



THE CROWD

is

UNTRUTH



SØREN KIERKEGAARD

1846–1847

On the Dedication to “That Single Individual”

Originally written in Danish, 1846–1847

First published posthumously in 1859



*From Synspunktet for min Forfatter-Virksomhed
(The Point of View for My Work as an Author)*

*Translated and formatted with help from Claude
from the critical text at
Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*



“Only one reaches the goal.”

— 1 CORINTHIANS 9:24

ON THE DEDICATION TO “THAT SINGLE INDIVIDUAL”



This, now considerably revised and expanded, was written to accompany the dedication to “that single individual” found in Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits, Copenhagen, Spring 1847.

MY DEAR READER, receive this dedication. It is offered as if blindfolded, and therefore undisturbed by any worldly consideration, in complete sincerity.

Who you are, I do not know. Where you are, I do not know. What your name is, I do not know. Yet you are my hope, my joy, my pride; in my unknowing, my honour.

It comforts me that the right occasion now exists for you: that which I have honestly striven for during my labour and within it. For if it ever became worldly fashion to read what I write, or even to pretend one had read it in hopes of gaining some advantage thereby, that would not be the right occasion. On the contrary, misunderstanding would have triumphed, and it would have deceived me too, had I not striven to prevent such a thing from happening.

* * *

This is, in part, a possible transformation within me (something I myself even wish for), essentially a disposition of soul and mind that does not claim to produce change by being *more* than change, and therefore produces nothing less than change: it is rather an admission. And in part, it is a thoroughly considered view of “life,” of “the truth,” and of “the way.”

There is one view of life which holds that where the crowd gathers, there too is truth: that truth itself needs the crowd on its side.

There is another view of life which holds that wherever the crowd gathers, there is untruth. To carry this thought to its furthest extreme: even if every individual possessed the truth privately, in stillness, yet if they came together as a crowd (such that “the crowd” assumed any decisive, voting, clamorous, audible significance), untruth would instantly be present.

* * *

For “the crowd” is untruth.

Eternally, divinely, in the Christian sense, the Apostle Paul’s words hold true: “only one reaches the goal,” not by way of comparison, for in comparison “the others” are still present.

This means: everyone can be that one, with God’s help; but only one reaches the goal.

This means: everyone should deal cautiously with “the others,” and speak essentially only with God and with oneself, for only one reaches the goal.

This means: the human being is akin to the divine, or rather, to be human is to be akin to divinity.

The worldly, temporal, busy, socially-minded person says: “How unreasonable that only one should reach the goal! It is far more likely that several together might reach it; and if we become many, it becomes more

certain and easier for each.”

Indeed, this is far more probable. And it is true regarding all earthly and sensory goals. It becomes the only truth if allowed to prevail, for this view abolishes both God and the eternal, abolishes humanity’s kinship with divinity. It abolishes this kinship or transforms it into a fable, setting in its place the modern notion (which is really the old pagan one): that to be human is merely to belong, as a specimen, to a rational species, so that the species, the race, stands higher than the individual, and there are only specimens, not individuals.

But the eternal, which vaults high above the temporal, quiet as the night sky; and God in heaven, who from that exalted state of bliss looks out, without the slightest dizziness, over these innumerable millions and knows each single individual; He, the great Examiner, says: *only one reaches the goal*.

That is to say: everyone can reach it, and everyone ought to become this one, each by oneself; but only one reaches the goal.

Therefore, wherever the crowd gathers, or where decisive importance is attached to the fact that there is a crowd, no one is working, living, or striving for the highest end, only for this or that earthly purpose. For the eternal, the decisive, can only be pursued where there is one. And to become this one (which everyone can do) is to will that God should help you.

“The crowd” is untruth.

* * *

A crowd (not this particular crowd or that, not one living now or long dead, not a crowd of the lowly or of nobles, of rich or poor), but a crowd *in its very concept*, is untruth.

For a crowd either renders the individual wholly without conscience and without responsibility, or it weakens responsibility by reducing it to a mere fraction of his choice.

Consider: not a single soldier dared lay a hand on Caius Marius. This was the truth. But give three or four women the consciousness of being a crowd, with some vague hope that no one could definitively say who did it or who began it, and they would have the courage. What untruth!

