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INDIVIDUALISM AND THE INTELLECTUALS

THE QUESTION that has so painfully divided our country for the past six months is in the process of being transformed: originally a simple factual question, it has been generalized little by little. The recent intervention of a well-known man of letters[1] has greatly contributed to this result. It seems that the moment has arrived to renew in a brilliant move a polemic which was bogged down in repetitiveness. This is why, instead of resuming once again the discussion of facts, we have passed on, in a single bound, to the level of principles: it is the mental state of the "intellectuals,"[2] the basic ideas they profess, and no longer the details of their reasoning which are being attacked. If they obstinately refuse "to bend their logic before the word of an army general," it is evidently because they presume the right to decide the question for themselves; it is because they place their reason above authority, because the rights of the individual seem to them inalienable. It is therefore their individualism which has determined their schism. But then, it is said, if we wish to restore peace in our minds and to prevent the return of similar discord, this individualism must be fought tooth and nail. This inexhaustible source of internal division must be dried up once and for all. And so a veritable crusade has begun against this public scourge, against "this great sickness of the present age."

We gladly accept the debate in these terms. We also believe

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that the controversies of yesterday only gave superficial expression to a more profound disagreement, and that opinion was divided far more over a question of principle than over a question of fact. Let us therefore leave aside the arguments over circumstances which have been exchanged on both sides. Let us forget the matter itself and the sad spectacles we have witnessed. The problem before us goes infinitely beyond the present incidents and must be distinguished from them.

There is one ambiguity that must be cleared up before all else.

In order to prosecute individualism more easily, they confuse it with the strict utilitarianism and the utilitarian egoism of Spencer and the economists. But that is to make the contest too easy. It is indeed an easy game to denounce as an ideal without grandeur this crass commercialism which reduces society to nothing more than a vast apparatus of production and exchange. For it is exceedingly clear that all communal life is impossible without the existence of interests superior to those of the individual. We quite agree that nothing is more deserved than that such doctrines be considered anarchical. But what is inadmissable is that they should reason as though this form of individualism were the only one which existed or was even possible. Quite the contrary—it is more and more becoming a rarity and an exception. The practical philosophy of Spencer is morally so impoverished that it can hardly claim any adherents anymore. As for the economists, though they formerly allowed themselves to be seduced by the simplicity of this theory, for some time they have sensed the necessity of tempering the rigor of their primitive orthodoxy and of opening themselves to more generous sentiments. Molinari is just about alone in France in remaining intractable, and I do not believe he has exercised a great influence on the ideas of our epoch. In truth, if individualism had no other representatives, it would be quite useless thus to move heaven and earth to combat an enemy who is in the process of quietly dying a natural death.

But there exists another sort of individualism which is less easily overcome. It has been professed, for the past century,

by the vast majority of thinkers: this is the individualism of Kant and Rousseau, of the idealists—the one which the Declaration of the Rights of Man attempted, more or less happily, to formulate and which is currently taught in our schools and has become the basis of our moral catechism. They hope to deal a blow to this form of individualism by striking instead at the former type; but this one is profoundly different, and the criticisms which apply to the one could hardly suit the other. Far from making personal interest the objective of conduct, this one sees in all personal motives the very source of evil. According to Kant, I am sure of acting properly only if the motives which determine my behavior depend not on the particular circumstances in which I find myself, but on my humanity in the abstract. Inversely, my actions are bad when they can be logically justified only by my favored position or by my social condition, by my class or caste interests, by my strong passions, and so on. This is why immoral conduct can be recognized by the fact that it is closely tied to the actor's individuality and cannot be generalized without manifest absurdity. In the same way, if, according to Rousseau, the general will, which is the basis of the social contract, is infallible, if it is the authentic expression of perfect justice, it is because it is the sum of all individual wills; it follows that it constitutes a sort of impersonal average from which all individual considerations are eliminated, because, being divergent and even antagonistic, they neutralize each other and cancel each other out.[3] Thus, for both these men, the only moral ways of acting are those which can be applied to all men indiscriminately; that is, which are implied in the general notion of "man."

