

According to Alexandre Kojève, a 20th century French philosopher best known for his reinterpretation of Hegel, man cannot live alone as man: man who lives alone or imagines himself as living only by himself could be possible as such only outside of human reality and history.¹ Acknowledging the historically and scientifically proven fact that physical detachment from society or others is virtually impossible, I began to wonder if for mankind the idea of conformity related to the necessity of community—if it was another “human need.”

In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau repeatedly emphasizes that human beings are gifted with a “natural liberty, which is bounded only by the strength of the individual,”² meaning that we all have private wills corresponding to our own selfish interests. Thankfully, those private wills are kept secure to each individual; science has yet to gain access to them. No matter how hard we try to decipher one another, we are only ever able to examine from an outsider’s perspective. We perceive the external presentation—what the individual publicizes, consciously or subconsciously—but nothing deeper. At all times, the individual remains private. Sovereignty, as Rousseau defines it, is “a right which no one can take from the citizens—and also the right of stating views, making proposals, dividing and discussing;” it is a given right.³ Despite the form of government a country embraces, individuals ultimately hold the power of governance. Rousseau states, “There is a great difference between incurring an obligation to yourself and incurring one to a whole of which you form a part.”⁴ To agree with every single law as it is organized is unrealistic, and also unnecessary; I would question the moral independence of an individual who does so.

Democracy appears as a form of government that actively supports it all—celebration of individuality, free will, and equality. It is, according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a government in which supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections. The pure form of democracy, though, is not always best represented in the United States, most likely because it is impossible, as a whole, to practice those values while keeping order. Thomas Jefferson once said, “Democracy is nothing more than mob rule, where 51% of the people may take away the rights of the other 49%.” As much as I would love to reject the legitimacy of this statement, it is undeniably applicable to America today. Despite the consensus, which stresses the importance of individual stance, the principle of democratic legitimacy insinuates that the source of social authority is the will of the majority.

The context of conformity had been and is still being modified; non-conformity has now become a trend, as uniqueness is favored amongst the public. Many people regard conformity solely as following the masses, yet it is way more extensive than it seems. It is evident in the rise of counterculture and the now general belief that following the stream is “wrong;” people spurn further inspection. Conformity involves following the mass without first evaluating what they are doing; *rejecting* the mass without evaluating what they are doing is, essentially, the same practice. Practicing nonconformity just for the sake of opposing the majority holds no internal significance. The anti-conformists who choose to live an “alternative” lifestyle are, after all, equally as commonplace in their own lifestyle. The irony is that we are all part of the general populace that we individually condemn; no matter how maliciously we criticize “the norm,” we

¹ Kojève, Alexandre. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*. Ed.

² Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. "Rousseau, Social Contract (1762)." *Rousseau, Social Contract (1762)*. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 Dec. 2013, p. 1.8

³ Rousseau

⁴ Rousseau

make the population—we *are* the general public, and we can never escape the fact. Countercultures and the mainstream cooperate: they fuel consumerism and only exist because of the power of the mass. In this context, the ideology of the “rebel” does not quite make sense—neither the purpose of “rebellious” nor the “audience” people are trying to prove themselves to.

As much as I would love to—and I assume everyone else would too—celebrate individual freedom by spontaneously doing whatever I wish, I can also imagine the chaos it would cause in society. It is important to be aware that we do not live alone; we coexist with others, meaning that certain boundaries must be present to perpetuate equilibrium. Because of this coexistence, individuals must practice their free will in the appropriate field of action. Education is therefore essential; knowledge of the self is as important as knowledge of others, as the two coincide. Only through others are knowledge and self-consciousness acquirable.⁵

In *The Republic* (Book VIII, 557b) Plato introduces a city of ultimate freedom where everybody gives their opinion and spontaneously takes action. It might sound like an ideal world to many, but in reality, it only causes destruction. In this “parrhesiastic” freedom, freedom of speech given to everybody and anybody, true and false discourses are useful, as well as bad or harmful opinions, but all become mixed up and intermingled and subsequently clash in mayhem.⁶ Plato's texts suggests that although we live in a democracy which supports free speech, it is inevitably dangerous to oppose views, which makes parrhesia merely a hypothetical theory that is unrealistic in human society. Michel Foucault explains in his lecture *The Courage of the Truth*, “For there to be parrhesia, in speaking the truth one must open up, establish, and confront the risk of offending the other person, of irritating him, of making him angry and provoking him to conduct which may even be extremely violent. So it is the truth subject to risk of violence.”⁷ The type of government that appears to be the epitome of independence and freedom is thus proved impractical. In contemplation of this failed theory, I question why freedom is so hard to acquire in society, and if individualistic utopia is plausible.

The omnipresence of homogeneity, along with the general denunciation of “difference,” makes it seem like there is no possible way for humans to elude it. Conformity is embedded deep—to the point that we are often unable to discern it. Modern definition of words is a good example of this deep perpetuation. For example, I examined the word *reference*: reference refers to material individuals utilize to generate support for their decisions and beliefs. None of these materials hold significance from the start—they only become “reference” when they are shared and accepted by a large enough group of people to enhance defined social normality. Religion, which I believe is the most powerful manifestation of conformity, has perpetuated its influence throughout the history of humankind. Conformity, though it may appear inescapable, is voluntary. It is not something a state or a church can govern; it is an individual who makes the decision to conform or not. In psychological terms, conformity refers to the “tendency for people to adopt the behaviors, attitudes, and values of other members of a reference group.” There is a difference between simply “following” and *succumbing* to societal standards; conformance is a personal decision. John Stuart Mill asserts this claim in his essay *On Liberty*: “Considerations to aid his judgment, exhortations to strengthen his will may be offered to him, even obtruded on him, by others; but he himself is the final judge. All errors which he is likely to commit against advice and warning are far outweighed by the evil of allowing others to constrain him to what

⁵ Foucault, Michel. Arnold I. Davidson, and Graham Burchell. *The Courage of the Truth*. N.p.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print.

