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An Individual's Conflict with Society through the Lens of a Liberal Education

In today's world, individuals conduct themselves based on the expectations of the society. The extent to which an individual plays a role in his or her communities is crucial to the betterment of the society as a whole. One tends to focus on his or her selfish interests and competes with others in order to survive. Although competition has the potential to be healthy, an excessive amount can be destructive. Therefore, a balance is necessary between individual advancement and providing for the common good. As an undergraduate student experiencing a liberal arts education, I have regularly asked myself as to what extent my involvement in society should be. I aspire to be a pure mathematician and explore the beauty of patterns and nature. On the other hand, the ideals of service and leadership are ingrained in me. Although a part of me aspires to contribute to mathematics and influence individuals through education, another side of me desires to serve the people and bring change in society. The combination of societal expectations and individual ambition contribute to my inner conflict. The beauty of mathematics emphasized by Godfrey Harold Hardy in *A Mathematician's Apology*, and the "invisible hand" and the "impartial spectator" employed by Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* assist in resolving my internal tension that revolves around finding the balance necessary for individual prosperity in the realms of the societal sphere.

In order to resolve this tension between my personal aspirations and public contributions, I need to understand why I chose mathematics in the first place. As a math major, I am constantly asked the bothersome question, “Why mathematics”? My peers, friends, and elders regularly express that I should have become an engineer as a direct correlation of being good at math. These expectations made me doubt my initial choice, and in order to have a secure alternative, I reluctantly added a computer science minor. Therefore, I have regularly contemplated why I initially wanted to become a mathematician. Was it for my own sake, in order to receive better judgement from others, for the good of mathematics, or a combination of the above? An individual cannot be content with his or her work unless he or she completely enjoys the process and remembers why he or she joined it in the first place. G.H. Hardy helps me resolve this conflict. His aim is to provide the “proper justification of a mathematician’s life” (Hardy 3). Hardy stated that a “mathematician, like a painter or poet, is a maker of patterns.” Most mathematicians are motivated because their work is “permanent” since it is “made with *ideas*” (13). Instead of viewing mathematics through a scientific perspective, he claims that “real mathematics must be justified as art if it can be justified at all.” Finally, he concludes that the purpose of mathematics is to combine the ideas and patterns so they “fit together in a harmonious way” and asserts that “there is no permanent place in the world for ugly mathematics” (14). Hardy’s defense of mathematics reinvigorates my motivation to pursue the subject. I initially dove into mathematics to explore patterns, conduct research, and spread the love of education, but due to society’s expectations, my underlying motivation deviated from the original passion for the subject. Reading this work sent me back to where I began—to do mathematics for the sake of mathematics, not for myself, and definitely not for society’s expectations.

While my passion to become a mathematician contributes a fraction to my internal struggle, my motivation to help others through service organizations is responsible for the rest of the tension. Although community service provides the opportunity to lend a helping hand to others on a regular basis, the extent to which the motivation remains selfless fluctuates. As the president of a community service organization, I believe it is necessary to help others as much as possible. Unfortunately, mundane bureaucratic duties like organizing community service events, recruiting new members, constantly communicating, and filling out paperwork take away from the overall goal. By the time the service occurs, the energy levels and motivation drop, and it turns into a habitual activity. When the act of helping others becomes a routine event, we lose sight of the main purpose. I am a victim of this habitual attitude. Furthermore, although we attempt to play our part in society, I feel like we could do much more. If we really are conducting selfless service, then why do we need to publicize the activity after? Why do most of us ignore individuals who are homeless and sleep under the bridge every night? Questions like these constantly bother me as to if we are really doing selfless duty. This idea can be extended to other fields in society as well since most actions have an underlying selfish interest attached. All in all, the eventual aim should be to eradicate the underlying selfish motivations and serve for the sake of the public selflessly.