Here we have come a long way from that apotheosis of well-being and private interest, from that egoistic cult of the self for which utilitarian individualism has been rightly criticized. Quite the contrary, according to these moralists, duty consists in disregarding all that concerns us personally, all that derives from our empirical individuality, in order to seek out only that which our humanity requires and which we share with all our fellowmen. This ideal so far surpasses the level of utilitarian goals that it

seems to those minds who aspire to it to be completely stamped with religiousity. This human person (*personne humaine*), the definition of which is like the touchstone which distinguishes good from evil, is considered sacred in the ritual sense of the word. It partakes of the transcendent majesty that churches of all time lend to their gods; it is conceived of as being invested with that mysterious property which creates a void about sacred things, which removes them from vulgar contacts and withdraws them from common circulation. And the respect which is given it comes precisely from this source. Whoever makes an attempt on a man's life, on a man's liberty, on a man's honor, inspires in us a feeling of horror analogous in every way to that which the believer experiences when he sees his idol profaned. Such an ethic is therefore not simply a hygenic discipline or a prudent economy of existence; it is a religion in which man is at once the worshiper and the god.

But this religion is individualistic, since it takes man as its object and since man is an individual by definition. What is more, there is no system whose individualism is more intransigent. Nowhere are the rights of the individual affirmed with greater energy, since the individual is placed in the ranks of sacrosanct objects; nowhere is the individual more jealously protected from encroachments from the outside, whatever their source. The doctrine of utility can easily accept all sorts of compromises without belying its fundamental axiom; it can admit of individual liberties' being suspended whenever the interest of the greater number requires that sacrifice. But no compromise is possible with a principle which is thus placed outside and above all temporal interests. There is no political reason which can excuse an attack upon the individual when the rights of the individual are above those of the state. If then, individualism is, in and of itself, the catalyst of moral dissolution, we should see it here manifest its antisocial essence. Now we understand the gravity of the question. For this eighteenth-century liberalism which is at bottom the whole object of the dispute is not simply a drawing-room theory, a philosophical construct; it has become a fact, it has penetrated our institutions and our mores, it has blended

with our whole life, and if, truly, we had to give it up, we would have to recast our whole moral organization at the same stroke.

Now it is already a remarkable fact that all those theoreticians of individualism are no less sensitive to the rights of the collectivity than to those of the individual. No one has insisted more strongly than Kant upon the supraindividual character of ethics and of law; he makes of them a sort of commandment that man must obey without any discussion simply because it is a commandment. And if he has sometimes been reproached for having exaggerated the autonomy of reason, one could equally well say, and not without foundation, that he placed at the base of his ethics an irrational act of faith and submission. Moreover, doctrines are judged above all by what they produce—that is, by the spirit of the doctrines to which they give birth. Now Kantianism gave rise to the ethics of Fichte, which are already quite impregnated with socialism, and the philosophy of Hegel, of whom Marx was the disciple. As for Rousseau, we know how his individualism is complemented by his authoritarian conception of society. Following him, the men of the Revolution, even while promulgating the famous Declaration of Rights, made of France an indivisible and centralized entity. Perhaps we should see in the work of the Revolution above all a great movement of national concentration. Finally, the principal reason the idealists have fought against the utilitarian ethic is that it appeared to them incompatible with social necessities.

This eclecticism, it is said, is not without contradictions. To be sure, we do not dream of defending the way these different thinkers went about fusing these two aspects of their systems of thought. If, with Rousseau, we begin by making of the individual a sort of absolute which can and must suffice unto itself, it is evidently difficult then to explain how it was possible for the civil state to be established. But the present question is to know not whether this or that moralist succeeded in showing how these two tendencies are reconciled, but whether or not they are, in and of themselves, reconcilable. The reasons given for establishing their unity may be worthless, and yet this unity may be real; and

already the fact that they generally coincide in the same minds leads us to believe that they go together; from all this, it follows that they must depend on a single social state of which they are probably only different aspects.

