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Contributions to the History of Individualism

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“When one thoroughly knows and deeply examines the notion of individuality and the consequences that derive from the principle that is its basis, meaning that every man is not only related to the world in a particular way, but also to every object in the world and to every idea that these objects awaken, one is astonished that so much natural discord is possible side by side with so much historical concord.”

This meditation of Hebbel — it is found in his *Journal* — gives us a precise idea of the individualist concept. In fact, if one doesn't create individualism, if one can't create individualism from mass systems, it seems to develop without conflicts in the “I” taken separately, as if one acts in terms of a tacit contract, a secret agreement. Not just the individual, taken in the most ordinary sense, doesn't escape this, but every artist, every philosopher, every intellectual creator, even if he presents himself as gifted with impersonal, disinterested, even social ideas, will appear to the observant and intelligent psychologist as an individual, completely isolatable phenomenon. This “immanent individualism” could not avoid being perceptible or

grasped, the individual himself could not find himself enriched from the fact of his existence, and could not develop himself more magnificently. But after three or four centuries, one feels the awareness of the individual growing as an existence apart, one notices the distinctive signs of the wonder that the perception of the I reawakens. The ancients, who all the histories of philosophy teach, barely perceived the I; it is necessary to get to the biographies of Saint Augustine, Petrarch, Junius for the path to open up, but it is with Pascal (around 1650) that modern individualism distinguishes itself from all that had come before it.

After his youth, Pascal started, with unlimited security, on the sunny paths of discovery and renown; still young, he had already achieved great fame. Suddenly he believed that he perceived that his I — “immortal”, “distinctive” — had gone to perdition. Power, honor, glory no longer appeared to him as anything but a vulgar chase after accomplishments for which the instinct of the species “man” aims: it seemed to him that only faith — christianity alone being able to isolate the I — could enlighten every I about its true destiny. Let one understand well: Pascal’s christianity was a particular creation, uniquely personal for Pascal; in this and in no other part could he recognize and distinguish his I. That this lucid and brilliant brain; that this scientific skeptic, that this clear-sighted mathematician and physicist could *believe* — was his faculty, his personal individualist gift. He would have been quite astonished, besides, if he had had to compare his faith with that of the masses. He thus attributed to christianity all awareness: only it could have convinced man of his infinite greatness and his tragic misery — that tragic misery to which Pascal had been prey when his insight had left him calm before certain problems impossible to solve. Faith was simply a means of self-exaltation for him, of raising up his I..

Then the individual withdraws so much apart and in isolation that he will dream of completing his moral isolation with

physical isolation, a method that is furthermore erroneous: but all apparently physical individualism will now but the expression of a cultural, intellectually effeminate sensibility. Here is Danie Defoe, the creator of the “Robinsonade,”¹ opening a century that never got away from robinsonades.

That such an ordinary man who is no longer satisfied with his home or his social environment, who the taste for adventure moves to go in search of his fortune in distant lands, doesn't present anything particularly distinctive; but that he gets thrown on a deserted island, separated from human society, forced to cope with his risk and danger, and that his I acts thoughtlessly, instinctively, unconsciously in the daily circumstances of life and the he acts so with regard to things and people that appeared suddenly, unforeseen, that face to face with traditional conceptions without slavishly recreating – individually and intellectually – the environment he'd left – this is what demonstrates in the poetic creator of Robinson a rare and original experience of the I. Because Robinson is forced to remake, step by step, the entire road covered by civilization, this nimble European, who responds, gifted with all the intellectual and scientific acquisition of this time at the threshold of mechanism, transforms himself into a serious, reflective man with deep thoughts, who establishes his own calendar, writes a newspaper and fabricates a religion fitting for his situation. If one compares this religion with that of the homeland, one will quickly see that what seems revolutionary is not, all told, so far from traditional conventions and customs. Equally, the author didn't want this – he conceived a pretty fabulous novel and did it in a way that the world of of discoveries carried out by his isolated I in Europe and elsewhere – is understandable.

