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The Path to Contentment: The Enlightenment's Move to Make Individuals Autonomous

The Age of Enlightenment was preceded by the influential Scientific Revolution and was succeeded by inspiring worldwide political revolutions. As Immanuel Kant states in his illuminating essay, “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment,’” this generation of individuals was propelled to attempt to emerge out of “self-incurred immaturity” (Kant 54). Reasoning and self-development were the most essential attributes utilized to overcome this inner conflict, which influenced individuals to challenge higher authorities and question their roles in society. Adam Smith’s introspective and profound *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s radical yet sensible *First Discourse: Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, and Voltaire’s symbolical and philosophical *Candide* indirectly criticize various elements to the conventional approaches to the Enlightenment. Smith claims that humans are naturally sympathetic and social beings, and it is the “impartial spectator” within every individual that helps resolve the conflict of an individual’s personal desires against his or her public interests. Rousseau is unique in his approach to answering the question posed by the Academy of Dijon if “the revival of the sciences and the arts [has] contributed to improving or corrupting morality” (Rousseau 47). Instead of taking a straightforward approach by supporting the sciences, he condemns human ambition because it assists in eradicating the natural virtues of integrity and honor. Voltaire’s allegorical portrayal of the various characters highlights numerous

philosophies but ultimately, he conveys his main objective which is to offer different paths of attaining individual contentment (Voltaire 133). Altogether, Smith's examination on the behavior of humans in society and his subsequent revelation of the "impartial spectator," Rousseau's emphasis on moral values at the expense of the corrupted sciences, and Voltaire's lesson of concentrating on self-development instead of superficially philosophizing establishes the objective of resolving an individual's conflict with him or herself and distilling a path to contentment rather than contemplating an individual's struggle with society.

Adam Smith explores how the natural instincts of individuals assist them in molding their behavior in society. He claims that "sympathy," is the "fellow-feeling" humans naturally have for the "sorrow of others" (Smith 2). The idea of sympathy revolves around the "sentiments between the spectator and the person principally concerned," which incorporates the human desire "to be loved and to be lovely" (4, 12). An individual acts depending on how he or she wishes to be regarded by others. 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" as they try to secure bliss and tranquility (21). Several Enlightenment thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke explore how an individual should enter into society and behave in order to remain a member of society. Smith, on the other hand, assumes that humans are already a part of society and deduces further implications of the relationships between individuals. The objective of Locke's and Hobbes's writings was to create a template of peaceful societies established by governments based on the state of nature of individuals. Smith, however, is not concerned with an individual's relationship with the society—rather, he focuses on an individual's journey towards contentment.

To attain contentment, individuals idolize certain members in society as their motivation to achieve progress. He claims that for their “self-satisfaction and enjoyment,” the “most powerful remedies for restoring the mind to its tranquility” is to have “society and conversation” (Smith 5). He states that “emulation” is the “anxious desire” of men, which is “originally founded in [one’s] admiration of the excellence of others” (12). Furthermore by bringing an individual “into society,” he or she “is immediately provided with the mirror which he [or she] wanted” (11). Smith declares that one can reflect on his or her actions by observing the actions of other members in society. He claims that judging what is right, honorable, or beneficial is determined by the emulating either virtuous or wealthy men. By imitating the desirable qualities of great individuals, one gains those qualities themselves. By working in a manner that has helped others gain respect, individuals can themselves climb up the ladder of social status. This is an example of “nature’s deceit” in which one tries to appear superior in other people’s perspective and live a happier life by employing an ambitious approach. Although selfish ambitions seem to be associated with a negative connotation, they can unknowingly have a positive impact on society. Passions motivate ambitions, and these ambitions cause individuals to excel in their particular field, which provides advancements in that area. If several ambitious individuals contribute to society, then together, they drive society forward and generate progress. Overall, Smith deduces that individuals’ desire to become happier causes them to maintain a positive image in society which is based on the characteristics of other revered individuals.

Along with maintaining a positive image, resolving internal struggles contribute to prosperity. To resolve these struggles, Smith proposes self-command and the impartial spectator. The major problem Smith is concerned with is the “admirers and worshippers” who represent the “great mob of mankind” because they blindly follow others instead of following

their own judgement (Smith 8). Another trouble that conflicts individuals is how to control their inherent passions. The resolution Smith proposes to both these problems is the revolutionary idea of an ‘impartial spectator.’ He defines it as “the man within, the great judge” encompassing the characteristics of “reason, principle, and conscience” (22). Passions motivate humans to pursue wealth and greatness, but this same passion creates the impartial spectator. This inner voice aids individuals to conceive how little they actually are in the overall scope of this world. Furthermore, Smith declares that one who has experienced severe hardships can achieve self-command with the help of the impartial spectator. He describes self-command not only as a “great virtue,” but also the originator of “other virtues” (22). An individual who demonstrates self-command can curb his or her desires and can therefore, judge his or her actions in a better manner. The impartial spectator elucidates the answer to right versus wrong, while self-command assists in reaching the destination of moral righteousness, which contributes to the overall happiness of the individual. Altogether, Smith professes that humans, who are inherently social beings, achieve contentment by resolving their inner conflicts by observing others, experiencing hardships, and forming judgments.

