Essays on Individuality

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Essays on Individuality

Edited and with an Introduction
by Felix Morley

Foreword to the Second Edition
by Arthur Kemp

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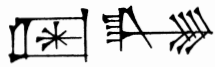

The cuneiform inscription that serves as the design motif for our endpapers is the earliest-known written appearance of the word "freedom" *(ama-gi),* or "liberty." It is taken from a clay document written about 2300 B.C. in the Sumerian city-state of Lagash.

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Foreword to the Second Edition

Only a few months longer than two decades ago, the twelve authors of these essays gathered at the Princeton Inn to criticize, discuss and comment upon their individual contributions. From an historical perspective, two decades are little more than an instant in time; but from the viewpoint of an individual person—and individuality and personality comprised the basic subject matter of these essays—two decades are a substantial proportion of the Biblical allotment of three score years and ten. To me, as director and organizer of that Symposium, and doubtless also to Felix Morley as its beneficent chairman as well as participant, twenty years is a very long time.

But, long as it is, I remember it well, and for several reasons. As an economist, it was the first time I had organized a multi-disciplinary conference involving scholars whose specialties were in the humanities, the physical sciences, the social sciences, history and poli-

tics as well as economics. The resulting discussions, probably inevitably, melded into philosophy. This was reinforced by the fortunate, perhaps fortuitous, selection of a group of men who had both the courage and the intellectual capacity to transcend the limits of their respective specialties in order to consider the problems of society as a whole, particularly those relating to individual privacy, individual responsibility, and individual freedom of thought and action.

Readers of these essays will not be able fully to appreciate the value of open, uninhibited discussion which results from participants speaking directly *to* each other, instead of *through* each other to an audience. Yet this contributed greatly to the quality of the resulting book when it was first published as well as now, when the problems discussed in these essays are as important as, if not more important than, they were two decades ago.

One discussion, still vivid in my memory, began with unanimous agreement that there existed no *science* of ethics as such. This led to the deeper question of whether or not a science of ethics could develop or be developed—a question which Professor Zirkle, not without hesitation, undertook to answer affirmatively based upon his particular specialty, genetics. Ethics, as a science, he proposed, might develop out of the principle that what is good is that which protects, preserves and promotes the survival and expansion of the species; in short, the ethical principle of women and children

first. Unfortunately there is no way of reproducing here the flood of objections raised by the other participants. I do recall very well Professor Hayek's quiet assertion that such a proposition not only presupposed knowledge of what did, in fact, preserve and protect the species, but also presupposed that it was a single cause and not a choice among, or interaction between, several causes. "Is it," he asked, "more ethical if the population were to double in thirty years rather than in sixty—or would it be the reverse?"

The interesting thing in retrospect is not so much the ensuing discussion, excellent as it was, as what was not said. As far as I am able to recollect, there was no discussion of some related ethical questions which surely would be raised today. These have to do with the distinct probability that science is able, or within the next two decades will be able, to introduce conscious, guided genetic selection into the so-called natural selection process of human beings. Like it or not, some interdisciplinary group in the not too distant future will have to raise some very difficult ethical questions. I hope the surviving members of the 1956 Princeton Symposium can be persuaded to participate in the discussions. The others doubtless will have reserved superior positions of audibility and observation.

The year 1976 called forth frequent references to Adam Smith, the "father of economics" (a dubious phrase, since he was a life-long bachelor). Those of us responsible for the 1956 Symposium should give

thanks for the efficacy of Smith's "invisible hand" in selecting two economists, both of whom some twenty years later would have received Nobel laureates in economics: Friedrich A. Hayek and Milton Friedman. Whether this was due to remarkable foresight and perspicacity on our part or to the fortuitious operation of the "invisible hand," today's readers must decide for themselves. Either way, the essays written by these men still speak eloquently and with remarkable clarity.

It might be said of these essays, as it can be said of the years between 1956 and 1976, that some were better than others. Taken as a whole, however, these essays hold up very well indeed, and like fine Cabernet Sauvignon, some have greatly improved and mellowed with age. Let us hope that today's readers will conclude, so far as essays on individuality are concerned, that 1956 was a very good year.

