on the role of reason in self-creation deserves some merit. However, if it is not illogical think that reason is a derivative from experience, the extension of Locke's idea as an invitation to see our lives and existence completely under our control is exaggerated. Experience and the constitution of rationality tell us the contrary. First, our thinking is shaped through the world, in particular our cultural traditions. Subsequently, we live to shape our lives from the inside out when we become mature and active participants of our society. Even at the point that we can boast of being a mature member of society, it is impossible to reason from a zero ground, devoid of influences from our customs and the framework of thought we have been accustomed to. We can achieve self-objectification at the theoretical level of existence, but the idea of individuality that we formulate at this level will be meaningless, thin and insignificant if placed within the spectrum of our lived existence.

I am not denying that reason should guide us in the attempt to cultivate our individuality. My point is that it is wrong to argue as if pure reason is the only true guide. What we are led to believe by the idea of pure reason is that reason must distant itself from all influences and associations that give the person a sense of meaning, stand on an empty ground and project individuality. But, this is incorrect logic as that which is reasonable to any individual or groups of individuals can only be meaningfully posited and defended within certain historical situatedness, especially within the complex meanings of what it means for the person(s) to live. What this leads us to is the crucial need to include the histories and influences in our lives when we engage in the pursuit of our individuality. Once we include the aforementioned factors, we must agree that the affective

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<sup>5</sup> Locke, Second Treatise, Ch. VII.

<sup>6</sup> Locke, Second Treatise, Ch. VI.

<sup>7</sup> A similar account surfaces in Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding. He argued that an investigation into the nature of our understanding or reason is tantamount to an enquiry into the self's knowledge.

nature of individuality is important in the process of self-formation. The constitutive influence of our temporality must be respected in any consideration of self-knowledge.

Let us reflect briefly on the life of Adam, God viewed his individuality from the standpoint of his temporality. The lack in the life of Adam impacted him severely and this helped him to comprehend his incompleteness, his distance from the other who seemed in some sense out of his sight. Adam's submission to the fact of his existence is undeniable, his desire for union was evident though there is no indication that Adam resigned to fate. What is evident here is that Adam viewed his individuality in connection with an other, primarily Eve. The process of identity formation evident in Adam is different from what most modern conceptions of identity portray. Adam spoke of himself without hiding his desire to be in union. He understood that his separation was incomplete and that the evidence of his development was to use his capacity to resolve the conflict entailed in his inner desire and the fact of his separation. Adam's capacities made a balanced demand on him, one that ensured he sustained his ultimate relatedness in all situations. The human capacities truly flourish when they are exercised to manage the transitions that occur in human awareness of attachment and separation. This capacity is innate, but it must be nurtured through education. It is not an exaggeration to say that the education propounded in the twenty first century has paid less attention to this important nature of our humanity. I will now comment on Descartes who is famous for the idea of 'cogito ergo sum', I think, therefore I live.

Descartes foundational self popularly distinguishes man as an independent, sovereign being. Descartes account deplored the formation of individuality through public or collective influences. Descartes assumption was that man's nature is primarily rational. Human thinking, in Descartes view, can be derived from the way it is caused to move in accordance with its internal regulations.<sup>8</sup> We can

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<sup>8</sup> I am following Thalos interpretation and application of Descartes' mind body problem here. See M. Thalos "From Human Nature to Moral Philosophy" (ed.) S. Brennan, *Feminist Moral Philosophy*, (Canada: University of Calgary Press), pp. 85-7 for the imagery of the self as projected by the mechanistic mode of explanation.

infer the power given to rationality and its implications on individuality. Since the rational nature engages primarily in thought, the most knowable beliefs we formed of ourselves by associating with the world should stem from our rational nature.<sup>9</sup> The self within us perceives and thinks about our affiliations and can will it off indiscriminately. By direct intuition, the self has access to its own reality and the awareness of the self by the self is the simplest and clearest way of knowing oneself.<sup>10</sup> The self that is uniquely representative of our true worth can be known only in introspection. This is the self that is free from bias.