While Smith provides the mechanisms that are fundamental in achieving contentment, Voltaire illustrates the direction that is necessary to travel by to in order to complete this journey. Although *Candide* revolves around the stories of several characters, Voltaire incorporates various philosophies to portray his views on humanity by utilizing symbolism. Through Martin, Voltaire proposes that for individuals to be happy, they should work ““without disputing; it is the only way to render life tolerable”” (Voltaire 133). On the other hand, through Candide, Voltaire claims the best circumstance is to, ““cultivate [one’s own] garden”” (133). These two phrases have multiple implications. They can be interpreted either separately or together. One can live

happily if he or she only concentrates on his or her own work without conflicting with other members of the society. On the other hand, individuals can also be content by simultaneously being social and productive while creating a harmonious society. The important aspect is to always strive for improvement. If everyone continues to improve themselves, then consequently, society will progress. Through these ideas, Voltaire suggests that not only would an individual become happier, society will drive forward as a byproduct. All in all, Voltaire conveys two similar yet unique proposals to achieve true contentment rather than acquire superficial materialistic happiness.

To support his broad claims, Voltaire utilizes his characters and dialogues to emphasize values essential to an individual. Pangloss and Martin, the two main philosophers in the story, provide a foil for each other. Pangloss reflects the impractical optimism in humans, while Martin displays society's suspicion and reluctance. Pangloss's naïve response, "I am still of my first opinion for I am a philosopher and I cannot retract, especially as Leibniz could never be wrong" while justifying his defining quote, "everything is for the best" effectively displays Voltaire's criticism pertaining certain Enlightenment philosophers and their corresponding ideologies (127, 48). Contrastingly, Voltaire portrays Martin's character by asserting "all is misery and deceit" (110). These two contradictory philosophies exhibit a vast gap of conflict present in individuals. Voltaire characterizes the extremes to exhibit the ebb and flow of the emotions that individuals' experience. By symbolizing the ideologies and stating his overall aim, Voltaire implies that instead of trying to philosophize and gather unreasonable attention by deceiving others, one should only focus on their own work.

In addition to the criticism of the superficial philosophies, Voltaire illuminates on principles that can resolve internal conflict within individuals. One of the recurring motifs is

suffering. For example, Pacquette claims that she is “one of the most unhappy wretches upon earth” (Voltaire 112). Every character suffers extreme hardship in this novel, and all of them have the evidence to claim that they have suffered the worst. Voltaire exposes the small world in which everyone think they live in, an observation Smith alluded to with the impartial spectator. The egotistical and selfish mindset causes an individual to think that they are the center of this universe, and everything revolves around them. Voltaire criticizes this thinking. Even though the Enlightenment emphasizes liberty and individualism, it does not profess that individuals should undermine everyone else in society. By continuously exhibiting characters that display more suffering than the character introduced before, Voltaire emphasizes that there will always be others in this world with greater problems. Therefore, one should not compare themselves with others but only concentrate on their own betterment. Finally, some of the other messages Voltaire tries to convey include “everybody seeks pleasure and scarcely any one finds it,” riches are “perishable” because “there is nothing solid but virtue,” and “men are only born to assist one another” (102, 50). Altogether Voltaire asserts that instead of chasing impermanent materialistic wealth or philosophizing mindlessly, individuals should concentrate on self-development by tirelessly working towards a certain target, living by moral values, and helping others without expecting anything in return. The combination of these ideas reflects Voltaire’s solution to the internal issues that plague individuals.