And, in fact, once we have stopped confusing individualism with its opposite—that is, with utilitarianism—all these supposed contradictions disappear like magic. This religion of humanity has everything it needs to speak to its faithful in a no less imperative tone than the religions it replaces. Far from limiting itself to flattering our instincts, it fixes before us an ideal which infinitely surpasses nature. For ours is not naturally a wise and pure reason which, purged of all personal motives, would legislate in the abstract its own conduct. Doubtless, if the dignity of the individual came from his personal characteristics, from the peculiarities which distinguish him from others, we might fear that it would shut him off in a sort of moral egoism which would make any solidarity impossible. But in reality he receives dignity from a higher source, one which he shares with all men. If he has a right to this religious respect, it is because he partakes of humanity. It is humanity which is worthy of respect and sacred. Now it is not all in him. It is diffused among all his fellowmen and consequently he cannot adopt it as the aim of his conduct without being obliged to come out of himself and relate to others. The cult, of which he is at once both object and agent, does not address itself to the particular being which he is and which bears his name, but to the human person (*la personne humaine*) wherever it is to be found, and in whatever form it is embodied. Impersonal and anonymous, such an aim, then, soars far above all individual minds (*consciences particulières*) and can thus serve them as a rallying point. The fact that it is not alien to us (by the simple fact that it is human) does not prevent it from dominating us. Now, the only thing necessary for a society to be coherent is that its members have their eyes fixed on the same goal, concur in the same faith. But it is in no way necessary that the object of this common faith be unrelated to individual natures. After all, individualism thus extended is the glorification not of the self but of the individual in general. It springs not from egoism but from sympathy for all

that is human, a broader pity for all sufferings, for all human miseries, a more ardent need to combat them and mitigate them, a greater thirst for justice. Is there not herein what is needed to place all men of good will in communion? Without doubt, it can happen that individualism is practiced in a completely different spirit. Some use it for their personal ends, as a means of disguising their egoism and of more easily escaping their duties to society. But this abusive exploitation of individualism proves nothing against it, just as the utilitarian falsehoods about religious hypocrisy prove nothing against religion.

But I am anxious to come to the great objection. This cult of man has as its primary dogma the autonomy of reason and as its primary rite the doctrine of free inquiry. But, we are told, if all opinions are free, by what miracle will they be in harmony? If they are formed without mutual awareness and without having to take one another into account, how can they not be incoherent? Intellectual and moral anarchy would thus be the inevitable result of liberalism. Such is the argument, always refuted and always renewed, to which the eternal adversaries of reason periodically return with a perseverance which nothing discourages, every time a momentary lassitude of the human spirit places it more at their mercy. Yes, it is quite true that individualism implies a certain intellectualism; for freedom of thought is the first of the freedoms. But where has it been seen to have as a consequence this absurd infatuation with oneself which shuts everyone up in his own feelings and creates a vacuum between intellects? What it requires is the right for each individual to know the things he legitimately can know. But it in no way consecrates some sort of right to incompetence. On a question on which I can form no knowledgeable opinion, it costs my intellectual independence nothing to follow more competent opinions. The collaboration of learned men is possible only thanks to this mutual deference; every science constantly borrows from its neighboring disciplines propositions that it accepts without further verification. However, my reason requires reasons before it bows before someone else's. Respect for authority is in no way incompatible with rationalism as long as the authority is rationally grounded.

This is why, when it comes to calling upon certain men to rally themselves to an opinion which is not their own, it is not enough, in order to convince them, to recall to them that commonplace of banal rhetoric that society is not possible without mutual sacrifices and without a certain spirit of subordination. The docility which is asked of them must still be justified for the particular case by demonstrating their incompetence. For if, on the contrary, it were one of those questions which, by definition, come under the jurisdiction of common judgment, a similar abdication would be contrary to all reason and, consequently, to their duty. To know whether a tribunal can be permitted to condemn an accused man without having heard his defense requires no special intelligence. It is a problem of practical ethics for which every man of good sense is competent and to which no one should be indifferent. If, therefore, in recent times, a certain number of artists, and especially scholars, believed they had to refuse to concur in a judgment whose legality appeared to them suspect, it was not because, in their capacity as chemists or philologists, as philosophers or historians, they attributed to themselves some sort of special privilege and a sort of eminent right of control over the thing being judged. It is because, being men, they intend to exercise all their human rights and retain before them a matter which is amenable to reason alone. It is true that they have shown themselves to be more jealous of that right than has the rest of the society; but it is simply because in consequence of their professional practices they take it more to heart. Since they are accustomed by the practice of the scientific method to reserve their judgment as long as they do not feel themselves enlightened, it is natural that they should yield less easily to the sway of the masses and the prestige of authority.