¹ Novels about shipwrecks on deserted islands, of which *Robinson Crusoe* may have been the first, and was certainly the first to gain substantial popularity.

Transport Robinson from the dominion of experimentation in the free air into that of sensibility, from fiction into the didactic, and you have on the most authentic forefathers of individualism — Rousseau.

You see how Emile, immediately after his birth, is taken to the countryside — his Robinson Crusoe island. This is because the first day spent in the unhealthy social environment could damage him, corrupting his individualism. And there, in the countryside, Emile really develops himself — though he doesn't cease to be anxious about the outcome of his development. What will he make of himself: a human being, an overhuman, a god, an animal?

Only, we are persuaded too quickly that Rousseau, very early in Emile, had conceived his program of education — where had he taken it? In observation, in experience, in the richest human knowledge — in the human being considered generically. Often times, even he is not this way: he played too easily with difficulties and his Emile comes to possess a mind that holds nature as absolutely incapable of good and evil. Despite his skillful system of education, manifestly acknowledged as individualist, the French Revolution, which pays homage to Rousseau's hands/manias, was absolutely right to give a social meaning to the slogan: "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity." It kept itself in the spirit of Rousseau whose individualism did not conceive the isolated man, defined separately, but the generic human being. No more than the way that everyone in the eighteenth century and later Kant and Fichte conceived it. How would it have been able to keep itself apart in this way. And wasn't Emile transported to the countryside from the womb of society?

This is where we share Hebbel's astonishment: "When one examines the notion of Individuality deeply... and the consequences that derive from it... one is astonished that so much natural discord is possible beside so much historical concord." Emile never forgot his governor, the eighteenth century; the nineteenth century honestly strove to say goodbye to it. But

of the human being as it being, as its deepest essence. I have no envy splitting me in two, chasing after a spook.

In this way, he liberated himself from all the other ideal spooks, and this is the way that he achieves his negations with the aim of freeing the I from all “generic” determinisms — note it well: universal, generic: *allgemein*.² This has nothing to do with the individual in its typical manifestations. Stirner, in fact, this tireless and intrepid wrestler with ideas has put them “at the service of what most potently and sublimely agreed with him, at the service of his I. Now if you (and X and Y) find that your I completes and “consumes” itself more in a world of ideas nearer to idealism — to Schiller, for example, I leave it to you; Stirner, the insurrectionist, the anarchist doesn’t prohibit this to you — furthermore, he approves of you. He tells you only to be... yourself.

Thus Stirner has definitively dispelled the Hebbelian astonishment. To open the eyes of human beings about their dependence, their faith in authority, their sensibilities prompted by the external world, the individualist principle starts with a scathing rebellion, with discord, with an energetic call to your “uniqueness.” But the one who shakes you, who moves you in this way, who puts your I back into your own hands, is a human being like you, who speaks your language, with the same passions, the same sensations that are yours. This is why “side by side with so much natural discord, so much historical concord is possible.”

² The German word that can translate: universal, general, generic, common... in the German in the Italian text.

the whole thing is to know whether the governor thus pensioned off hasn’t come back in through the back door, whether the very divorce according to the Rousseauian conception hasn’t forced the real facts into an inevitable simplification. The personal, specific, individual man wanted once and for all to clear out, to strip, to reach the nineteenth century. But don’t let it be forgotten: when all is accounted for, Individualism, the most consistent concern... of human beings, has nothing to do with gods, with the greatness that can show itself absolutely.

Rousseau had not deeply examined “all the consequences that derive from the notion of individuality.” Schleiermacher, Stirner and Nietzsche did so like the true philosophers that they were. In Schleiermacher’s *Monologues*, for the first time, we find the happiness that is the privilege of the man who dares to consider himself as a being “willed apart.” The universe, in its greatness, can seem to want to crush me, but it cannot penetrate me, I, who am a formative and indispensable part, and the further the unique strives to spread himself out and his aim and his action, the more deeply he understands his situation and his need for the cosmos.

