

Liberty and responsibility of the individual

Josiah Warren

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Responsibility must be Individual, or there is no responsibility at all.

The directing power, or the lead of every movement must be individual, or there is no lead, no order, nothing but confusion. The lead may be a person or a thing—an idea or a principle; but it must be an Individuality, or it cannot lead; and those who are led must have an individual or similar impulse, and both that and the lead must coincide or harmonize, to insure order and progress.

The masses in a city, when meeting each other upon the side-walk, without any thing to lead to one Individual understanding, may turn out in divers ways to avoid collision.

One turns to the right, the other to the left, and they both counteract each other; and both stop, both change again, with the same result—no progress—nothing can result but uncertainty and confusion, until there is some definite understanding between them, which both co-operate to carry out. (Definiteness is attained only by an Individuality of meaning in the proposition advanced). Some one Individual suggests through the papers that every one turn to the right on meeting another. As it is for the interest, and is the wish of every one to avoid collision and delay, their inclinations and interests coincide with the idea thus thrown out, and the confusion is at an end. Here is individuality of purpose, individuality of understanding, individuality in the regulating or governing power, or lead, and yet the governing power is not a person, but an idea. Therefore, although the lead or governing power must be an individuality, it need not necessarily be a person. It is sufficient that it is an individuality; that is, notwithstanding that thousands accept the suggestion, it has but one meaning to any, and to all; and hence its success as a regulator. But if two suggestions were thrown out at the same time, the one proposing to turn to the right, and the other to the left, and no one individual understanding were arrived at, and if each one had not an interest in avoiding collision,

they would neutralize each other, and confusion must be the result. Can we not see (Democrats as we are) that here may be an explanation of the defense of absolutism in governments, for the suppression of diversities of opinion, suppression of the freedom of the press, etc.?

Here is in miniature the grand issue between despotism and liberty! What is the solution?

I answer, the right of supreme Individuality must be accorded to every one; and though it is entirely impracticable to exercise this right in the present close connections and combinations of society, the true business of us all is to invent modes by which all these connections and amalgamated interests can be Individualized, so that each can exercise his right of individuality

at his own cost, without involving or counteracting others; then, that his co-operation must not be required in any thing wherein his own inclinations do not concur or harmonize with the object in view.

I admit that this makes it necessary that the interests of the individual should harmonize with the public interests! This is entirely impossible upon any principles now known to the public, (and this explains the motive for the introduction of these new elements of society).

We propose to throw out such ideas or discoveries as, when they come to be examined, may, like any other definite or scientific truths, become like the suggestions relative to the side-walk, the regulators of the movements of each individual, by the coincidence between these suggestions and his interests, or self-preservation.

Blackstone, and other theorists, are fatally mistaken when they think they get “one general will” by a concurrence of vote. Many influences may decide a vote contrary to the feelings and views of the voters; and, more than this, perhaps no two in twenty will understand or appreciate a measure, or foresee its consequences alike, even while they are voting for it. There may be ten thousand hidden unconscious diversities among the voters which cannot be made manifest till the measure comes to be put in practice; when, perhaps, nine out of ten of the voters will be more or less disappointed, because the result does not coincide with their particular individual expectations.

These inventions are all too short-sighted and too defective to be allowed to govern the great interests of mankind! I admit, that when we have once committed the mistake of getting into too close connections, it is impossible for each to exercise his right of Individuality; that then, perhaps, to be governed by the wishes of the greatest number (if we could ascertain them!) might be the best expedient; but it is only an expedient, a very imperfect one—dangerous when great interests are involved, and positively destructive to the security of person and property, from the uncertainty of the turning of the vote, or of the permanence of the institution resulting from it. One man may turn the whole vote, and often for want of definiteness (Individuality) in the meaning of the terms of the laws, their interpretation and administration are, of necessity, left to an individual; and this is despotism! The whole process is like traveling in a circle too large to be taken in at a glance, but yet, without being aware of it, we travel toward the point whence we set out, although we take the first steps in the opposite direction!

Disconnecting all interests, and allowing each to be absolute despot or sovereign over his own, at his own cost, is the only solution that is worthy of thought.

Good thinkers never committed a more fatal mistake than in expecting harmony from an attempt to overcome individuality, and in trying to make a state or a nation an “Individual!”

The individuality of each person is perfectly indestructible!

A state or a nation is a multitude of indestructible individualities, and cannot, by any possibility, be converted into any thing else! The horrid consequences of these monstrous and abortive attempts to overcome simple truth and nature, are displayed on every page of the world’s melancholy history. A few instances will illustrate.

Lamartine, in his admirable history of the first French Revolution, says:

“Among the posthumous notes of Robespierre, were found the following: ‘There must be one will; and this will must be either Republican or Royalist, all diplomacy is impossible as long as we have not unity of power.’”

We here see the very root of his policy and the explanation of his sanguinary career. It was precisely the same root from which have sprung all the ancient as well as modern political and social fallacies. It was a demand for "unity," "one-ness of mind," "one-ness of action," where coincidence was impossible. The demand disregarded all nature's Individualities, demanded the annihilation of all diversity, and made dissent a crime.

All were criminal by necessity, for no two had the power to be alike! The true basis for society is exactly the opposite of all this. It is FREEDOM to differ in all things, or the SOVEREIGNTY OF EVERY INDIVIDUAL.

Having the Liberty to differ does not make us differ, but, on the contrary, it is a common ground upon which all can meet, a particular in which the feelings of all coincide, and is the first true step in social harmony. Giving full latitude to every experiment (at the cost of the experimenters),

brings every thing to a test, and insures a harmonious conclusion. Among a multitude of untried routes, only one of which is right, the more Liberty there is to differ and take different routes, the sooner will all come to a harmonious conclusion as to the right one; and this is the only possible mode by which the harmonious result aimed at can be attained. Compulsion, even upon the right road, will never be harmonious. The SOVEREIGNTY OF THE INDIVIDUAL will be found on trial to be indispensable to harmony in every step of social reorganization, and when this is violated or infringed, then that harmony will be sure to be disturbed.

Robespierre may have carried the old idea a little farther than some Republicans, but he carried it no farther than the Greeks, the Venetians, and even the ancient and modern advocates of community of property. In all of them, as well as in all forms of organized society, the first and great leading idea was and is to sink the Individual in the state or body politic, when nothing short of the very opposite of this, which is, RAISING EVERY INDIVIDUAL ABOVE THE STATE, ABOVE INSTITUTIONS, ABOVE SYSTEMS, ABOVE MAN-MADE LAWS, will enable society to take the first successful step toward its harmonious adjustment.

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