Not only is individualism not anarchical, but it henceforth is the only system of beliefs which can ensure the moral unity of the country.

We often hear it said today that religion alone can produce this harmony. This proposition, which modern prophets believe they must develop in mystic tones, is essentially a simple truism about which everyone can agree. For we know today that a religion

does not necessarily imply symbols and rites, properly speaking, or temples and priests. This whole exterior apparatus is only the superficial part. Essentially, it is nothing other than a body of collective beliefs and practices endowed with a certain authority. As soon as a goal is pursued by an entire people, it acquires, in consequence of this unanimous adherence, a sort of moral supremacy which raises it far above private aims and thus gives it a religious character. From another viewpoint, it is apparent that a society cannot be coherent if there does not exist among its members a certain intellectual and moral community. However, after recalling once again this sociological truism, we have not gotten very far. For if it is true that religion is, in a sense, indispensable, it is no less certain that religions change—that the religion of yesterday could not be the religion of tomorrow. What is important therefore is to say what the religion of today should be.

Now everything converges in the belief that this religion of humanity, of which the individualistic ethic is the rational expression, is the only one possible. Hereafter, to what can the collective sensitivity cling? To the extent that societies become more voluminous and expand over vaster territories, traditions and practices, in order to accommodate themselves to the diversity of situations and to the mobility of circumstances, are obliged to maintain themselves in a state of plasticity and inconstancy which no longer offers enough resistance to individual variations. These variations, being less well restrained, are produced more freely and multiply; that is to say, everyone tends to go off in his own direction. At the same time, as a result of a more developed division of labor, each mind finds itself oriented to a different point on the horizon, reflecting a different aspect of the world, and consequently the contents of consciousness (*conscience*) differs from one person to another. Thus, we make our way, little by little, toward a state, nearly achieved as of now, where the members of a single social group will have nothing in common among themselves except their humanity, except the constitutive attributes of the human person (*personne humaine*) in general. This idea of the human person, given different nuances according to the diversity of national temperaments, is therefore the only idea

which would be retained, unalterable and impersonal, above the changing torrent of individual opinions. And the feelings it awakens would be the only ones which could be found in almost every heart. The communion of spirits can no longer be based on definite rites and prejudices, since rites and prejudices are overcome by the course of events. Consequently, nothing remains which men can love and honor in common if not man himself. That is how man has become a god for man and why he can no longer create other gods without lying to himself. And since each of us incarnates something of humanity, each individual consciousness contains something divine and thus finds itself marked with a character which renders it sacred and inviolable to others. Therein lies all individualism; and that is what makes it a necessary doctrine. For in order to halt its advance it would be necessary to prevent men from differentiating themselves more and more from each other, to equalize their personalities, to lead them back to the old conformism of former times, to contain, as a result, the tendency for societies to become always more extended and more centralized, and to place an obstacle in the way of the unceasing progress of the division of labor. Such an enterprise, whether desirable or not, infinitely exceeds all human capability.

Moreover, what are we offered in place of this despised individualism? The merits of Christian morality are praised and we are discreetly invited to embrace them. But are we to ignore the fact that the originality of Christianity consisted precisely in a remarkable development of the individualistic spirit? Whereas the religion of the ancient city-state was quite entirely made of external practices, from which the spiritual was absent, Christianity demonstrated in its inner faith, in the personal conviction of the individual, the essential condition of piety. First, it taught that the moral value of acts had to be measured according to the intention, a preeminently inward thing which by its very nature escapes all external judgments and which only the agent could competently appraise. The very center of moral life was thus transported from the external to the internal, and the individual was thus elevated to be sovereign judge of his own conduct, accountable only to himself and to his God. Finally, in consumating