ARTHUR KEMP

Claremont Men's College
Claremont, California
November 3, 1976

Introduction

The twelve essays composing this volume were originally prepared for a "Symposium on Individuality and Personality" held at the Princeton Inn, Princeton, New Jersey, September 12 to 18, 1956. Most of them have been somewhat revised by the authors, in the light of the symposium discussions, and are now submitted to public consideration as a comprehensive survey of this vital and timely subject.

This symposium was sponsored by the Foundation for American Studies, which in a preliminary announcement noted that since the close of World War II "an increasing number of scholars have turned their attention to the problem of man's freedom in the face of modern society's seemingly irresistible urge to socialize and regiment the thought and action of the individual." It was to give close analysis to the far-reaching implications of this trend that the Foundation gathered together, for free and untrammeled discussion, a group

of men "whose writings have shown a particular awareness of the . . . challenge to . . . individual privacy, responsibility, and self-determination. . . ."

The only instruction given to those whose contributions follow was that each should "approach the topic of the symposium from the vantage point of his own specialty." Since the participants had been intentionally selected from various professional fields, uniformity of approach was neither desired, expected nor attained. In the group were specialists in two branches of natural science, in economics, history, literature, philosophy, politics, rhetoric, and sociology. Yet, as the reader will see for himself, the area of fundamental agreement proved itself much more extensive, and much more positive, than the occasional differences of opinion, sharp though these sometimes were.

None of the essays printed in this volume were read at the symposium. They nevertheless clearly reveal not only the scope but also the high degree of interlocking support and intellectual integration in the proceedings. The various papers had been prepared for advance distribution among the participants, each of whom introduced his subject briefly to the group, whose members then engaged in lengthy and lively round-table discussion. Notes on the points debated were kept, then read, amended, and approved at the close of each session.

Finally, these notes were amalgamated into a general summary report of the entire proceedings, prepared by Professor Arthur Kemp of Claremont Men's College, who was Director of the Symposium and in that ca-

pacity responsible for its excellent arrangements. The writer in this Introduction served as chairman and was chosen as coordinating editor of this resultant volume. Professor Helmut Schoeck voluntarily contributed both time and talent to compilation of the Index.*

During the sessions there were no guests, no reporters, and indeed no interruptions of any moment. Three daily sessions, held morning, afternoon, and night for four days, absorbed practically all but bedtime for the conferees. Even at meals, in shifting combinations, the participants continued a line of discussion which was of such absorbing interest to all that this present wider distribution of results seems wholly desirable. Few of the members of the symposium had personally known many of the others before this gathering, and one sign of its notable success is the number of continuing friendships founded on the exchanges at the Princeton Inn.

So is it always on an exploration or a pilgrimage. And exploring pilgrims the members of this symposium assuredly were—even though perforce more sedentary than those immortalized by Chaucer. More than one of the group found a certain parallelism with the Canterbury Pilgrims, with the Tabard Inn at Southwark where they assembled, with the rich variety and deep human insight of each and every strongly individualized tale.

There is perhaps another similarity, since in both

* A new, enlarged Index has been provided in this second edition—Publisher.

cases the order of presentation has no relationship with intrinsic merit. Indeed, as in the *Canterbury Tales,* each of the following essays owes strength to its federation with other essentially independent units.

But since the beautiful essay of John Dos Passos takes Chaucer as the "fountainhead" of individuality in English literature, to that participant appropriately falls the lead position of that master's "ful worthy" knight. "And he bigan with right a mery chere his tale anon, and seyde in this manere. . . ."

FELIX MORLEY

Gibson Island, Maryland
January 12, 1958

Essays on Individuality

Essay One

A Question of Elbow Room

John Dos Passos

John Dos Passos (1896–1970) was one of America's foremost novelists of the twentieth century. His Three Soldiers *and* Manhattan Transfer *revolutionized literary styles and trends in the Twenties, both in America and abroad. He also wrote extensively on American self-government, history and biography.*

Individuality is freedom lived. When we use the word individuality we refer to a whole gamut of meanings. Starting from the meanings which pertain to the deepest recesses of private consciousness, these different meanings can be counted off one by one like the skins in the cross section of an onion, until we reach the everyday outer hide of meaning which crops up in common talk.

