

The Evolved Meaning of Individuality

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The word “individual” holds an important place in today’s society. If asked the meaning of the word “individual,” a randomly chosen person would confidently reply, “an individual is one person.” Compared to the modern definition, the person would be correct. According to the most recent meaning of “individual”, as defined in the Oxford English Dictionary, is “of, pertaining or peculiar to, a single person or thing, or some one member of a class” (OED individual 5a). If the same question were asked in the seventeenth century, a different answer would be given. In fact, the word “individual” was rarely used. Instead, the word “individuality” or “individualism” was often heard in the seventeenth century in reference to politics or religion. The seventeenth century definition of “individuality” is “the state or quality of being indivisible or inseparable.” Obviously, these two meanings differ. By exploring the political and theological meaning in the seventeenth century and comparing it to the latest meaning, centered on biology and society, we will use history to help us analyze the conflicts between the new meaning and the old meaning of individuality.

The history of the word “individual” is thoroughly explained in Raymond Williams’ *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. When returning to Cambridge University, after being absent for four and a half years in the war, Williams observed the people around him and noticed that a new language had evolved. This new language inspired Williams to try to discover why words were used more often around him after he returned from the war than they were before he left. The year 1945 marked a starting point for him to write a book to teach people about the change in meaning of certain words. Each word included in *Keywords* had

caught his attention because he did not feel that their meanings were being helpful to the problems they were used in. Thus, the word “individual” fits into this category.

In the 1600s, the word “individuality” referred to a unified group of people, who were inseparable. Using this meaning, a certain field fits into this category: theology, or the study of God. This word was useful to theologians because they believed that the church itself was inseparable as long as God ruled. Williams states, “ Individualism and individual can be found in the sense of essential indivisibility in medieval theological argument, especially in relation to the argument about the unity of the trinity” (Williams 134). The trinity, the three members of the Christian Diety (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) as constituting one God, is three separate beings , which are unified as one. Although the individual in the trinity includes three separate beings, they are considered as an individual because they are unified as one. John Milton explains the importance of individuality among the church in an interview a Remonstrant. “Thus this untheologicall Remonstrant would divide the individuall Catholicke Church into severall Republicks ” (Milton 16). A translation of this would be: “This protester who does not study God wants to divide the inseparable all-embracing, universal church into many commonwealths.” By using the word “individual”, Milton ’s readers will better understand the context of this conversation. Also, Milton concludes that this word should also be used in marriage ceremonies: “These words also inferred that there ought to be an individuality in Mariage ” (OED individuality 1). As a woman and a man were joined together, they are unified as “one.” They became an “individual” because they were considered to be “inseparable” for the rest of their lives. Their unity, or individuality, is crucial if they want to maintain a happy marriage.

Under the concept of marriage, the word “individual” can be viewed as positive, but anything that is viewed as positive can also be viewed as negative. Warner Fite, a professor of Philosophy at Indiana University, defines “individualism” as “the term used to describe the tendencies of the trusts, the stock-jobbers and the corrupt politicians, while the honest citizen, and particularly the unfortunate citizen, is supposed to be ‘performing a social function’” (Fite 5). Here, there are two individuals: the dishonest people and the honest people. The two social forces disagree and “individualism” and the argument appears to be negative. In ethics, the word “individualism” became “a popular synonym for selfish meanness—in fact a generic term for moral evil” (Fite 5). At the same time, the word was used to describe free enterprise, limited government and personal freedom. Natural Rights was an individualistic concept characterized by phrases such as: “‘Laissez Faire’ and ‘that government is best which governs least’” (Fite 275). “Laissez Faire” is a policy where there is no interference by the government. This policy agrees with most citizens’ negative outlook on politicians, which makes them want to govern themselves.

The words “individual” and “society” were once abstract categories. Marx “argued that the individual is a social creation, born into relationships and determined by them” (Williams 136). This argument appears to say that society comes together as one “individual” but also contains “individuals.” The “individuals” in “society” must refer to different groups. This thought could be viewed as a starting point for the change in the meaning of the word “individual.”

“The transition is best marked by uses of the phrase ‘in the individuall’ as opposed to ‘in the generall’” (Williams 134). This phrase helps to define an individual as not being like the others or being separated by something. Instead of being a part of the species or society, a

person is now defined as being a person who is independent. Also, by being independent, a person is now supposed to think for himself and fulfill his personal desires. Felix Morley wrote on “Individuality and the General Will” in a collection of essays. He observed that “when such a person performs an act, no part of his being seems uninvolved; what happens on the outer circumference is duly controlled by the integrating center” (Morley 64). Unfortunately society is not concerned with what happens inside of a person, but rather on what they appear to be on the outside. If someone adapts to society to try to fit in, his desire to fit in comes from within.

Although not always considered just, society is important to the life of man.

The change in meaning could have possibly occurred when Locke referred to an “individual man”, which made the word “individual” into an adjective (quoted in Williams 135). Here, one man is separated from a group of men. In the transition from an adjective to a singular noun, the word “individual” changed from the social and political meaning, to a logical and biological meaning. Phillips, for example, says: “Thus: ‘an individual...in Logick ...signifies that which cannot be divided into more of the same name or nature’” (quoted in Williams 135). Instead of being used to describe a unified group, the word “individual” refers to what cannot be broken down. This quote resembles the thoughts of Locke, but in a different field.

