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Modernization and Its Discontents

17 March 2017

### Individuality versus the Collective Good

#### Part VI: The Rise of Equality and the Alienation of Individuals

Democratic ideals have permeated the globe over the past two centuries. Along with the rise of democracy, there has been an increased awareness towards the legal protection of individual rights. The Constitution of the United States of America was established on the guarantee of the Lockean principle of natural rights even though inequality was widespread. Since then, slavery and child labor have been abolished, women and African Americans have attained the right to vote, and protections for the elderly and the disadvantaged have increased. Around the world, the creation of the European Union, establishment of international alliances like the United Nations and NATO, and the rise of globalism have unified the world and eased social barriers. Although the idea of equality has spread throughout the world, economic imbalance and corruption continue to be prevalent, racism and discrimination are still deep-rooted, and international conflicts remain ever-present. While political freedom has not resolved social tensions, the attainment of legal rights has not guaranteed tranquility within individuals. These individuals continue to suffer from anxiety, mental stress, psychological tension, and internal conflicts. Fyodor Dostoyevsky's reflective novella *Notes from Underground and The Grand Inquisitor* as well as Søren Kierkegaard's analytical comparisons in *A Literary Review* illuminate as to why individuals suffer from internal misery in a seemingly harmonious and democratic society. Kierkegaard's contrasting depictions of passion in the Revolutionary Age

and the Present Age respectively, the portrayal of the public as the ultimate leveler, and the ‘all or nothing’ mentality exhibited by the Underground Man demonstrate how an individual paradoxically suffers from alienation in society despite the presence of equality.

In his analysis of the distinctions between the Revolutionary and the Present age in the literary review of the novel, *To Tidsaldre (Two Ages)* by Danish author, Thomasine Christine Gyllembourg-Ehrensward, Kierkegaard illuminates on the motivation behind individual distress. In this novel, while the ‘Revolutionary Age’ describes the French Revolution era and the ‘Present Age’ symbolizes the mid-nineteenth century, these comparisons are still applicable to present-day society. Kierkegaard identifies passion as the defining distinction between these two ages. He depicts the age of revolution as being “essentially passionate,” while he contends that the modern era “has not bottled passion enough” (Kierkegaard Loc1476). Individuals can truly be themselves only when they have the environment to express their views, are not constrained by social obstructions, and have the freedom to remain spontaneous. Passion encourages individuals to elevate themselves from these distractions and social tensions, but if one “removes the essential passion, the one purpose,” then they become “stagnant” (1359). This is exactly what citizens of the modern era suffer from. The routineness of daily life in the modern age has caused individuals to curb their ambition, morals, or both. In the past, individuals envied intrinsic qualities like “skill,” “love,” and “fame,” but “money [has] become the object of desire,” today (1572). This encourages individuals to be envious against wealthier members of society, which instigates animosity among them. Society has, therefore, degraded due to the gradual rise of equality. In the Renaissance Age, intellectual, artistic, and well-rounded personalities were valued, but today, society judges individuals on the basis of their external achievements, social status, and monetary worth. Although this attitude might result in

economic prosperity for some, it has led to the mentality of self against the rest of society. This has resulted in the degeneration of morality. Equality might have eradicated some social barriers, but it has not ensured social cohesion. Instead, it has deepened the skepticism among people. Kierkegaard concludes that society has moved towards a “*sensible and reflective,*” yet “*dispassionate,*” path, which has alienated individuals from society (1455). As a whole, in the modern age, the lack of passion has transformed individuals into reflective, immoral, and unambitious beings.

While the absence of passion is the intrinsic quality that alienates individuals in the present age, the abstraction of the public is the external feature which contributes to this phenomenon. Kierkegaard implies that equality has decreased the free will of individuals as it has conformed their opinions in the form of the public. The public, he claims, is the “phantom” that creates the phenomenon of leveling and self-reflection (1824). He states that “leveling is abstraction’s victory over the individuals,” which is the “absolute difference between the modern era and antiquity” (1720). In the present age, an “individual does not belong to God, himself, his beloved, his art, or his scholarship,” but rather to the public (1746). While in the “antiquity,” the problem was that “the man of distinction was what others *could not be,*” the conflict in the modern age arises from the fact that one cannot “become the man of distinction, the hero, the one who stands out” because “this is prevented by levelling” (1797). Leveling causes conformity among individuals, which leads them to become passionless, and this lack of passion generates discontent. Conformity is a result of social pressure, which creates a mob mentality and undermines the freedom of the individuals. Along with social pressure, self-reflection and motivation determine how individuals behave in society. Without passion, reflection ceases to have a positive impact, and therefore, Kierkegaard exclaims that “reflection is, and remains the

most unyielding creditor in life” (1811). He exemplifies this by stating that when a “person belongs to the public,” “he is nothing,” but he is truly himself only when “he does not belong to the public” (1864). Kierkegaard concludes that the “public is all and nothing” since it “is the most dangerous of all powers and the most meaningless” one as well and in comparison, the public is actually “less than even a single quite unremarkable actual human being” (1871).

