Dewey, J., Individuality, Equality and Superiority, 1922

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In *Mediocrity and Individuality* I pointed out that the current reception of the results of mental testing proves the extent to which we are given to judging and treating individuals not as individuals but as creatures of a class, a quantitative class which covers up truly individualized traits. Our mechanical, industrialized civilization is concerned with averages, with percents. The mental habit which reflects this social scene subordinates education and social arrangements to stratifications based on averaged gross inferiorities and superiorities, We accept standards of judging individuals which are based on the qualities of mind and character which win under existing social conditions conspicuous success. The "inferior" is the one who isn't calculated to "get on" in a society such as now exists. "Equals" are those who belong to a class formed by like chances of attaining recognition, position and wealth in present society.

This intellectual acceptance of standards for valuing individuals of a society which every candid mind admits to be lopsided and disordered gives occasion for a reexamination of the fundamental ideas of superiority and equality. What do these words means? Professors have one measure of superior ability; captains of industry another. One class esteems aptitude for learning academic subjects; the other class appraises in terms of power in execution. Suppose that investigators and artists were so socially dominant that they were effectively articulate. Should we not then employ quite other standards of measurement? At present superior races are superior on the basis of their own conspicuous achievements. Inferior races are inferior because their successes lie in different directions, though possibly more artistic and civilized than our own.[1]

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Superiority and inferiority are meaningless words taken by themselves. They refer to some specific outcome. No one should use the words until he has asked himself and is ready to tell others: Superior and inferior in what? Is a student inferior for purposes of reciting lessons, of fitting into a school administration, of influencing companions, of "student activities" or what? Is an adult superior in

[1] From The New Republic, Dec. 13, 1922.

money-making, in music, in chicanery and intrigue, in being a wise parent or good neighbor, as a homemaker, a chauffeur or a librarian, a congenial companion, a confidence man, an investigator of higher mathematics, an expert accountant, a tractable worker or a revolutionist, in writing acceptable movie scenarios or in research in the laboratory?

There are as many modes of superiority and inferiority as there are consequences to be attained and works to be accomplished. And until society becomes static new modes of activity are continually developing, each of which permits and exacts its own specific inferiorities and superiorities. There is doubtless some degree of correlation between traits which promote superiority in more than one direction. But the idea of abstract, universal superiority and inferiority is an absurdity. The current loose use of these conceptions suggests overcompensation on the part of those who assume that they belong to a superior class. It appears like an attempt to escape from the limitations and incapacities which we all know, subconsciously at least, that we possess.

When classifications are rigid, the quantitative, the more or less, phase of superiority is inevitably conspicuous. Castes are ranks or grades of superiority; within each caste the hierarchical order of higher and lower is repeated. The endeavor to discover abstract degrees of mental superiority which fit for "leadership" in the abstract is evidence of the hold upon us still exercised by feudal arrangements. Our new feudalism of the industrial life which ranks from the great financier through the captain of industry down to the unskilled laborer, revives and re-enforces the feudal disposition to ignore individual capacity displayed in free or individualized pursuits.

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Sometimes in theory we conceive of every form of useful activity as on a level with every other as long as it really marks the performance of needed service. In these moments we also recognize in idea at least that there are an infinite number of forms of significant action. But these ideas are usually restricted to religiously accented moments. When it comes to "practical" matters, the very person who in his religious moods asserts the uniqueness of individuality and of opportunity for service falls back upon a restricted number of conventionally formulated and esteemed occupations and is content to grade persons in a quantitative comparative scale.

It was once supposed, at least by some, that the purpose of education, along with equipping students with some indispensable tools, was to discover and release individualized capacities so that they might make their own way with whatever of social change is involved in their operation. But now we welcome a procedure which under the title of science sinks the individual in a numerical class; judges him with reference to capacity to fit into a limited number of vocations ranked according to present business standards; assigns him to a predestined niche and thereby does whatever education can do to

perpetuate the present order. The motto concerning genuinely individual distinctions is that of the tank corps. "Treat 'em rough" except as they give promise of success in this or that established social classification. Otherwise, the person might grow up to be a conscientious objector or a social innovator, or be inclined to demand social recognition for activity in free scientific inquiry or in art or some other luxurious and ornamental calling.

The irony of the situation is that this course is usually taken in the name of aristocracy, even of intellectual aristocracy, and as part of an attack upon the tendencies of democracy to ignore individuality. It may be that the word democracy has become so intimately associated with a particular political order, that of general suffrage and elective officials, which does not work very satisfactorily, that it is impossible to recover its basic moral and ideal meaning. But the meaning remains whatever

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name is given it. It denotes faith in individuality, in uniquely distinctive qualities in each normal human being; faith in corresponding unique modes of activity that create new ends, with willing acceptance of the modifications of the established order entailed by the release of individualized capacities.

