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Applying Early Existential Critiques to Contemporary Themes in American Culture

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APPYLING EARLY EXISTENTIAL CRITIQUES TO CONTEMPORARY THEMES IN AMERICAN CULTURE
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Charles Taylor, Carl Elliot, Alexis De Tocqueville, and Lionel Trilling have presented and critically analyzed a number of ideals that animate currents in contemporary American Culture, which include authenticity, sincerity, pluralism, subjectivism, and self-actualization, but these ideals do not harmoniously coexist; rather, they inevitably conflict. These notions have been realized in a way that is unique in their current understandings. Though there is the appearance of some homogeneity amongst these themes, they inevitably clash and contain internal tensions. The philosophers Kierkegaard and Nietzsche respond to many of the ideas that underlie these modern notions. Though differing in degrees, these critiques anticipate many of the problems that have arisen within discussion of contemporary culture. The themes that Taylor, Elliot, De Tocqueville, and Trilling outline are not limited to those notions that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche criticized. Rather, some cultural attitudes find their lineage in their respective philosophies. Both the historical tradition behind, and the contemporary definitions of these themes, need to be understood in order to explain the fragmented nature of contemporary culture. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche offer a historical perspective to the definitions given by Taylor, Elliot, and Trilling. Understanding the multifarious and contradictory foundations of contemporary culture is essential to demonstrating the potential paradox of realizing a consistent language of contemporary culture, and may include the inability to uphold these themes.

Problems with Individuality in American Culture
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This paper will deal with the concept of individuality as a moral ideal and how it affects our perception of the actualization of the self. We will trace this idea out as it developed in Western Europe and into its full idealization in contemporary American culture.

The idea of individuality as a moral idea is so common to us in American culture that it is hard to imagine any other outlook on life. Our everyday talk bears the mark of an individualistic culture, and it is hard if not impossible to break out of it. We will return to these ideas more specifically later, but want to point out how distinct the difference is between how we think now and how we thought before. It seems foreign to say anything else but that we make our *own* decisions, steer our *own* course in life, and choose our *own* moral ideals. This is very different than the way morality was talked about, especially during the long period of medieval Christian Europe. The moral self was defined by its relationship to God and the church; something external. Moral truths did not come from within; they were told to you from the outside. You knew exactly what you had to do to be a fully actualized person; you were told so by an outside force. This is just a synopsis of the changes that took place in Western culture and we will now turn to them more specifically.

Before the Shift to Individuality

According to Trilling and Taylor there was a shift in the moral language and moral ideas in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries. The rise of Protestantism, the French revolution, and the enlightenment in general shifted authority to the populous. Thinkers like Rousseau and Kant advanced the cause of individuality in terms by giving moral rational power to every individual rather limiting it to the hierarchy, whether it is the King, the Aristocracy or God.

Traditionally attitudes of identity were derived from hierarchical relationships, which were based in inequality. The differences between socio-economic classes, between genders, between races, and between nation identities defined these inequalities. These descriptions told you who you were, and defined the rules by which you lived your life. You knew who you were and what your place in society was. You knew what you had to do to be a fully actualized person. Although one might not have been happy with their place in society, one knew what that place was supposed to be. Identity was defined by external forces and for the most part one knew what these external forces were.

From a culture that rested on inequality came the idea of honor and rising above oneself. Because someone could be inherently better or worse than someone else, it was important that one lived up to the ideals of what they were. Even the dynamic of the hero

myth has changed in Western culture. The traditional sense of hero was someone who was better than everyone else, somebody to look up to as a model, even if one could not attain that same level of heroics. A hero was doing something that not everyone was capable of. They lived in their own class. A hero in the modern sense is somebody who does something that we may all have done in our finest moments.

This system of honor and heroics was removed by progressive philosophies and revolutions which removed the traditional societal structures. The traditional notion of honor, resting on the previous inequalities, was replaced with the idea of universal dignity that is granted to all rational human beings. This shift took away the exalted status of the hero and the moral idealization that went with it. The hero was the actualization of a human being, and because of the structure of the society at that time not everybody could be a hero.

The real shift towards a moral culture of individuality comes from the shift in power from the Church and the State to the individual. The sorts of events that are represented by the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution are important for understanding why the shift occurred at all. As mentioned before political and moral rights were given to the individual by the State and the Church. The individual was defined by the sorts of rules that these two groups decided on. For a large period of time in many nations these two entities were one and the same. The two cultural changes represented by the Reformation and the French Revolution mirrored the change happening in the individual. People, granted white men, had new political rights and power that they did not have before. They were given control over their rights in way they did not have before.

Not only were political powers relegated to the individual with the new sense of egalitarian rights, but so were moral decisions. Moral ideas that had once been taken from an external source, as in the Church and God, started to come from within. With the old external looking system there was always the layout of what needed to be done to be an actualized person: following religious tenets, getting right with God, fulfilling your place in society. This direction was lost when power was given to the individual. Self-discovery than became the important goal for self-actualization. Finding oneself began to replace finding God. At the very least God was to be found internally and personally rather than externally and impersonally. Morality began to have a personal and individualistic tone to it.

Because of this shift away from the external and to the internal, moral language started to change. The 18th century gave us the idea that we have a moral sense of what is right and wrong, anchored in our feelings, not in rational calculations. The idea of a personal moral language leads to the idea of authenticity. There was now even more moral weight to the idea of being in touch with our feelings and with our core selves. The essence of what it means to be human comes from within, and so if one was to be an actualized person one must be authentic and true to oneself.