⁶ Mill, John Stuart, and Elizabeth Rapaport. *On Liberty*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 1978. Print.

⁷ Foucault, p. 11

they deem his good.”⁸ We are not bound, for example, to a single society; we have the choice to avoid our innate society if it is not the most suitable, and we have a right to instead choose the society most acceptable to us. However, many individuals do not have enough self-assurance to make this decision themselves. I believe ignorance is the ultimate factor that drives people to conform their values and perpetuate those values without critical thought.

The analogy between ignorance and conformity is evident in the history of religion. All religions revolve around an assumption of authority that is present above them, often leading humans to trust blindly anything the “authority” says without critical evaluation. Karl Marx uses the metaphor of worker and product to explicate religious reliance amongst humankind: “The more the worker exhausts himself, the more powerful the alien world of objects which he creates over and against himself becomes, the poorer he and his inner world become, the less there is that belongs to him as his own. The same is true in religion. The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself.”⁹ Due to ignorance, self-doubt is born, causing the individual to seek external reliance. This is what causes a person to confuse his or her own existence and desires with the figure that dominates his or her mind. Futurist structural designer Jacque Fresco, in discussion of his current project, reflects upon his formative years to highlight the intellectual advancement he made once he stopped seeking approval of others. He proclaims, “When you work for the approval of others, you sacrifice original thinking.”¹⁰

I believe hedonism is inherently present in individuals. Pleasure is a subjective word and therefore interpretation varies per individual; pleasure is, when looked at on a bigger scale, more like a driving force that keeps us alive. Human beings have an instinctual drive towards self-preservation, and will take whatever means to satisfy their natural needs. Because of this natural drive to preserve and care for oneself, competition naturally occurs. *Amour propre*, as Foucault called the love of self,¹¹ makes the primary interest of each human being the need to be recognized by others. Nobody would be able to develop insecurities in physical isolation (total disconnect from the world). Only with the acknowledgment of others one is able to instigate comparison and feel either superior or inferior. An insecure person, due to unstable moral values, is dubious of one’s autonomy. In search of mental and emotional security, the individual therefore commits instead to an authority figure they can rely on. I am not criticizing groups or socialization; what I defy is the replacement of self, or loss of self-identity.

Humans are naturally solitary. We are individuals, carrying separate entities since birth; we do not share a soul. We are gifted with private, subjective thinking; thus physical alienation is unnecessary to achieve solitude. It is inherent in human beings, yet many fail to realize it. As Thoreau denotes in *Walden*, “Solitude is not measured by the miles of space that intervene between a man and his fellows.”¹² We can only be so close to our peers. Our access to one another is surprisingly limited; we are naturally detached from one another. Mill remarks on the importance of self-commitment in practicing individuality: “The term duty to oneself, when it means anything more than prudence, means self-respect or self-development, and for none of these is anyone accountable to his fellow creatures, because for none of them is it for the good of

⁸ Mill, p. 75

⁹ Marx, Karl, and Eugene Kamenka. *The Portable Karl Marx*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1983. Print, p. 134

¹⁰ "Fresco-seeking Approval, Invention, Formative Years." *YouTube*. YouTube, 15 May 2010. Web. 04 Dec. 2013.

¹¹ Foucault

¹² Thoreau, Henry David, W. S. Merwin, and William Howarth. *Walden, Or, Life in the Woods; and "Civil Disobedience"* New York: Signet Classics, 2012. Print, p. 111

mankind that he be held accountable to them.”¹³ Selfish as it may sound, I find it essential to place myself before others in order to remain faithful to my own purpose in life.

My method for achieving true nonconformity, in short, is self-reliance. Mindlessly following *or* rejecting is never the solution, despite the size of the group. I refer to nonconformity as the neutrality and independence that eventually leads to strong self-will. I am not talking about arrogance, but a basic sense of confidence generated with self-awareness—a genuine perception of oneself that allows critical self-analysis. With a developed reflective consciousness, the separation of one’s entity from others is automatically intensified, and one will be able to mindfully utilize knowledge acquired from the external environment. The equilibrium I mentioned earlier also refers to mutualism amongst human beings. Humans thrive by benefiting from each other. Personal stability will allow one to perceive and learn from one’s environment with neutrality, resulting in the ability to naturally form healthy relationships with others. To conform or to succumb is an individual choice, although it might not require much conscious thinking. To practice individuality is to stay true to oneself. I do not wish for utopia; I tend to accept the current environment and make personal amendments according to each situation. I cannot help but imagine the potential for increased positivity among the human population if we were to share a comprehensive understanding of individuality. If everyone accepted one another’s differences—not superficial, perceivable difference, but the difference inherent in every individual prescribed by natural solitude—debates about conformity and individuality would no longer exist. The need to present the uniqueness of oneself would be diminished, along with hatred and exclusivity, leaving only appreciation for one another’s existence.

¹³ Mill, p. 77

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