Adam Smith's "impartial spectator" and the "invisible hand" help me resolve this inner strife regarding the balance of private and public spheres. Smith defines the impartial spectator as "the man within, the great judge" encompassing the characteristics of "reason, principle, and conscience" (Smith 22). The impartial spectator illuminates the answer to right versus wrong, and self-command assists in reaching the destination of moral righteousness. Due to this sense of conscience, we need to try to always make morally right decisions and help others whenever

the opportunity is provided. In addition, Smith claims that humans are naturally sympathetic and social beings. One does not necessarily desire to become an exemplary figure or achieve critical acclaim; rather, he or she only demands respect and “praiseworthiness” (12). Individuals strive to obtain “ease, pleasure, [and] applause” in order to secure bliss and tranquility, and to achieve this goal, they aim for monetary security and emulate “the excellence of others” (12). Economic stability can lead to ease and pleasure, and this is exactly the reasoning that caused me to add the computer science minor even though I was initially against it. My goal as a mathematician, though, is not to earn applause, but rather for the self-satisfaction and helping advance the field as a whole. I will be able to achieve this by emulating others. If I follow the path of other great mathematicians, then I can reach that pinnacle one day as well. Altogether, Smith professes that humans, who are inherently social beings, achieve contentment and resolve their inner conflicts by observing others, experiencing hardships, and maintaining self-command. Similarly, I can accomplish my personal aspirations by following the paths of other mathematicians, progressing through struggle, and applying mathematics for solely moral purposes.

In addition to the impartial spectator, Smith introduces the idea of an invisible hand. He asserts that man works only “for his own happiness” and security (Smith 112). Yet, he or she cannot gauge to what degree a positive impact those selfish actions cause. Therefore, Smith concludes that individuals are “led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention” (99). Passions motivate ambitions, and these ambitions cause individuals to excel in their particular subject, which indirectly provides advancements in that field. If several ambitious individuals contribute to society, then together, they have the potential to drive society forward and generate progress. This idea helps combine my internal conflicts. Even though serving the society might not be as selfless as it ought to be, the effort is not in vain. Some

individuals might participate in serving others only to receive praise or improve their resumes, but regardless, other people are being helped. The regular repetition of this process slowly helps in transforming the attitudes of the individuals. As the impartial spectator's moral compass becomes ingrained in the individual, the need of the invisible hand reduces. The collective good will automatically be the result of individual actions, rather than indirect consequences. Smith helps me realize that I can be a focused mathematician as well as an avid community server at the same time. The main point is one should always employ the impartial spectator and never lose sight of "integrity" and "simplicity" while pursuing his or her work (Rousseau 60). As a whole, this radical idea put forth by Adam Smith resolves my personal conflicts.

Altogether, Smith and Hardy have had an immense impact on my liberal education. Societal expectations hurt individual ambition, while individual self-interest harms the collective good. This paradox has become central to my education. One should always maintain a balance between individuality and the collective good. Although one can attempt to always have a pure and selfless attitude towards life, ambition tends to creep in. Regardless of success and contribution to the society, integrity and simplicity is necessary. These qualities cannot be lost while becoming better in other ways. Selfishness and envy, which are caused by the ebb and flow of successes and failures, are not necessarily negative characteristics, however, if the impartial spectator can be employed in a moral fashion. Adam Smith answers the question of the balance between the ambition and the collective good by utilizing the idea of the "invisible hand." One should always strive to become better and progress the society as a whole, but having self-interest is not necessarily wrong if it can be employed morally. If we contribute our share to the society while being content with ourselves, then the greater good will emerge as a byproduct. Finally, these two ideas can be applied to my life through G.H. Hardy. Why one

becomes a mathematician does not have anything to do with other activities at all. If one does mathematics for his or her own sake and contributes to mathematical ideas, then the aim is accomplished. I can be involved in society, meet new people, do service for the community, and not have to choose from my different interests. An individual should pursue what he or she is interested in regardless of societal expectations, and he or she should seek to provide for the greater good even if the service comes in the way of personal goals. Instead of choosing between the individual and societal sphere, both of these can coexist at the same time. All in all, it is not merited to sacrifice a specific personal trait or interest for the betterment of the society; on the contrary, it is the combination of both the personal and social characteristics of the individual that produces the best desired results.

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