Descartes idea prepared the way for a radical conception of individuality in the sense that prioritizes individual actions. This radical idea suggests, and rightly that individuality cannot be caged. Man was born free and he must enjoy absolute freedom in his choice of life plans. The individual should never be imprisoned in his or her thoughts. To realise this end, individuality must confront itself with certain knowledge. Certainty of knowledge and beliefs is the distinguishing virtue of self-introspection. Under introspection, the self is presented to itself and not until its grasp occurs with clarity and distinctness, it cannot be deemed to be known. By clarity, Descartes means that the self 'is present and accessible to the attentive mind.' And it is distinct in that it is 'sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear.' "Distinctness" demands that we have before the mind nothing but what pertains to having that item fully before the mind. "Distinctness therefore requires that, through reductive analysis, we separate that item from all other items that accompany it in our everyday sensuous or intellectual experience."<sup>11</sup> There is no doubt that Descartes was aware of the other in the process of gaining an unmistakable knowledge of the self, but he was not here interested in exploring its crucial roles in the journey of self-knowledge. What is uppermost in this journey is the eradication of every form of suppression to gain the experience of independence.

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<sup>9</sup> R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, AT VII; CSM II 10.

<sup>10</sup> Med. 4; 2:40, AT 7:57.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted from M. Thalos, p. 17. (italics mine).



What does it mean for the foundational self to be detached from everything else to the point that it contains only itself? This is an important question that will be answered shortly. But, as the detached self continues to evolve, it grows within the individualistic characteristic which defines its originality. Therefore, when the identity of the self is expressed, it must exhibit an autonomy that denounces the wisdom that is gained from society, knowing that this wisdom is none of its own doing. This is individuality in doing. The desire that longs for the realisation of this individuality stems from the root of self-centeredness. Thus, individuality must expose its ego as that which wills the desire, and work toward its fruition: only its own goal. To exhibit tendencies of dependence is to exhibit the quality of weakness and this is off the mark in the journey of individuality. For this philosophical tradition, individuality is more rooted in doing than in being. However, “human beings-along with other entities on earth-are ineluctably place-bound. More even than earthlings, we are place-lings, and our very perceptual apparatus, our sensing body, reflects the kinds of places we inhabit. The ongoing reliability and general veracity of perception (a reliability and veracity that countenance considerable experiential vicissitudes) entail a continual attunement to place (also experienced in open-ended variation)”<sup>12</sup>.

In his vastly embraced work *On Liberty*, Mill spoke of our capacity to use our faculties. He argued that using all our faculties in our individual ways is what gives us freedom. Mill was clear of what individuality entails when he said, ‘he who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need for any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation’.<sup>13</sup> Mill contrasted free people with ‘ape-like’ imitators to show how much freedom matters. Without it, no one could develop his or her fullest potentials. Mill’s project was to ensure that we are not denied the opportunity to use our endowed gift of reason. Again, it challenged us to stand up against anything that might want to intrude into our rights to live in accordance with reason. We are responsible to utilise our innate gift, namely, reason.

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<sup>12</sup> Edward C. Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, (Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indiana Polis, 2009), p. 322-3.

<sup>13</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, (Amherst: Mass, 1986).