The first untruth is that “the crowd” is credited with doing what in fact only a single individual within it does, or what each individual separately does. For a crowd is an abstraction; it has no hands. Each individual, on the other hand, ordinarily has two hands. When a single individual lays those two hands on Caius Marius, they are *his* two hands, not his neighbour’s, still less the crowd’s, which has no hands at all.

The second untruth is that the crowd supposedly had “the courage” for it. Never at any time has even the most cowardly individual been so cowardly as the crowd always is. For every individual who flees into the crowd, thereby fleeing in cowardice from being a single individual (from either having the courage to lay hands on Caius Marius, or the courage to admit he lacks it), contributes his portion of cowardice to “the cowardice” that is the crowd.

* * *

Take the highest example. Think of Christ, and the whole human race, all the human beings who have ever been born and ever will be. The situation is this: a single individual, alone, in solitary surroundings, face to face with Him. As an individual, he steps forward and spits upon Him.

No such human being has ever been born, nor ever will be, who would have the courage, or the impudence, to do this.

This is the truth.

But remaining in a crowd, they had the courage for it.

What frightening untruth!



The crowd is untruth.

Therefore no one has more contempt for what it means to be human than those who make it their profession to lead the crowd. Let an individual human being approach such a person: what does he care? That is far too small a thing; he proudly sends him away; there must be at least a hundred.

But if there are thousands, then he bends before the crowd, he bows and scrapes.

What untruth!

No; when there is a single human being, one should express the truth by respecting what it means to be human. And if perhaps, as people cruelly say, it were a poor, needy human being, one should especially invite him into the best room, and if one has different tones of voice, one should use the kindest and friendliest.

That is the truth.

When, on the other hand, there is an assembly of thousands or more, and “the truth” is to be put to a vote, one should, reverently (or if one prefers, silently repeating the prayer from the Our Father, “deliver us from evil”), one should reverently declare that a crowd, as the final authority in ethical and religious matters, is untruth. Whereas it is eternally true that everyone can be the one.

This is the truth.

The crowd is untruth.

This is why Christ was crucified. Though He addressed Himself to all, He would not deal with the crowd. He would not in any way let a crowd come to His aid. In this respect He absolutely pushed away, would not found a party, would not permit voting, but would be what He was: the Truth, which relates itself to the single individual.

Therefore everyone who truly wishes to serve the truth is, by that very fact, in one way or another a martyr. If it were possible for a human being still in his mother's womb to form the resolve to serve "the truth" in truth, he would already be, by that very fact, a martyr (whatever form his martyrdom might take), even while still in the womb.

For to win over a crowd is not so great an art. One needs only some talent, a certain dose of untruth, and a passing acquaintance with human passions.

But no witness for the truth (and alas, every human being, you and I, should be one) dares have dealings with crowds.

The witness for the truth (who naturally has nothing to do with politics, and is careful above all not to be confused with a politician) has this as his reverent task: to deal with all, if possible, but always *individually*; to speak with each person privately, in the streets and lanes; to break up the crowd, or to address it not in order to form a crowd, but so that one or another might go home from the assembly and become a single individual.

"The crowd," on the other hand, when treated as the final authority regarding "the truth," its verdict taken as *the* verdict: this the witness for truth abhors more than a virtuous young woman abhors the dance hall. And those who address the crowd as the ultimate arbiter, he regards as

instruments of untruth.

For let me repeat: what has validity in politics and similar domains (sometimes fully, sometimes partially) becomes untruth when transferred to intellectual, spiritual, and religious matters.

And at the risk of excessive caution, I add just this: by “truth” I always mean “eternal truth.” Politics and the like have nothing to do with eternal truth. A politics that, in the genuine sense of eternal truth, seriously attempted to bring eternal truth into practical life would in the same instant prove itself to be, in the highest degree, the most impolitic thing imaginable.

* * *

The crowd is untruth.

And I could weep, or at least learn to long for eternity, whenever I consider our age’s misery, even compared with the ancient world’s greatest woes. The daily press and anonymity make our era more insane still, aided by “the public,” which is really an abstraction claiming to be the final authority on “the truth,” whereas assemblies actually making such claims hardly even exist.

That an anonymous person, aided by the press, can day after day say whatever he pleases (even regarding intellectual, ethical, and religious matters), things he might never have the courage to say personally in any actual situation; that every time he opens his maw (one cannot call it a mouth) he can at once address thousands upon thousands; that he can get ten thousand times ten thousand to repeat after him, and no one is held accountable!