Along with Smith and Voltaire, Rousseau tackles the question of individuals’ struggles by illustrating how human beings have lost their morality in order to attain knowledge. He stresses that the Scientific Revolution has incentivized people to seek glory instead of seeking a simple life. He proclaims that individuals that garner attention include “physicists, geometers, chemists, astronomers, poets, musicians, [and] painters” instead of the simple “citizens,” who have been

left “indigent and shunned” from the rest of society (Rousseau 63). One of the major problems of the Enlightenment is that it cultivated individuals into behaving “in exactly the same ways,”—thereby creating conformity (50). Furthermore, Rousseau stresses that science has the potential to produce dangerous effects and is a waste of time. Finally, it has provided for the lack of trust among individuals through the rise of “suspicions, resentments, fears,” beneath the “veil of politeness” (50). These are the reasons that people’s “souls have been corrupted” due to societies’ focus on arts and sciences (51). He has a clear point. Although science has led to technological advancements, it has also created an illusion. Instead of pursuing a simple life, individuals strive to seek glory, sometimes through the means of arts and sciences. This causes unhealthy competition and further complicates the intention of simplicity, which defeats the underlying purpose of driving society forward and attaining individual happiness.

Pursuing a simple life is a better alternative than living unethically. Rousseau claims that “integrity is even more precious” to individuals than “erudition is to scholars” (Rousseau 47). Individuals disguise themselves to appear better than others, which displays a detrimental theme of appearance versus reality—individuals tend to have “all the virtues without the possession of a single one” (49). By doing what it is unnatural to them, one surrenders his or her authenticity. The desire of luxury and materialistic wealth motivates people to lead a complicated life, which is exactly what Rousseau opposes. Instead, his solution points toward a life of “simplicity,” which used to be the norm “long ago” (60). He claims that “sciences and arts owe their birth to our vices,” and by pursuing these fields, individuals extend the harmful effects of these vices (56). Leading a simple life would cause the moralistic values of individuals to be “healthier” and “society [to be] more peaceful” (58). Society focuses on rewarding “clever minds” while awarding “no honors” to true virtues, which is a contradiction

towards creating a moral society (63). An individual's character is much more important than the wealth he or she possesses. If a person possesses good qualities, then regardless of their work status, others will still appreciate and respect them. On the other hand, an individual who is in a respectable position but lacks virtues is not necessarily going to be embraced by society. Smith supports the notion of observing wealthy or virtuous men to mold one's own identity, but Rousseau suggests that if only one had to be chosen, then virtuosity is more desirable than wealth. In the Bollywood movie, *Bawarchi* (1972), the main character states that "it is so simple to be happy, but so difficult to be simple" (Mukherjee, Bawarchi). This is Rousseau's point. Individuals waste too much time trying to sustain a better life and concentrating on how to achieve blissfulness, which causes them to lose sight of self-development and self-satisfaction. Enlightenment provoked individuals to question and challenge authorities, embrace the arts and sciences, and employ reason to generate innovation and revolution, but at the same time, it eradicated the simplicity in life. *3 Idiots* (2009), another Bollywood movie, emphasizes to "become excellent. Do not run after success. If one becomes excellent, then success automatically comes" (Hirani, 3 Idiots). This directly parallels Rousseau's point. Instead of attempting to become distinguished by seeking a glorious path to happiness, one should try to be the best at everything they do without seeking anything in return. Therefore, staying in the present, pursuing a modest lifestyle, and exhibiting excellence will lead to true contentment.

All three of these thinkers illuminate on the struggles an individual experiences and propose their own solution to this eternal problem. Although there is more than a single template to achieve contentment, their writings provide a series of guidelines. One should not attempt to seek glory and attention; rather, one should seek morality. Furthermore, ambition can be both a powerful and dangerous weapon. Therefore, one should possess enough ambition to strive and



improve as a person but not an excess amount which can lead to major conflicts among individuals within society. Self-development is as an essential stepping stone towards achieving contentment, which should be the underlying objective of human endeavor instead of striving for impermanent materialistic wealth. These are a combination of ideas from Rousseau, Voltaire, and Smith that display a facet of Enlightenment thinking. These thinkers are not necessarily convinced by the path taken by other thinkers and philosophers. Instead of wasting valuable time in deciphering the sciences, discussing the constraints of individuals in society, or devising political treatises, they concentrate on an individuals' struggle. If one concentrates on true self-development instead of superficial appearance, one can have a positive impact on society. To achieve contentment, Rousseau proposes simplicity, Voltaire recognizes individual work, and Smith provides us with the tools of self-command and the impartial spectator. If all these ideas are combined together into one great philosophy, societies will be capable of achieving positive transformation. Individuals should live a simpler life, void of excess desires and selfish interest, strive to excel in their particular field without expectations, manifest moral virtues, trust their inner voice to make judgments, and as a result of their self-development, ultimately serve and provide for the betterment of others in the society. As a whole, by being critical of different aspects of the Enlightenment and displaying how individuals should lead content lives, these three thinkers move towards making individuals autonomous.

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