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The Importance of Democracy

We often believe that we are quite self-reliant, that we are independent people who make our own decisions, especially in an age of democracy and individuality. The values that nations like America were built on encourage us to take responsibility for our actions since we're no longer restricted by the feudalistic social ranks of medieval Europe. Instead, we're told that we are responsible for our success because someone can break free from poverty through great effort in school and work to become financially successful. In an age of internet connection with countless pieces of information online preaching the importance of hard work, perseverance, and self-improvement, we perhaps get this sense that we can truly be the creators of our destiny, that we can take our futures into our hands as long as we work hard enough and pounce at every opportunity. In other words, our locus of control starts to turn inward—we start to make our own decisions and become self-reliant, and we start to believe in free will. After all, many of us have been told by our parents and teachers that we are responsible for our grades and success in our careers.

At school, the grades we receive for coursework and tests indicate the amount of work and effort invested into that class, and not exclusively our innate talent. It's commonly understood that the more someone studies, the better their grades. Those who fail no longer have the excuse of being talentless or having no way to improve themselves since it was their lack of effort and determination that led to failure, not that they weren't smart enough. Serfs in medieval times didn't have this excuse: they had very few opportunities to climb the social ladder to acquire land and gain riches, instead

fated to work their lives away for their lord (De Botton 67). But in more recent years, over the past few centuries, Enlightenment thinking has introduced the concepts of freedom, liberty, and independence, quashing the rigidity of feudalism and implanting in man a desire for success, freedom, and independence. No longer do we want to be shackled by our socioeconomic background.

Psychology and psychoanalysis tell a completely different story about self-reliance and free will. To understand why we find ourselves with a plethora of social issues and acts of violence and polarity despite America's firm foundation in democratic values of freedom and justice, we must first turn to the modern psychoanalytic inquiry into human nature on the individual level before understanding how we act together in society. With a comprehensive overview of identity formation and how barriers are created between people, we can tackle the issues of polarity and open communication in society, which can hopefully guide us to better understand the root cause of many conflicts.

The Fear of Standing Alone

Near the turn of the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud coined the Oedipus complex, which laid down the foundations for modern psychoanalytic theory. Freud believed that a child wished his father dead to compete for the mother's love and affection, which was not received too well because he was obsessed with discovering the sexual motives behind human behavior (Thornton). But Freud's work remains salient today because it helped shape modern psychoanalytic thought and our understanding of human development during childhood and adulthood. We now

understand that it is not because the child is afraid of his mother's love being taken by his father, that it is not the child's sexual desire for his mother and his ambivalence toward his father; but rather because the child needs to nourish his self-esteem and sense of security in his environment through maternal affection, whether it be through physical intimacy and motherly love or words of praise and symbolic worth.

Upon entering the world, babies receive unconditional love from their mother and father. Whatever needs they have—loud noises, discomfort, diapers that need to be changed, maternal love—are attended to promptly by parents at the utterance of a cry. But at some point, children must grow up and understand the demands of the adult world. No longer can they cry and complain about every small issue. Instead, they must learn to control themselves and gain love and affection from maternal figures in a symbolic form: through words of praise and feelings of self-worth (Becker 51). Children are, in other words, shaped by their parents' expectations, which typically coincide with social standards and norms. Confused at the symbols and abstractions of the adult world, children must learn to manage their anxiety at being tossed and dragged about in a realm of dos and don'ts. This confusion and attempt to adapt is the foundation for identity formation and neurosis that most of us fall into during childhood, even if we may not realize it. We end up relying on powerful figures to define what we believe and how we should act.

The modern interpretation of the Oedipus encompasses the transition from a helpless child to a repressed adult who relies on others to find comfort and worth, giving rise to a dangerous reliance on others (Becker 160-61). We find ourselves helpless by ourselves because we are afraid of standing alone. It's much more comforting to stand

with the masses, to have others agree with you even if you don't truly believe what you believe. It means we turn to authority figures like older family members, politicians, and even entire nations and their values. It suggests that many of us have never learned to interpret reality for ourselves, relying on the views of others that we have rarely come to truly question. It also means that democracy can sometimes be quite fallible to the swaying words of politicians who capitalize on the weakness of many individuals. Those who have confidence in their posture, conviction with their words even when those words are nonsense, and an aura of something greater than oneself can sway the thoughts of the masses due to their often blind reliance on authority figures, which strips away the individualism that democracy promises. We can start to see that despite the grounded reasoning behind democracy, the justice and fairness that is promised, the very nature of our being gets in the way of a more ideal democracy.