A harmonious development of all human potentialities is not desirable in Mill's project on individuality. What we possess in common is reason and the essence of reason is freedom. Because individuals are sufficiently similar in this regard, they have the ability to engage and form a cooperative association. The ability to dialogue and reach consent is present in us but the pursuit of harmonious development of human potentialities is regressive and oppressive. How much is Mill willing to give to the stimuli we receive both from within us and from the outside in our attempts to pursue individuality? How much wisdom and knowledge of ourselves can we gain by intensely gazing into our inner self, our soul? Mill's concern is admirable to the extent he associates originality with individuality. Human beings are, thus, expected to originate their own values rather than discover values from some external source. Since the individual is endowed with reflective capacity, he/she is capable of making choices which flow from an understanding of what matters most to him/her.<sup>14</sup>

But, Mills account is too simplistic, said Sandel who was of the view that unsociability needs not be involved in self-creation. When we reflect on who we are from the standpoint of reason, we do not make sense of a singular identity from which we capture the kinds of persons we are. What truly happens during our reflective moments is that we become aware of ourselves through numerous associations, like sex or gender, ethnicity, race, nationality, religion and others. These association help us to form certain believes about who we are. Our individuality is substantially grasped not only by pure rationalisation in which case we have all the freedom to determine who we are or want to be. But, true freedom suggests that we carefully observe the world and choose for ourselves the life we believe defines our true being. In choosing, we encounter our self as we go through some sort of psychological submission which reveals to us our temporal situatedness as well as the other dimensions of our lives which we cannot will away. This individuality is far rooted in being than in doing.

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<sup>14</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, Liberalism, Individuality and Identity, *Chicago Journals*, 27(2), 2001. p. 319.

### **III. Desire for Unity Essence of Humanity**

What is often overlooked in the thinking about individuality as doing is the fact that the ultimate differentiator of individuality, which is the original self, lacks qualities of difference and for this reason it is only an ultimate differentiator and not an ultimate difference. The ultimate self that sees its own individual qualities houses the qualities without itself being differentiated. It is the reality behind what appeared to us in our finite existence. This self has been called various names in various cultures, but the Judeo-Christian tradition gives it a semblance of God's spirit. What the spirit does is to differentiate things but itself is not differentiated. The spirit cannot be differentiated from that which it differentiates. It is not separate from it, but it is not identical with it. Much as it is inward to the individual, it transcends its individual content. This freedom of the spirit is the freedom of the self, the freedom to escape the content that it individuates. What this entails is the fact that individuality, as fine as it may appear to us in our introspection, cannot be an identical reflection of our self. We transcend whatever definition we may associate with our self. We are not ultimately limited to those qualities that define us apart from the others. The implication of this to those who seek their individualities in action is to understand that we are answerable to our shared historical commitments and the traditions that form the background of our intelligibility.

Another understanding that stems from the above is the notion of the spirit as a universal self. The spirit is the essence of all, including matter. As portrayed in the creation story, the whole of creation came from nothingness. Nothingness cannot be a 'no thing'. For then it will be illogical for something to come from nothing. Nothing being the foundation of all there is in the world illustrates the limitation of the finite knowledge and language to capture its nature. Nothingness, therefore, refers to the finest essence from which the reality of everything else is derived. This is the spirit, the ultimate self. Before the creation of Adam, the spirit ruminates upon the surface of the earth, apparently energising and revitalising the whole of creation, its dynamic traditions, values and customs. The spirit is everywhere, in motion without distinctive qualities. The spirit is that which differentiates matter but is itself undifferentiated. The implication is

that there is a union of spirit and matter and the mystery of this union is too profound for any finite mind to exhaust.

It is the power of this union that finds reflection in human communion with both the physical and the sacred. Since the source of existence is the same for all, the desire to be not apart remains strong in all. Adam's desire to escape aloneness expresses the desire to transcend separation which appeared to be the essential nature of his individuality. Adam's refined capacity sees its transcendental essence beyond the realm of separation to the realm of union, only when Eve came to his side did he find the good which was long associated with the rest of creation. This longing for unity is the essence of the self and it is toward this end that the capacity for reason should lead us.<sup>15</sup> This is the sociability of individuality and not until we begin to understand the special implications this has on our dwelling, we will not be able to conceive of our self truly. The originality of this idea of individuality is that it appeals to us to feel our common humanity as it transcends divisive identities which blind us from seeing who we truly are.



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<sup>15</sup> See Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence : The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).