

St Andrew Holborn Friday Forum

Abigail Doggett:

How to be myself but not alone.

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My career at the bar was very isolating. But I wasn't unduly troubled by it because I took it as the price to pay for independence. At the time, I felt that I was achieving greater self-definition. Financial independence alone enabled me to choose where I lived, and how I spent what –admittedly precious little- time I had left when I wasn't working. It enabled me to pursue my love of history, theatre, ancient churches, living in and walking around the city, and reading avidly. I was very sad that I had so few daily companions, but I was grateful to discover what I enjoyed. And, I thought it was inevitable that someone like me wouldn't fit easily, that is, certainly into the typical circles from which I had come. Now, whilst it was good for me to discover more of who I was, or am, it wasn't good for me to stay isolated in that. In many other areas, I was shutting down. Or even if not shutting down, I wasn't being fully and richly myself.

Let us cast our minds back to past years in which behaviour and societal norms were far more prescribed. There are few, I imagine, who would relish going back to such times; times in which the likes of Lady Ludlow denied the propriety of education for the working classes, in which it was not seen fit for women to be nurses, let alone doctors, barristers, pilots and deep sea divers, or in which a man had to sign up to the Church of England just to receive a BA at Oxford.

All of us are probably very glad, and rightly so, that such prescription has been relaxed. The idea of the accident of birth determining one's future is not an idea we warmly entertain. Isolation and loneliness may not have been an option - Society made your life its business, after all - Yet, if this is the antidote to being alone, few would wish to return to such a community.

So, let's move on to the much fought for rights of the individual. The freedoms which are now enjoyed openly, and by right, would have been unthinkable previously. There is no doubt that we have the potential for far greater self-determination than any of our forebears. In terms of cost, we have touched already on one cost of this freedom; namely,

our isolation from one another. And, we will come back to this towards the end of this talk. But, first, I want to look at whether we have even achieved as rich and beneficial an individual existence, as our rhetoric might claim or our longings might hope for. It is one thing to pay a high price for a benefit we actually secure; it is quite another to pay the price and not even obtain any gain. Have we, perhaps, managed to isolate ourselves and not become correspondingly more individual in the process? Robert Pippin puts it like this:

“modernity promised us a culture of unintimidated, curious, rational, self-reliant individuals, and it produced a herd society, a race of anxious, timid, conformist ‘sheep’, and a culture of utter banality”

Another observer described a man he knew as: “a self made man.... The living proof of the horrors of unskilled labour.”

Where once rigid social structure lay, there is now a vacuum. Into it, pours every kind of mass media, mass cultural and mass psychological pressure under the sun. We are, in fact, rudderless; looking round anxiously for some kind of steer on how we should be and who we should be. The steer is all too often provided by advertising, magazines, newspapers, radio programmes and films. That’s one obvious way in which we diminish any hope for true individuality.

But it was for slightly different reasons that I found the chance to choose my life for myself a pressured business. Not, in fact, because I subscribe to Heat and seek to emulate Victoria Beckham in all she does (Just to be clear – I don’t do either of those things!). But because, almost the more potential I have to be something successful, the more I want it to be meaningful, substantial and significant. It’s not enough to get by. Had I lived hundreds of years ago, I wouldn’t have had the luxury of making so many choices. Just surviving life, with enough food and health to see out each day, might have meant far more than it does today. But, now, I want to be sure my chosen life means something more. That pressure to mean something more has interesting consequences for the way in which I think about individuality, as we will see in a moment.

If a straw poll were to be taken on the streets today, we probably wouldn’t be surprised by how few are enjoying the fruits of the age of individual freedom; how many feel buffeted by pressure and compulsion, and a sense of not being all that they *should* be, if they are to be defined a success.

As we did a couple of weeks ago, let's go back to some philosophical roots. I'm not claiming that philosophy is the only cause of our present predicament, but I have certainly found it to be a helpful illuminator. I mentioned a fortnight ago how many an ancient philosopher was searching for a single, perfect ideal; the One; the First Principle. That was a search which necessarily labelled plurality, variety and particularity as inferior. A search which did not consider earthly entities of value for their own sake, but which looked to extract from them only the aspects they contained from which one could reason backwards to a single ideal of Perfection. All other aspects were discarded as inferior. At its height, the body itself was entirely despised for that reason.

Such an approach, ironically, continues. We are still looking for the definitive way to be beautiful, the definitive method for being liked and the definitive definition of success. We still do not easily embrace variety and particularity. We tolerate it, but that is not the same as *validating* it *in* its variety. Toleration has, unfortunately, come to mean indifference, which permits 'the other' to be different - if they so wish, but, at the same time, dismisses it as irrelevant for my life. Paradoxically, the more pressured I am about making sure my life means something, the more I become involved in an anxious search for the definitive way to live a successful life. My anxiety is, ironically, both, individualistic - focussing as it does on me, and dismissive of variety - searching for the definitive way to be.

Worse still: In searching for the definitive road to happiness and success, we often reduce 'others' to our agenda. We very easily view 'the other' – whether people, things or places - through the filter of how they, or it, might serve my aim of being more successful, more beautiful, more loved – in essence, my aim of being better. It's a modern day version of what ancient philosophers were doing long ago. We are looking to extract from others whatever in them will serve the goal of ideal perfection in my life, discarding and ignoring the rest of their being. Colin Gunton called this 'the monism of the finite individual'. 'The other is or becomes subordinate or instrumental to the I or the individual.'