The logical sense of individual collides with a biological meaning. Williams breaks the chain down for his reader when he explains that “the usual division in logic is made into genera...those genera into species, and those species into individuals” (quoted in Williams 135). The new biology recognized this classification and began to use it. A well-known example, recognizing the nineteenth century evolved meaning of the word “individual” is Darwin’s Origin

of Species : “No one supposes that all individuals of the same species are cast in the same actual mould” (quoted in Williams 135). As this new definition became more popular, the old definition, a unified group, was replaced with the “individual” as “a fundamental order of being” (Williams 135). Although, the modern meaning of “individuality” is based on logic and biology, it results from a certain phase of political and economic thought and a phase of scientific thought.

The Conservatives criticized the Liberals because of their new thoughts based on the “individual.” Burke’s words serve as an example when he said: “the individual is foolish...the species is wise” (quoted by Williams 136). Clearly, Burke defends the beliefs of the conservatives who believe in being governed by a body of people. They want society to be a body, which agrees with the old meaning of individuality. Their conflicting thoughts on the Liberals arose because the Liberals were firm believers in each person doing their own thing. The Liberals are in favor of government by the people, which goes along with the new meaning of “individual.” This is an example of the new vs. old meaning conflict.

The change in the meaning of the word “individuality” to the modern definition is related to the break-up of the medieval social, economic and religious order (Williams 135). During the movement against feudalism, people focused “on a man’s personal existence over and above his place or function in a rigid hierarchical society” (Williams 135). Instead of living their lives as they would any other day, this caused people to question themselves and try to surpass everyone else. Also, in Protestantism there was a concern on “a man’s individual relation to God, as opposed to this relation mediated by the Church” (Williams 135). People were starting to realize that maybe a person had a closer relationship with God than the Church presented it. This is an argument between the old meaning and the modern meaning of “individual.” Maybe

the inseparable church thought they would lose a member if the relationship with God were the same in either scenario. Or man would rather speak to God in his own way, rather than having someone else do it for him.

Ironically, the meaning of the word “individual” in the sense of marriage has remained the same throughout the years. Although the meaning remains, the word “individual” is not normally used in marriage ceremonies. When two people are married, they are still considered as “one.” They may think different individually, but they come together to make decisions that affect their entire family.

The new use of the word “individual” helped to define a person’s place in society. An individual human being is capable of living independently of society while making his own decisions. He has enough knowledge to exist alone without clinging to the society as a whole. There is one problem. Some people do not feel secure with living apart from society. Abraham Kaplan, an editor who wrote on the distinguishing characteristics between identity and identification, points out that “If we move too close to others, we are in danger of losing our individuality; but if we keep ourselves too far from others, we face the danger that our individuality will no longer be worth keeping” (Kaplan 5). This quote could be used to explain the main problem with society: we do not know where to draw the line amongst our individuality. People today cannot seem to find middle ground because they try to remain close to the people around them without being someone other than himself. If everyone has been granted the natural right to be his own person, then why would he want to fall in the trap of society?

A logical explanation is that people may not realize they are falling into society's trap. They have to learn where to find the middle ground and how to remain there to stay stable around others. This lesson can be learned by making worthy choices. "Freedom of choice demands, not that the world about you be empty; since in an empty world there is nothing to choose; but rather that it be various and full" (Fite 278). Even with this freedom, individuals look to the media and to their peers to see how they should act and how they should live. Today as Americans, we do not observe our free rights to be individuals, but instead we look to be a part of society. We fear that our lifestyle does not meet the standards of the latest trends. Who set the rules of how to live in sync with society is unknown. The most logical explanation is natural rights, but not our natural instinct. Instead, this instinct is the one we think is correct by what we see around us. To most people, the most important goal in their life is to fit in with everyone else as opposed to being themselves with major concerns about appearing as an "outcast." To most people, being an outcast is viewed as negative. That is not always the case when it comes to joining the crowd to better your community or to do something nice for someone.

Our lives are based around each aspect of society whether we realize it or not. If we were separated from society, our lives would be one-sided because we would not appreciate the unique differences between every human being. If a person kept himself isolated from society, he would live an extremely boring life. On the other hand, society could not exist without individuals. Today in American society, people are a big part of making diversity and creating a society. Diversity in the society can only exist by including different types of people with different interests and desires. If everyone was the same, the world would be boring and no one

would want to be a part of it. Society and individuals thrive off each other, which makes each imperative to the existence of the other.

Not only has the meaning of “individual” changed, but our roles as “individuals” have also changed. If we compare ourselves to someone from the pioneer days, we will see a massive difference in the way we live our lives as opposed to the pioneer. By looking at the external pioneer, we see that his freedoms were completely different than ours. “Not only his choice of books, pictures, and music—the constant labor involved in securing the necessities of life left little room for thoughts of these—but his choice of friends, of wife, of occupation, of education for his children, --for that matter, of what to eat, drink, and wear, --along every line his life was rigidly determined” (Fite 278). He did not think of himself as being tied down because of his lack of freedom. Since he had never been exposed to more freedom than this, the pioneer did not take his life for granted, as most of us do today. Also, the pioneer did not feel the need to thrive off of society when to us it is expected. Today, humans take shape to their society because not many things in life are determined. They are not completely sure of anything, which makes them feel the need to blend with society. Although man can survive without society, he chooses to depend on it to feel more assured.

This shift in definition has had a positive effect on society. People are still having difficulty accepting the new meaning of individualism. The most visible mistake is that people think there can either be one or the other. In reality, there must be one to have the other. There is a time to be an individual in the new meaning and a time to be an individual in the old meaning. What we need to make sure of is that we do not lose either of them and they stay balanced.

The meaning of the word “individual” has evolved since the seventeenth century. First meaning “inseparable or indivisible,” “individual” now means “one person.” Not only has the meaning changed, but also as it started in the field of politics, it is now mentioned in biology and logic. The definition has been a positive addition to society.

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