Goethe spoke somewhere of the higher happiness of the children of the Earth. Personality! Schleiermacher and Goethe were metaphysicians: according to them, one sees immediately where the concord “side by side with so much natural discord” comes from: the unique is such a powerful person! I might object and say that this is the chain of appearances that, in some way, govern the cosmos — that wants the necessary precautionary measures to be taken. Nietzsche himself — who holds in his hands the beginning and end of the last century — was a metaphysician to the bottom of his heart, despite defending himself so bitterly, and this is why, with his “eternal return,” he again mitigates the absolute, irrational individualist, so that he conceived a mechanical development of universal evolution, so that he believed in a constancy of “herds.” And why is this? — aren’t even these composed of “I’s”? And, in the meantime,

someone, in the same century, held the key to the “astonishment” that tormented Hebbel: “side by side with so much natural discord,” and this someone was Max Stirner.

The history of philosophy is greatly indebted to Stirner, at least as much as to Berkeley who disturbed the changeable consciousness in himself so much by speaking for the first time of the “world as our representation.” Let’s accustom ourselves, therefore, once and for all, to looking the ocean of eternally moving thoughts in the face, to considering preconceived deductions, which one may deduce from dogmatic idols as “the truth” and “the lie,” as unimportant. Let’s consider, once and for all, things and thoughts as an eternal and magnificent play of changing colors that come one after another on the cloak of the infinite, that would not be conceivable to us except for our senses, in a mixed condition, a condition of inner liquification, perhaps only in death. In all instances, here is what is certain: This that, living beings, we rarely have consciousness of our intimate link with the cosmos — that our same, most affirmed excesses of consciousness seem to evolve within the limits of a deliberate rupture, an intentional separation with the universe, of the sort that we abandon ourselves that much more blindly and confidently to our instincts that reveal our I to us as a thing of extreme importance.

If the eternal link of every I with the cosmos seems beyond doubt, we don’t feel it; my neighbor may be infinitely sad and in anguish, while *my* heart beats with joy and intoxication; at the same time, A...’s eye sees different images that B...’s eye (even if a sphere of feeling and sensations surely saturates the entire universe and is exteriorized in much “enthusiasm, don’t I have the right to make my individual consciousness rest on itself and to let every I, taken separately, assert itself? There are two methods: one considers the I as part of a whole that it doesn’t know — the other considers every I as a whole that it knows, particularly through the manifestations of its consciousness. This second method is the one that Max Stirner fol-

lowed; it is because he has “deeply examined” the notion of individuality and its consequences, that he calls the I “the mortal and momentary creator of its unique.” Not because it is this way, but because we...know it. Therefore, if we turn towards Stirner for other suppositions, if one wants to get some information on universal Harmony, the Creator of all things, one will learn nothing. But if one knows that Stirner speaks of every I as a unique in the totality of appearances, one learns valuable things. Hebbel is interested in the universal and ends up being astonished because side by side with such a differentiation there can be “so much historical concord.” Stirner, himself, only knowing the joy of logic, pushed a thought to its extreme theoretical consequence, caring little how it would end up.

I would very much like to know what suppositions are more solidly supported than these! A large portion of people offer us — and we are so inured! — the “greatest” perspectives, the “most sublime” conceptions, the “most unprejudiced” viewpoints: on what do they base all this? It is certain that if Stirner had not considered Feuerbach’s atheism as proven, he would not have explained individualism as he did. But isn’t theism a proven fact? If it had been, Stirner would have sought other grounds, would have found them and equally would have come to extreme individualism. He had thus proceeded from Feuerbach, who had defined religion as “a rupture of the human being with itself.” He doesn’t ask whether Feuerbach’s definition was precise or not in itself, rather asks how the rupture could be cured, repairing the rift. In Feuerbach, the divine attributes had become manifestly human and, in order to realize the ideal “of humanity,” the unique had to struggle tirelessly to conquer them. It was still the “generic” human being of the XVIII century. — No, Stirner cries, I am not that human being there, I am the personal, individual, specific human being; the theological ideal has cost me thousands of years of fruitless struggle, the “human” ideal will not demand this of me. I myself (and every *unique like me*) am in each moment as much the appearance