When we speak commonly, without exaggerated precision, of an individual, don't we mean a person who has grown up in an environment sufficiently free from outside pressures and restraints to develop his own private evaluations of men and events? He has been able to make himself enough elbow room in society to exhibit unashamed the little eccentricities and oddities that differentiate one man from another man. From within his separate hide he can look out at the world with that certain aloofness which we call dignity. No

two men are alike any more than two snowflakes are alike. However a man develops, under conditions of freedom or conditions of servitude, he will still differ from other men. The man in jail will be different from his cellmates but his differences will tend to develop in frustration and hatred. Freedom to develop individuality is inseparable from the attainment of what all the traditions of the race have taught us to consider to be the true human stature.

Fifty years ago all this would have been the rankest platitude, but we live in an epoch where the official directors of opinion through the schools, pulpits, and presses have leaned so far over backwards in their efforts to conform to what they fancy are the exigencies of a society based on industrial mass production, that the defense of individuality has become a life and death matter.

It is a defense that a man takes on at his peril. The very word has become suspect. Even to mention individualism or individuality in circles dedicated to the fashionable ideas of the moment is to expose oneself to ridicule. "Listening to papers on individualism—how boring!" exclaimed a lady to whom I tried to explain over the phone what I was doing in Princeton.

Casting around for examples which might clarify some of the meanings of the word individuality, without seeming too boring, even to heads full of the fashionable negations of the moment, I find myself falling

back on English literature as we find it on the library shelves.

I'm thinking of the magnificent series of imaginative writings in modern English that began with Chaucer five hundred years ago. You can make a very good case for the notion that there runs through it all a unifying thread which is the measure of its difference from other literatures. This English literature is dedicated to the description of man not only as an individual but as an eccentric. Naturally it is colored throughout by the peculiar eminence the traditions of English law and of English thought generally gave to individual rights and individual responsibility, but it is flavored, to boot, by a real enjoyment of idiosyncrasy. Perhaps English literature will continue to be the conduit through which our now so discredited passion for personal liberty will be freshened and stimulated by impulses from past generations. The belief in the uniqueness of each human being is, after all, not of yesterday. To the Athenians this belief was incarnate on earth. Primitive Christianity turned it inside out and established it in heaven. Our practical English forebears managed to bring it down to earth again.

Their earthy individuality is the heart of our literary inheritance. To root that inheritance out of our minds you'll have to pull the English classics off the shelves of our libraries. The American educational process, with its bias towards conformity on the basis of the lowest common denominator, has not managed to do

quite that, at least not yet; but it has succeeded in letting the classical literature molder in innocuous desuetude in the dust of the unvisited stacks. Scrape the mildew off the backs of the books and you'll find them as ready as ever to fill the imagination with a rich spawn of cantankerous human beings.

Chaucer is the fountainhead. Right at the beginning, in the earliest days of the formation of the language, you'll find in the *Canterbury Tales* the characteristics which are to be the special earmark of English literature for the next five hundred years. The minute you step into that Tabard Inn at Southwark, in the first few lines of the prologue, you find yourself part of the pilgrimage of all the great characters of English storytelling. Right away the poet starts describing people, individuals he enjoys for their own sake. Already he shows the down-to-earth knowledge of vulgar reality, the gift for jocose narrative, the appetite for freedom and elbow room, the sharp satire mellowed by fellow feeling for a great many varieties of men. These are the qualities which are to characterize the whole literature to come. You feel behind every word and phrase the driving force of Chaucer's enthusiasm for individuality in his fellow man, even indeed for eccentricity and oddity.

Not only the men but the women are individuals. It is in Chaucer that there first appears a certain special attitude towards women. The women have as much private and personal individuality as the men. Com-