Superficiality in Society

Beyond the individual level, we can observe fundamental issues with how we communicate and interact with each other. It's helpful to understand that what ultimately ends up driving us is building up our self-esteem and self-worth since, without our esteem and worth, we are quite worthless in our own eyes (Becker 66). What Freud failed to see in his development of the Oedipus complex was the motive behind human behavior. Mostly everything we do in everyday life is driven by our need to establish or fortify our self-esteem. Something like the grades of students helps them understand their worth. To improve their self-esteem, they study and try to improve their grades, or turn to nonacademic activities to boost their self-esteem in other areas. Salaries and

figures in the bank account help us understand our worth in society because we let the amount of money we have define our success and ultimately our self-esteem. Without the various sources of self-esteem—grades, money, family members, hobbies, accolades—we would feel worthless and maybe even find our existence utterly meaningless. Put in the context of a meritocratic, capitalistic society like America, we might understand why so many people chase riches and fame.

Self-esteem, however, would not exist if there were no people to value what we value. Most of us find ourselves drawn into the throes of social interaction and understanding our position in society. With each social interaction we have, we are exposed to the judgments of others, and the possibility of having our self-esteem undermined. Therefore, we try to protect ourselves from others by displaying a mask of sorts (Becker 88). It's the fear of exposing ourselves that leads us to develop these complex social rituals, the politeness and shallow cheeriness in business settings, and the rigid formalities in diplomatic settings. Because we are afraid of being devalued, we hide from others with a mask of superficiality that creates, on a rather large scale, a society that is driven by superficial values. We perhaps never get to see what most people hide behind their masks—their true feelings, their desires, their ugly and endearing sides—because of the way we must protect ourselves. We essentially become actors who are acting out our roles, and the better we are at acting, the further we go in society.

Sometimes there seems to be no true understanding of other people and their thoughts because we are too constrained by social norms and the fear of having our self-esteem pushed down. There is often a dissociation between our inner selves, the

ones we discover through deep introspection, and our outer selves, the ones we tediously build up for others to see. The nature of social interaction provides yet another barrier to open communication, which can breed polarity and a lack of understanding with each other, although, fortunately, the rigidity of social interaction can maintain peace and provide a safe area for simple communication through standardized social norms. But we may still find ourselves mired in an environment closed off to values that go against the grain of society.

Narcissism and Fear

The issues with polarity and communication are only exacerbated by our need for self-esteem. The methods we take to build up our self-esteem could collectively be labeled as narcissism: we are typically concerned about ourselves more than others. Although there are truly altruistic people who put others above themselves, most of us are begrudgingly more concerned about ourselves and our sense of worth. We may rely on helping others or putting others above us to make ourselves feel good. And in fact, narcissism isn't necessarily bad when it urges us to accomplish more in an attempt to nourish our self-esteem, but we may also end up putting others above ourselves, seeking powerful figures to identify ourselves with to obtain a grander sense of meaning. This can breed hostility toward others who we don't consider ourselves, who are treated as aliens or outsiders. Because of our inherent narcissism, we can become suspicious or even aggressive toward outsiders simply because of differences without understanding the other side. When narcissism becomes too prevalent in groups, acts of atrocity can happen without people realizing the horrors they commit. A rather

straightforward example can be seen with European colonization of the New World, where in many areas in the Americas, natives were discriminated against and used by white colonists because of the inherent belief in white supremacy. A sense of superiority that stems from narcissism in whites creates hostility toward those who aren't white.