the definitive separation of the spiritual and the temporal, in abandoning the world to the disputes of men, Christ delivered it at once to science and to free inquiry. This explains the rapid progress made by the scientific spirit from the day when Christian societies were established. Individualism should not, then, be denounced as the enemy which must be combated at any cost! We combat it only to return to it, so impossible is it to escape it. We can oppose to it only itself; but the whole question is to know its proper bounds and whether there is some advantage in disguising it beneath symbols. Now if it is as dangerous as we are told, how can it become inoffensive or beneficial by simply having its true nature dissimulated with the help of metaphors? And looking at it from another point of view, if this restrained individualism which is Christianity was necessary eighteen centuries ago, there is a good chance that a more fully developed individualism is indispensable today. For things have changed. It is therefore a singular error to present the individualistic ethic as the antagonist of Christian morality. Quite the contrary—the former derived from the latter. By attaching ourselves to the first, we do not deny our past; we only continue it.

We are now in a better position to understand why certain minds believe they must oppose an opinionated resistance against everything that seems to threaten the individualistic creed. If every enterprise directed against the rights of an individual revolts them, it is not only out of sympathy for the victim; nor is it from fear of having to suffer similar injustices. Rather, it is because such attempts cannot remain unpunished without compromising the national existence. Indeed, it is impossible for them to occur freely without weakening the feelings they transgress against. And since these feelings are the only ones we hold in common, they cannot be weakened without disturbing the cohesion of society. A religion which tolerates sacrilege abdicates all dominion over men's minds (*consciences*). The religion of the individual therefore cannot let itself be scoffed at without resistance, under penalty of undermining its authority. And since it is the only tie which binds us all to each other, such a weakness cannot exist without a beginning of social dissolution. Thus the

individualist who defends the rights of the individual defends at the same time the vital interests of society, for he prevents the criminal inpoverishment of that last reserve of collective ideas and feelings which is the very soul of the nation. He renders to his country the same service the aged Roman once rendered to his city in defending the traditional rites against foolhardy innovators. And if there is a country among all others where the cause of individualism is truly national, it is our own; for there is no other which has created such rigorous solidarity between its fate and the fate of these ideas. We have given them their most recent formulation, and it is from us that other peoples have received them. And this is why even now we are considered their most authoritative representatives. Therefore we cannot disavow them today without disavowing ourselves, without diminishing ourselves in the eyes of the world, without committing a veritable moral suicide. Not long ago, people wondered whether it would not perhaps be convenient to consent to a temporary eclipse of these principles, in order not to disturb the functioning of a public administration which everyone recognized to be indispensable to the security of the state. We do not know if the antinomy really poses itself in this acute form; but, in any case, if a choice truly is necessary between these two evils, to thus sacrifice what has been to this day our historical raison d'être would be to choose the worst. An organ of public life, however important, is only an instrument, a means to an end. What purpose does it serve to maintain the means with such care if the end is dispensed with? And what a sad way of figuring to renounce everything that makes life worthwhile and lends it dignity in order to live,

Et propter vitam vivendi perdere causes!

In truth, I fear there may have been some frivolity in the way this campaign was undertaken. A verbal similarity has permitted the belief that "individualism" necessarily derived from "individual" and therefore egoistic feelings. In reality, the religion of the individual was socially instituted, as were all known religions. It is society which fixes for us this ideal as the sole common goal

which can rally our wills. To take it away from us when we have nothing else to put in its place is, then, to precipitate us into that moral anarchy which is precisely what we wish to combat.[4]

Yet we have almost considered the eighteenth-century formulation of individualism perfect and definitive and have made the mistake of preserving it almost without modification. Although it was sufficient a century ago, it now needs to be enlarged and made complete. It presents individualism only in its most negative light. Our fathers undertook exclusively the task of freeing the individual from the political shackles which impeded his development. The freedom to think, the freedom to write, the freedom to vote were therefore placed by them in the ranks of the primary benefits to be obtained, and this emancipation was certainly the necessary precondition of all subsequent progress. However, quite completely carried away by the fervor of the struggle toward the objective they pursued, they ended by no longer seeing beyond it and by erecting as a sort of final goal this proximate term of their efforts. Now political freedom is a means, not an end; its worth lies in the manner in which it is used. If it does not serve some end which goes beyond itself, it is not simply useless; it becomes dangerous. It is a battle weapon; if those who wield it do not know how to use it in fruitful struggles, they soon end by turning it against themselves.