The problem is that this approach doesn't work, and, even if we persist in the illusion that it is working, it is intensely dissatisfying. Other people and, even other things and places, do not have their existence to fulfil a function in my life. That is made abundantly clear through the many ways in which they do not conform to the needs of my life and they disappoint in the provision of what I need.

It is odd, and, yet, significant, that the times in which I have been most enriched by my interaction with 'the other' – be it another person, place or thing – is when it has been something fully other, more than what I expected, independent of my agenda, free from functionality, behaving autonomously, and surprising me. To give a very mundane example: I remember once thinking, 'I know, I need to work, so I will get some lunch and go and sit in the concert recital happening at St Andrew's. The music will be good background music which will make the working pleasant, and the food can be consumed whilst I read and write, thereby saving time, and meaning I can carry on.' Needless to say, I was not capable of concentrating properly on my reading, whilst trying to shovel hot pasta into my mouth, with some semblance of enjoyment, and simultaneously listening to music. But what I noticed the most was that the concert recital was so much more than background music. I had approached it as fulfilling a function in my life, fitted to my predetermined agenda. Yet, what confronted me was a fascinating Polish violinist, much beloved and feted by Nigel Kennedy, who was memorising to watch, let alone listen to. She had a life, a history and a career all of her own, set out on a handout, and demonstrated as she performed, both of which were utterly absorbing. That was totally apart from her slotting into a defined role in my life, and it was so enriching and refreshing.

For those of you who were present at my last talk, in which I used a similar example, it is worth pointing out that my concern, this time, is not so much with how this example denies my finite limitations, but with how it denies the individuality – the otherness- of my neighbour. Might embracing a world in which 'the other' has an existence, which is not viewed solely through the filter of my life's programme, be a more enriching, varied and satisfying place?

So, we have looked at how being set free to be individual hasn't resulted in us being individual. We have also considered how our quest for individuality can result in us ignoring the individuality, or otherness, of those around us. And we have noted the high price of isolation that we pay in all this. It's probably no coincidence that increasing isolation often accompanies the mindset that sees all others solely through the filter of our own life's agenda.

I don't know if you are aware but the first draft of John Donne's work Meditation XVII has been uncovered in Private Eye this week. Donne is sitting looking perplexed at the manuscript in front of him on which he has written, 'No man is an island....er, except the Isle of Man.'

Well, no man is an island – but some of us are pretty long peninsulas.

Is there a way forward? I want to suggest that we thrive as human beings by way of ‘related particularity’. What is related particularity?

It’s first of all ‘related’ because it involves an acceptance of, and increasing appreciation of, our relatedness to ‘the other’ –people, places and things – surrounding us. I spoke last time on the frustration involved when we try to ignore our finitude. There is a corresponding frustration involved in trying to ignore our relatedness to all that surrounds us. Putting it bluntly, like it or not, we are related because of our existence in a space – time universe. For me to get from A to B, I will pass through many other places (which do not exist solely for me to pass through them), and I will be dependent on many others to help me get from A to B (others who do not exist solely to serve the function of getting me from A to B). I can persist in denying that reality, or I can accept it. If I were to accept it, I would be better placed to appreciate the countless opportunities that present themselves to interact with other people, places and things as I travel through space in time. The enriching, varied and refreshing interaction with ‘the other’ can take place even in the context of a train delay. It is not dependent on the fulfilment of my predetermined agenda, and can take place any time and anywhere.

Then, ‘related particularity’ is, secondly, the belief that this relatedness, when functioning well and correctly, will actually bring out more and more the particular in each of us. It is not just that our lives are rendered more satisfying and refreshing through the variety of our interaction with ‘the other’. Paradoxically, it is in that context that we often become more ourselves - not by becoming like others, but by interacting with others as ourselves.

I struggle to accept this last strand of the argument. My mind- set is one which easily believes that the only way I can be truly myself, and be sure that I can explore what I enjoy, is in freedom from others. Living in my peninsula, admittedly not entirely detached from the world around, but choosing when, where and how I might make a foray out. I have known, as I am sure we all have, many interactions which have squashed me, and not given space for who I am. Such interactions only serve to reinforce my original mindset.

Yet, I know too that, ultimately, not only can I not escape others, but, actually, if I pursue a route of isolated independence, I dwindle. I become less. Isolation is not only dissatisfying, it is lessening.

Interestingly, Plotinus (one of those ancient philosophers) comes to his description of the One. His One is utterly alone, utterly withdrawn into Himself, since the One cannot look on anything less than Himself. Plotinus says, “He is borne...to the inmost of Himself..” “inclining towards something outside of Himself, He would destroy the identity of His being...” “He pre-eminently is because He holds firmly towards Himself, looking towards Himself”. In Plotinus’ world view, we human beings likewise achieve perfection when we take no pleasure in the things of this earth, and pass utterly alone, into the Alone.

The Trinity stands in stark contrast to Plotinus’ world view. God is One. As One, He holds together all things in unity, but He does so in no simple monotheistic manner. For God is Three in One. Within God himself, there are three distinct persons, who have existed in difference, relatedness and wonderful community for all time. Now if such a God said, “Let us make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness”, if such a God was responsible for the original creation of this world, this would have something quite profound to say about us. It would tell us a great deal about what it means to be fully human, and how it is that we are to thrive.

In fact, the Trinity does just that. It points to the rightness and importance of being distinct. It tells us of the value and legitimacy of being particular. Yet, significantly, it demonstrates how your true self is worked out in the context of relatedness. How interaction with and affirmation of the other, as fully other, is what makes us really ourselves.

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