Hostility may also stem from fear. Not only might we feel superior to those who we do not consider us, but we may also feel threatened by them. This phenomenon can generally be explained by the concept of cultural relativism: that cultures will often undermine each other because they attempt to answer the same questions about life, and that no culture is more correct than any other (Baghramian and Carter). In western contemporary society, more and more people are turning away from religion, and society is becoming increasingly secular as technology is playing a greater role in our lives. While some of us may believe to be more correct than others because we rely on science and rational thought, as opposed to religious thought and belief in something less tangible, those who are religious or even primitive societies find just as much meaning and way of life, perhaps even more, without science and rational thought. It can work the opposite way too, where those who are religious may believe to be more correct because they believe in some greater being or spiritual realm. Either way, most cultures provide answers to some fundamental questions about life. When one culture sees another culture with different answers and foreign values bustling with vitality and purpose, there is a deep sense of discomfort and fear because it proves that we may not be correct, that others are just as happy as us despite having different values that we would consider wrong.

We should understand that even when growing up in a secular society that relies heavily on empirical evidence, the social side of society still breeds distortion. Simply growing up will distort our values because we must learn to adapt to symbols and the demands of the adulting world. No matter how we are raised, we typically find ourselves with some sort of distortion of reality as we come to identify ourselves with a certain culture. The matter of self-esteem makes matters worse because we can become overly narcissistic and suspicious of others. It is almost impossible to avoid neurosis and bias as we grow up.

The importance of democracy becomes more apparent when we realize that most of us are susceptible to weakness, that we are often reliant on our parents and society for our values and decisions. Because it's hard for us to stand alone, and because we are often caught up in our own worlds, we need people who can break down barriers and provide unique perceptions of the world. When society is filled with people who cannot rely on themselves, who must rely excessively on the rallying cries of politicians and authority figures, democracy tends to fall short of its promised ideals because people cannot truly make decisions by themselves. Under the illusion of self-reliance, we make decisions believing that we are contributing novelty to a democratic society, but in the end, we tend to do nothing more than rehash ideas that we do not completely agree with. It becomes more important that a democracy is filled with adults who are more separated from mass thought, not those who cannot differentiate between their own thoughts and those that are borrowed and instilled from childhood.

In Favor of Superficiality

Most of my meaningful experiences so far have been in moments of vulnerability, in moments of open communication when social norms don't matter. It means talking without pretenses, without fearing when tacit rules are broken, and without seeming happier than I feel. I think open communication with at least a couple of people you can trust is important because we have the chance to express the self that we've been hiding behind masks in normal social interaction. There's less fear about covering subjects that would be considered taboo, and at least I've felt a deeper sense of connection when I can talk openly about subjects that most people wouldn't bring up in normal conversation. In an ideal world, maybe we could all learn to drop pretenses and communicate without masks. There would be no deception, no anxiety, and no hostility due to differences and narcissism because the barriers in communication that stem from our neurotic upbringings wouldn't exist. It would also mean that democracy would function much closer to its ideal state because we would likely be free from the rigidity of social norms and we would be free to express what we truly think; there would be fewer distortions in our perceptions.

But of course, it's nearly impossible to reach such an ideal. As we've already explored, we are set up for weakness the moment we start to grow up and enter the adult world of symbols. Open communication in society is still quite far off because at least a part of us remains susceptible to external influences. I think the first step we could take to creating a better democracy is understanding ourselves better from a psychoanalytic viewpoint. While it may be truly difficult to break free from the values and traditions we've grown up with, an awareness of why we believe what we believe and

how cultures and values are often relative—not absolute—can help us start to understand the differences between people. We can learn to understand that we may not be correct, that sometimes no one is correct. With an understanding of how self-esteem drives our actions, and how narcissism can influence our viewpoints and breed hostility and fear, we can learn to become more accepting of others, which can create a safer environment for democracy and discussion of different viewpoints.

There is merit in superficiality, however, in the sometimes rigid structure of social interaction because of its necessity. It can be difficult to come to terms with what drives us, and it's often uncomfortable to hear that we can be wrong and that parts of us are neurotic without us realizing it. In the first place, it goes against the social grain to openly discuss the farcicality of society and the shallowness in many social interactions. It goes against the social grain to talk about the root cause of our behavior, our insecurity, and our need for self-esteem. Perhaps only with a deeper general understanding of human behavior can we start to break down communication barriers and encourage a more open and self-reliant democracy.

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