

## The Decent of a Man

### The Quest

Individualism presents a unique problem in “social creatures” such as humans. Society and individuals are presented on two ends of the power spectrum with each excluding the other. Complete submittal would be akin to subjugation but pure selfishness could theoretically lead to a “State of Nature”. Neither of these options appear beneficial in the Utilitarian point of view. How then do we, as individuals, go about determining the appropriate amount of influence society has over us? This is the question I wish to examine currently. Individualism and by extension personal choice is a central theme of many of the authors we read this semester and so I conclude that these two subjects should be attended to with vigor. Music about individualism and choice was not difficult to find and was filled to the brim with angst. Apparently contemplation of the individual is not merely limited to men with magnificent facial hair. In the end, perhaps individual choice is merely an illusion.

### The Media of Choice

Music is the epitome of popular culture and simultaneously a wonderful medium for metaphorical interpretation. In addition, musical (as opposed to simple speech or graphical) communication activates large portions of the human brain in both hemispheres. Thus music is a good candidate for an assignment based upon personal interpretation of complex subjects. Similarly, Prezi presentation software can show interrelatedness organically more so than the typical word document or PowerPoint slide show can accomplish.

### The Theme

Marx, Darwin, and Nietzsche present *prima facie* arguments that might appear to disagree but a more thorough examination in practicality proves otherwise. Marx and Engels write that society is often in direct conflict with and has continuous influence over the individual (or a subset of individuals) resulting in physical exploitation. They of course argue for the abolishment of such exploitation culminating in the loss of property but not individuality. Similarly Darwin often suggests that in certain circumstances, apparent altruistic behavior may be selected for in a highly socialized animal. This appears to be in direct contradiction to Nietzsche's vehement denial of anything other than individuality. After all, he does say that the mission of education is to make machines. Pink Floyd's “Another Brick in the Wall” is an excellent visual representation of the issue.

Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* write, “From the moment when labour can no longer be converted into capital... you say individuality vanishes.” This part of the Communist philosophy is particularly difficult to apply to my study since it appears that Marx and Engels had a differing definition of the individual. Marx goes on by saying, “...by 'individual' you mean no other person than the bourgeois... This person must, indeed, be swept out of the

way, and made impossible.” An individual is somewhat altered here to mean someone who is without possession (either material or otherwise) but still possess a clear character. The distinction between property and individuality has now been established. In a very clear point Marx says that we are a compendium of all the views and (mis)conceptions of our progenitors and are therefore already socialized. Since we cannot ever truly be selfish individuals with unencumbered choices, we will inevitably flow into a Communist State. John Lennon sings about the peace humans will experience after the change in his work “Imagine.” The music group Northlane sings about the influence of society with a more negative connotation in their song “Singularity.”

By far the author with the most to say about the influence of society and individualism is Nietzsche in *Twilight of the Idols*. Looking closer into Nietzsche's arguments reveals a more political approach to individualism. He defines freedom as, “...the will to self-responsibility.” In essence, making up your own mind free from outside opinion. The musical group Lit with their song “My Own Worst Enemy” provides a good example of personal choice regardless of public decency. At least now we have a better definition of our question: How much of an influence does society have in an individual's life and does it make a difference in his/her choices? Nietzsche also suggests that our apparent viewpoint of the world is not really the true world and by extension our supposed view of conflict between ourselves and society may not actually exist. A short poem by the Moody Blues is provided as an illustration of illusion.

*The Descent of Man* by Charles Darwin also presents a remarkably political approach to society and even gives hints of predestination. Of course, it all starts with sexual selection which is why I choose the Bloodhound Gang song “The Bad Touch.” Throughout the two volumes, Darwin justifies his reasoning for the characteristics of animal species through natural selection. The unfortunate issue with this approach is the lack of predictability for the future of a species. A chaotic and emergent phenomenon such as natural selection is impossible to study without knowing the conditions of the surroundings. Evolution presents as more of a retroactive justification of current evidence which works just fine for science but provides little for practical philosophy. For example, his discussion of the moral sense of humans only explains how a particular trait of humans could have arisen as a consequence of natural selection. The only clue that Darwin gives for his insight into the opposing nature of society and individuals is, “As all men desire their own happiness... as happiness is an essential part of the general good, the greatest-happiness principle indirectly serves as a nearly safe standard of right and wrong.” So according to Darwin, the question is moot anyway. The choices of past individuals have irreversibly modified our own wants aligning them with those of the society as a whole. The band Flobots discusses a thought experiment of an individual who progresses to possibly tyrannical global domination from the simplest of curiosities. In the end, could such a series of events happen without at least tacit approval of society?

Society and the individual is practically a false dichotomy. Marx believes we are too confounded by society to untangle ourselves so why fight it. Nietzsche doesn't like the influence of other upon one's will but he might not agree that such an influence even exists or matters.

Darwin suggests that society has been ingrained into our decision making process through selection and is already without opposition. Despite their varied approaches, in practice one thing can be said about individualism: We are all in this together as individuals. The only choice we really have is to accept it. And even that is under influence.

The presentation can be accessed at: [http://prezi.com/9aexppwcn\\_6o/?utm\\_campaign=share&utm\\_medium=copy](http://prezi.com/9aexppwcn_6o/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy)

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