Democracy in this sense denotes, one may say, aristocracy carried to its limit. It is a claim that every human being as an individual may be the best for some particular purpose and hence be the most fitted to rule, to lead, in that specific respect. The habit of fixed and numerically limited classifications is the enemy alike of true aristocracy and true democracy. It is because our professed aristocrats surrender so gladly to the habit of quantitative or comparative classifications that it is easy to detect snobbery of greater or less refinement beneath their professed desire for a regime of distinction. For only the individual is ultimately distinctive; the rest is a matter of common qualities differing merely in degree. Even in the crudest pioneer democracy there was something more distinctive, more aristocratic, than in that smoothed-off communal worship of qualities belonging to certain classes which is characteristic of present-day critics of democracy.

The most ardent of the early advocates of equality never fell into the stupidity of alleging that all persons are qualitatively alike. Rousseau was one of the first to insist upon natural differences, psychological and physical. It was his profound conviction of the intensity and scope of these differences which made him so insistent upon political, legal and, within certain limits, economic equality. Otherwise some form of native superior energy would result in the enslavement of the masses, adding artificial enfeeblement to their natural deficiencies, while corrupting those of superior ability by giving them an artificial mastery over others and a cruel, contemptuous disregard for their welfare.

In our own earlier history, John Adams is perhaps the chief proponent of the unavoidable necessity of recognizing the aristocratic principle in politics because of inequality of natural endowments. But Adams was a realist. He did not as-

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sume that superiority of gifts meant intellectual superiority or that aristocracy in practice means the rule of the mentally and morally superior. He saw that the native superiorities which were bound in any political system to find outlet and to warp institutions to their ends are of indefinitely many kinds power, power to command and influence the action of others, being their only common divisor. In his own realistic words: "Any aristocrat is any man who can command two votes, one besides his own." And this superior influence may be due, he points out, to virtue, talent or intrigue and debauchery; to loquacity or taciturnity, to frankness or reserve, to goodfellowship or fraud, violence and treachery, to deism or atheism. Powerful is as powerful does. Adams never fell into that mealy-mouthed sentimentalism of contemporary defenders of aristocracy who assume that native superiorities are all in the direction of talent and virtue, and inferiorities all in the opposite direction.

Thomas Jefferson is associated with the democratic school. But he writes to John Adams: "I agree with you that there is a natural aristocracy among men. . . . The natural aristocracy of virtue and talents is the most precious gift of nature. . . . That government is best which provides the most effectively for selection of these natural aristocrats into the offices of government." And he proceeds to state that the differences between Adams and himself concern the means which are best calculated to secure this result. Adams thought that some express and definite institution was necessary; Jefferson thought that such explicit recognition would encourage the "tinsel" aristocracy of wealth and birth at the expense of natural aristocracy; for the wealthy will manage to protect themselves anyway and need no artificial protection against the feebleness of the poor. Both agreed that equality is moral, a matter of justice socially secured, not of physical or psychological endowment.

No intelligent defender of democratic equality has ever believed anything else. To-day he is not as sure as men were a century ago that any legal and political system can of itself

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prevent the untoward working of native differences of power. He sees very clearly that a regime of economic anarchy like the present overstimulates many of the least desirable forms of superior native power, and that the result overrides the legal and political bulwarks of moral equality. In consequence he sees that moral equality cannot be conceived on the basis of legal, political and economic arrangements. For all of these are bound to be classificatory; to be concerned with uniformities and

statistical averages. Moral equality means incommensurability, the inapplicability of common and quantitative standards. It means intrinsic qualities which require unique opportunities and differential manifestation; superiority in finding a specific work to do, not in power for attaining ends common to a class of competitors, which is bound to result in putting a premium on mastery over others. Our best, almost our only, models of this kind of activity are found in art and science. There are indeed minor poets and painters and musicians. But the real standard of art is not comparative, but qualitative. Art is not greater and less, it is good or bad, sincere or spurious. Not many intellectual workers are called to be Aristotles or Newtons or Pasteurs or Einsteins. But every honest piece of inquiry is distinctive, individualized; it has its own incommensurable quality and performs its own uniqueservice.

Upon reflection, however, it is apparent that there is something academic in confining the models of moral equality to art and intellectual pursuits. Direct personal relationships, the affections and services of human companionship are its most widespread and available manifestations. The snobbery of the snobbish, who call themselves aristocrats, is nowhere as evident as in their neglect of the superior gifts and attainments of the humble of the earth in these respects. No contact of this human sort is replaceable; with reference to it all are equal because all are incommensurable, infinite. Democracy will not be democracy until education makes it its chief concern to release distinctive aptitudes in art, thought and companionship. At present the intellectual obstacle in the way is the

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habit of classification and quantitative comparisons. Our pseudo-aristocrats with their flourishing of abstract and uniform superiority and inferiority are now the main defendants of a concept of classes which means only the mass divided into smaller portions. The democrat with his faith in moral equality is the representative of aristocracy made universal. His equality is that of distinction made universal.