In ancient times, the relatively unaccountable crowd held power. But now we have something absolutely unaccountable: *No One*; an anonymous author, an anonymous Public, sometimes even anonymous subscribers;

therefore: *No One*.

No One!

God in heaven! And such states even call themselves Christian!

One cannot claim that with the press's help "the truth" can overtake lies and error. You who say this, ask yourself: Do you dare claim that human beings, in crowds, are as quick to reach for truth (which is not always palatable) as for untruth, which is always deliciously prepared? Especially when grasping truth must be combined with admitting one has been deceived!

Do you dare claim that "the truth" is as quickly understood as untruth, which requires no prior knowledge, no schooling, no discipline, no abstinence, no self-denial, no honest self-examination, no patient labour?

No. "The truth," which also abhors that untruth whose sole aim is its own proliferation, is not so swift-footed.

First, it cannot operate through the fantastical, which is untruth. Its communicator is only a single individual.

Second, its communication relates itself in turn to the single individual. For in this view of life, the single individual *is* precisely the truth.

Truth can neither be communicated nor received except as if before the eyes of God, with God's help, with God as the mediating presence, for He *is* the truth.

It can therefore only be communicated by and received by "the single individual," which, for that matter, every living person could be. The defining characteristic is truth's contrast with the abstract, the fantastical, the impersonal ("the crowd," "the public"), which excludes God as the mediating presence (for the personal God cannot mediate an impersonal rela-

tion), and thereby excludes truth itself, since God is truth and its mediator.

* * *

To honour every individual human being, unconditionally every human being: that is truth, and is to fear God and to love one's neighbour.

But to recognise "the crowd," in ethical-religious terms, as the final authority on "the truth," that is to deny God, and it cannot possibly be to love one's neighbour.

"The neighbour" is the absolutely true expression of human equality. If everyone truly loved his neighbour as himself, perfect human equality would be unconditionally attained. Everyone who truly loves his neighbour expresses unconditional human equality. Everyone who genuinely recognises (even if, like me, he admits his efforts are weak and imperfect) that the task is to love one's neighbour, also recognises what human equality is.

But never have I read in Holy Scripture this command: *You shall love the crowd.*

Still less: *You shall, in ethical-religious terms, recognise in the crowd the final authority on "the truth."*

It is clear that to love one's neighbour is self-denial. To love the crowd, or to pretend to love it, to make it the final authority on "the truth": that is the path to temporal power, the path to every worldly advantage.

Yet it is untruth.

For the crowd is untruth.

* * *

But whoever acknowledges this view (which is seldom proclaimed, for it often happens that someone believes the crowd is in untruth, yet thinks everything is fine once the crowd accepts his opinion *en masse*) admits to himself that he is weak and powerless.

How could a single individual stand against the many who have the power?

And he certainly could not wish to win the crowd to his side in order to advance the view that the crowd, as ethical-religious authority, is untruth; that would be to mock himself.

But although this view from the outset admits weakness and powerlessness, and therefore seems so uninviting, and is therefore so seldom heard, it has this virtue: it is fair. It offends no one, not a single person. It makes no distinctions among human beings, not a single one.

A crowd is indeed composed of single individuals. It must therefore be within everyone's power to become what he is: a single individual. No one is prevented from being a single individual; no one, unless he prevents himself by becoming many.

To become a crowd, to gather a crowd around oneself, is on the contrary to make distinctions in life. Even the most well-meaning person who speaks of this can easily offend a single individual.

But it is the crowd that possesses power, influence, reputation, and dominion; this too is life's distinction, which tyrannically overlooks the single individual as weak and powerless, and in temporal-worldly terms overlooks the eternal truth:

The Single Individual.



A Note by the Author

The reader will recall that this text (whose opening reflects the atmosphere of that moment when I voluntarily exposed myself to the brutality of literary vulgarity) was originally written in 1846, though later revised and considerably expanded.

Existence, almighty as it is, has since then shed light on the proposition that the crowd, seen in ethical-religious terms as the final authority, is untruth.

Truly, this serves me well. It has helped me understand myself more clearly. For now I shall be understood quite differently than I was then, when my weak, solitary voice was heard as a ridiculous exaggeration, whereas now it can scarcely be heard at all above existence's own loud voice, which proclaims the same thing.





Mængden er Usandheden

Copenhagen, 1846–1847