And this is precisely the reason why today it has fallen into a certain disrepute. Men of my generation recall how great our enthusiasm was when, twenty years ago, we finally saw the fall of the last barriers which restrained our restlessness. But alas! Disenchantment quickly followed. For we soon had to admit that we did not know what to do with this hard-won freedom. Those to whom we owed this freedom used it only to tear each other to pieces. And from that moment on, we felt that wind of sadness and discouragement rise over the land which daily grew stronger and eventually finished by disheartening the least resistant spirits.

Thus, we cannot limit ourselves to this negative ideal. We must go beyond the results achieved, if only to preserve them. If we do not finally learn to put to work the means of action we have in our hands, they will inevitably lose their worth. Let us therefore make use of our liberties to seek out what we must do and to do it, to smooth the functioning of the social machine, still so harsh on individuals, to place within their reach all possible means of developing their abilities without hindrance, to work finally to make a reality of the famous precept: to each according to his labor! Let us even recognize that in a general way liberty is a delicate instrument which one must learn to handle; and let us train our children accordingly. All moral education should be oriented to this end. Clearly, we have no lack of matters on which to take action. However, though it is certain that we will hereafter have to set up new goals beyond those already attained, it would be senseless to renounce the latter in order to better pursue the former. For the necessary progress is possible only thanks to progress already achieved. It is a matter of completing, extending, and organizing individualism, not of restraining and combating it. It is a matter of using reflection, not of imposing silence upon it. Reflection alone can help us emerge from our present difficulties. We do not see what could replace it. It is not, however, by meditating upon *Politics in the Holy Scriptures* that we will ever find the means of organizing economic life and of introducing greater justice in contractual relations!

In these circumstances, is our duty not clear? All those who believe in the utility or simply in the necessity of the moral transformations accomplished in the past century have the same interest: they must forget the differences which separate them and unite in their efforts to preserve the already acquired position. Once the crisis has passed, there will certainly be cause to recall the teachings of experience, so that we do not again fall into that sterile inaction for which we are now paying the penalty. But that is tomorrow's task. Today, the urgent task which must come before all others is to save our moral patrimony; once it is secure, we will see that it prospers. Let the common danger at least shake us from our torpor and give us back a taste for action! And already, indeed, we see across the country initiative wakening and men of good will seeking each other out. If someone would come to group them together and lead them into battle, then victory might not be far off. For what should reassure us to a certain

extent is that our adversaries are strong only because of our own weakness. They have neither the profound faith nor the generous impulses which irresistibly lead peoples to great reactions, as to great revolutions. We certainly would not dream of questioning their sincerity! But how could we fail to sense to what extent their conviction is improvised? They are neither apostles who let their anger or their enthusiasm overflow nor scholars who bring us the product of their research and reflections; they are men of letters seduced by an interesting theme. It would therefore seem impossible that these dilettantes' games could long succeed in holding back the masses if we know how to act. But also, what a humiliation it would be if reason, dealing with so weak an opponent, should end by being worsted, even if only for a time!

5

THE INTELLECTUAL ELITE AND DEMOCRACY

WRITERS AND SCHOLARS are citizens. It is therefore obvious that they have a strict duty to participate in public life. It remains to be seen in what form and to what extent.

Men of thought and imagination, they would not seem to be particularly predestined to a properly political career. For that demands, above all, the qualities of a man of action. Even those whose profession is to contemplate societies, even the historian and the sociologist, do not seem to me more fit for these active functions than the man of letters or the naturalist; for it is possible to have a genius for discovering the general laws which explain social facts of the past without necessarily having the practical sense which allows one to divine the course of action which the condition of a given people at a given moment in its history requires. Just as a great physiologist is generally a mediocre clinician, a sociologist has every chance of making a very incomplete statesman. It is no doubt good that intellectuals be represented in deliberative assemblies. Aside from the fact that their culture permits them to bring to deliberations elements of information which are not negligible, they are more qualified than anyone to defend before the public powers the interests of the arts and sciences. But it is not necessary that they be numerous in the parliament in order to perform this task. Moreover, we may wonder whether—except for a few exceptional cases of eminently

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