These phrases effectively illustrate Kierkegaard’s criticism of the public. The will of the public can have devastating impacts on the rest of society without the fear of blame, disapproval, or judgment on any single individual’s part. A single individual, on the other hand, suffers from a lack of passion and the fear of the judgement if he or she opposes the will of the public.

Kierkegaard claims that ultimately, it is the press who achieves triumph through the abstraction of leveling since they play a key role in influencing and arbitrating the public. He concludes that while the “passionate age *accelerates, raises and topples, extols and oppresses*, a reflective, passionless age does the opposite – *it stifles and impedes, it levels*” (1729). All in all, the abstraction of the public is the external aspect that leads to the alienation of the individual.

While Kierkegaard exhibits leveling of the public and lack of passion as causes of alienation, Dostoevsky epitomizes individual suffering through his characterization of the Underground Man. The Underground Man introduces himself as a “spiteful man,” who is not “kind, neither a rascal nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect” (Dostoevsky 307,324). His downfall is attributed to his conflicting attitude between aiming to become “either a hero or to grovel in the mud—nothing between them” (1037). This is a universal conflict. Due to the rise of equality, it has become possible for most individuals to have the opportunity to achieve excellence in their respective fields. The failure to achieve the peak, though, can produce an inferiority complex and emphasize the mentality that “I am alone and they are *every one*” (865).

Individuals in the modern era live in constant comparison, and the judgment of success or failure derives from their perception of others. Therefore, the all or nothing mentality helps precipitate a Hobbesian conflict of a constant state of war between individuals. This conflict is further agitated since men have the desire to prove that they are “men and not piano keys” (687). Men want to evade the effects of public leveling and stand out, but they cannot do so effectively if they continuously judge themselves through the eyes of others. The underground man expresses that he can only progress if his “desires and ideals” are eradicated, but that seems to be an unattainable goal (766). The underground man’s conversations with his friends reveal that they “accepted stupidity,” “respected success,” “took rank for intelligence,” were “depraved” and only “affected by cynicism” (1185). Dostoevsky criticizes this attitude. The spite of the underground man reveals his internal wounded pride while the characteristics of his friends symbolize the paradox that in order to be “an intelligent man,” one ought “to be a characterless creature” (324). This observation demonstrates that individuals in the modern era strive for external success rather than individual development and passion, which eventually induces their lack of contentment. As democracy increases, the wounded pride temptation surges and causes the rise in humiliation and dehumanization, which generates both external and internal conflicts. Altogether, the all or nothing mentality is the foundation of the underground man’s spite, which leads to self-laceration and eventual self-destruction, a trait evident in individuals of present-day society.

In today’s world, society is comprised of individuals who suffer from an inflated ‘all or nothing’ mentality, lack of passion, and conformity of opinion. Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard expose these conflicts that plague society. While Kierkegaard focuses on the effect of the public on individuals’ mentality, Dostoevsky emphasizes what afflicts them from within.

Enlightenment era thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau attempted to resolve these conflicts by establishing social contract theories. These theories were the early foundations of modern-day governments. Although governments and nation-states have accomplished major strides in creating a safe environment for their citizens, they have not lead to peace within the individual. An underground man is still present in every person. Individuals are never completely satisfied, and the constraints of the society suppress their passions and will. Alfie Kohn in *Punished by Rewards* reflects this idea by stating that today's society is conflicted between "intrinsic motivations and extrinsic motivators" (Kohn). Instead of focusing on developing character, the aim has shifted towards gaining materialistic wealth. The characteristics exemplified by the underground man like jealousy, envy, rage, resentment, impotence, and humiliation are rising while aspects like love, friendship, and admiration are declining. This comparison exhibits that the aim of the Enlightenment thinkers has not been completely fulfilled. Our society is moving towards a future where legal rights are continually gained, but internal peace slowly deteriorates. In order to resolve the paradox where the society suppresses individuals, we are in the process of creating another paradox where individuals suppress each other, and in the process, themselves. Although these conflicts cannot be resolved easily, the best way forward is to find a balance between the individual and the societal sphere\*. The goal of an individual should be to provide for the larger good of the larger amount of people, while developing him or herself in the process. They should not have to renounce their interests, hobbies, and passion, but should strive to provide for the collective good at the same time. Altogether, the rise of social protections and their subsequent failure to guarantee inner peace has been the major discontent that the modern world continues to suffer from.

\*My other papers elaborate on this topic that deals with finding a balance between the individual and the societal sphere.

Word Count: 1830