On the Prioritization of the Individual

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I am split between the differing views of individuality of the global north and the global south. An odd amalgamation of the American Dream and the prioritization of the community seen in Central America, govern me. In the United States, the individual supersedes not only the community but even the self, as one perpetually aims to reinvent themselves. Arguably, there is no constant self, since reinvention of the self prevails as the national ethos. The argument would be that the group cannot exist without individuals therefore emphasis should be placed on the latter. How can we expect an individual to positively contribute to the group if they must undermine their desires for the sake of others? Nevertheless, the community can offer experiences and methods in which an individual can achieve self-fulfillment and awareness— distinct from a self-absorbed lifestyle. Who constitutes the "common" in the common good? There are various dimensions to the common good as there are aspects of life that are shared universally and others only with those we share a reality with. Addressing and resolving environmental issues (such as air quality), the global immigration crisis, the exploitation of workers, and the rise of human trafficking to name a few would serve the greater good. However, regardless of what seems substantial public attention we fail to make considerable progress. Ergo, it is plausible that the pursuit of appeasing the common good is publicized as a means to lessen individual shame derived from lack of genuine care for others.

The collective is pluralistic and fluid. Our realities are shaped by those who surround us and the experiences we share (even if they are processed in different ways). In our lifetimes the majority of us will journey through multiple collectives. When a group in one corner of the world is being oppressed while unfortunate, taking into account how hostile global relations have become, it appears natural for a non-oppressed group to ignore the other. As I attempt to make sense of the role of the individual in society, I believe it is critical to take into account the major social institutions (i.e. the family, education, religion, and the State). Said establishments usually take the form of more than one person yet often propagate narrow world views. For instance, while the family, education, religion, and the State possess the potential to encourage empathy paradoxically due to their uber-collective identity they further pit the self from the "other". For that reason I believe that to assess the role of the individual one must evaluate the social institutions that influence the self.

In my personal experience education, religion, and the State (in the United States) have in many ways attempted to alienate me from the "other". Assisting Catholic private school from the age of five to seventeen combined with a strict Pentecostal upbringing— I have witnessed the divisive nature of organized religion upfront. In an attempt to blend into my environment, I recall identifying as both Christian and Catholic. As a child, I paid no heed to the covert and overt aggressions between my parishes. On Pentecostal days, preachers vehemently proclaimed moral righteousness above Catholics because they did not use religious iconography. On Catholic days, robed fathers performed rituals and expressed their "concern" for the definite condemnation of non-believers and believers who ascribed to other denominations. My recognition of the cacophony of hostile remarks amongst two identities I found to be one—effectively ousted me

from groups that looked down upon skepticism. This religious background influences my view and consequent wariness of identifying with a group.

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche warns in *Beyond Good and Evil* of succumbing to a herd mentality (1973 p.173). The acknowledgement of the underlying negative force collectivity wields marks my view of the individual. The possibility of losing one's essence is frightful. That is not to say I oppose the benevolent consideration of the "we" over the "I," rather I strongly recognize the potential harm of a "we" mentality. The concept of Diffusion of Responsibility tested by psychologists Bibb Latané and John Darley illustrates the loss of individual will engendered by simply being around another group. They "set up an experiment where a distress call made it appear that a person nearby had suffered an injury. When subjects heard the cry, and thought they were the only ones that heard it, 85% of them helped. But if subjects thought there was another person who heard the call too, only 62% helped. And if subjects thought that four other people also heard the cry for help, just 31% took action" (The University of Texas n.d). Although there are exceptions in which individuals rise above the "herd," the study shows that even the presence of another person affects the way one reacts in challenging situations. The University of Texas concludes that the phenomena of "diffusion of responsibility keeps us from paying attention to our own conscience." For this reason, I believe a solely "we" mentality is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, a "we" mindset can successfully encourage empathetic behavior. For example, usually religious congregations cultivate groups that believe it important to service the community. At the Roman Catholic high school I assisted there was a service hour system. Each student was expected to contribute to society, for example by volunteering at a homeless shelter, for a minimum of ten hours outside of the school. The system combined with the values that were instilled in us daily encouraged positive competition amongst the students to see

who could volunteer the most. On the other hand, a "we" mindset detracts from personal responsibility and in strenuous situations (such as war) lead to fatal results. I find that the herd mentality is extremely discernible in the context of political and religious ideologies. The group encourages uniformity and frowns upon "otherness." This contempt towards the other can manifest in violent forms (i.e. ethnic cleansing, religious wars, genocide, segregation). Once an individual identifies with a group they not only risk losing their individuality but the group becomes strengthened tenfold due to one's complacency, that one simply turns into an agent of the group. Perhaps it is more beneficial in the long term to focus on the development of the individual rather than the group because the group more often than not promotes collective-thinking.

It is much more facile to mitigate issues between individuals as opposed to groups. In my opinion, individuals are much more susceptible to empathy in one-on-one situations. Growing up in Los Angeles as a first-generation American during an antipathetic sociopolitical climate, I had difficulty sharing my parents' status as undocumented immigrants. The school I attended was predominately Euro-Americans who were anti-immigrant. I found that in group discussions they were much more vehement in their antipathy and closed off to hearing my thoughts. As there were few people who agreed with my stance I often felt discouraged as I witnessed the cruel manner in which they addressed the plight of immigrants. Yet, when I discussed with the members of the opposing group individually, they expressed empathy to my father's journey from San Pedro Sula to Los Angeles on top of the dangerous freight train known as "The Train of Death." When I told them I could not go to certain areas of the city because my family feared the possible presence of ICE (Immigration Customs Enforcement) agents they explained the root of their contempt. Oftentimes, they explained that their family and politics (social groups) constantly fueled their

anti-immigrant sentiments. Confirming my belief of the antagonistic inclination groups bestow on individuals.

In my opinion, individuals are more suited to positively contribute to the common good if they recognize and understand their opinions and desires. If an individual cannot exercise altruism on their own accord, how can we expect them to do so in a group? Taking part in a group can be beneficial in developing interpersonal skills but it is equally important to develop one's intrapersonal skills. Yes, taking the common good into consideration is ideal however, the reality is that in a global society composed of various subtle and explicit stratifications— unity remains elusive. This is not to say that all, current efforts towards emphasizing the collective are rendered moot however, I mean to highlight its insufficiency.

References

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