Alexis De Tocqueville: The Beginnings of a New Nation
Connecting the discussion of individuality to contemporary values demands an account of the values of early Americans. One writer who noted the novelty of American values was Alexis De Tocqueville; in his classic work Democracy in America. De Tocqueville believed American individuality was best reflected in political discourse.

There is an argument to be made that many in the United States see their individuality as deeply rooted in the democratic state. Democracy is seen as not only protecting the individual and their ability to act freely but also as serving to represent the individual desires of its citizens. Political action is often explained in terms of an expression of one's individuality. Furthermore, we as Americans often treat our negative rights as sacrosanct. Tocqueville argued that individualism had the effect of drawing a person out of public life, where their private values and opinions could be created within the context of their family. Tocqueville also notes the novelty of individualism. Individualism is contrasted with the more traditional term "selfishness," but one was held up as a virtue and the other a vice. So, there are two important shifts which Tocqueville points out. First there is the notion that democracy in America has somehow caused people to draw away from public life and form their own worldviews. The second shift is the distinguishing between selfishness and individualism.

The Existentialists

It is important to note a movement which was occurring in Europe because it anticipates many of the problems confronted by contemporary Western culture. The existential movement helped further turn the focus to the individual. These philosophers were reacting to systematic philosophies of people like Kant and Hegel whom they thought lost sight of the individual in their grand systematizing. The existentialists believed the individuality of a person was severely compromised by accepting disinterested and cold calculations about the world and humanities place in it. Philosophy, prior to the existentialists was based in the belief that human reason was capable of unraveling many of the greatest mysteries which confronted humanity. Philosophy was performed devoid of emotion and personal interests. The existentialists thought this dehumanized the work of the philosopher, and compromised its impact. However, they were also wary of individualism and noted its potential negative consequences.

Two of the most significant contributors to early existentialism were Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche both were concerned with how to maintain a notion of individuality while avoiding some of the potential contradictions that might arise out of individualism. They also foresaw the problems that a culture of individuality would have and gave possible solutions to get around these crises. Before we look at there individual answers it is important to continue to lay out the problem.

Individuality in America

With the advent of a democracy and the idea of equality amongst all people, along with the maturation of ideas from the Revolutions and Reformations in Europe, America became an Individualistic culture. We have the idea that we are all equal in making our decisions, no one can tell us what to do, we can only agree on what we should do. Not only do we all have the ability to make our own moral choices we must respect the choices of others around us.

This sense of individuality and only needing to depend on ourselves for moral choices started to lead to a new way of talking about morality. Phrases such as "Be true to yourself", "Be who you are", etc have taken on a very strong moral weight. Not only is morality taken from the inner being as if you can just roll your eyes into the back of your

head and look around for what you should do, but the fully actualized person must find out what they are to do by looking inward.

Only the individual as an individual can define what it means to be fully actualized, because that is where moral decisions are now made. This new conception of morality, understood as the quest to be an actualized person, had brought with it a host of potential problems. When our language concerning individuality is examined it becomes clear that there is little consistency, and these results in moral confusion.

First of all what do we even mean by looking into the "self?" What is there that we are referring to? Though this is part of a greater philosophical problem, We will merely suggest the best working definition for the self: If one is to look inward and find a self, it must be something that is there and does not change, or at least changes slow enough that we can keep track of it.

This means that we must talk about a self that actually exists; we must presume that it is there. That precludes us from using a common conception of a person as someone who is but an actor in different social situations, or a collection of masks that they where depending on what they want to show. We must talk about the self as something that has a personality that we can identify over time, if we are to refer to with any talk of moral ideals.

Secondly we have the problem of how we get access to this self, and how we express it to others. Since we do not have direct access to each others selves we must discover them through language and behavior. The only way I can know anything about you or you can know anything about me is through our shared language and behavior. This creates a problem then for the expression of self.

If I feel that I am a person who is very charismatic and I define myself in some way or another by this trait, then I may have a problem. The problem is that I alone do not get to decide if I am charismatic or not. That is something that others have to help me with. Being charismatic involves winning people over and making friends and for this to happen I must rely on others. So we may have a problem being a fully actualized person, something that is supposed to be defined only inwardly, but now is completely reliant on others.

This seems to be the case for nearly any self identity issue. If we can only define ourselves with socially defined constructs, how are we reliant on ourselves at all? It seems that we are completely reliant on others for our identities, completely opposite of what it should be. This problem has become even more complicated in the last 50 years with the discovery of drugs and surgeries that can control who we are.

Going back to the charismatic example; what happens if I feel like I am a charismatic person but I just freeze up every time I am around people because I have anxiety? Before this might be a real problem with any view of actualization, but now we just have to take a drug for it. We can change the way we are, actually alter who we are by taking drugs. But when we do this, when we completely change our personalities to line up better with whom we think we should be; are we even talking about the same person? If we can only be defined to each other by our behaviors what happens when all that changes. Is that even the same person anymore, or somebody else who just happens to occupy the same body? It is very hard to say.

Our individualistic talk seems fraught with problems. These tensions seem inherent with the way we talk and the way we assign ourselves within a culture. We want

on one hand to be able to say that we are only reliant on ourselves for our decisions, that we are the final decision makers. It seems thought that this is not the case; we are completely reliant on the society around us for even a background to judge ourselves against. There is no moral talk, no evaluation outside of the context of a society.

In order for us to look inward and to find ourselves it seems like there must be some stable core to look at. If we are to be unique individuals who are expressed in unique ways then it seems there must be some stable "self". But what happens now when we don't like the self we are given, and not only that we can change everything about it? Is there anything to look towards anymore, when everything there can seem to be changed with enough operations or pills? It sure seems that there is nothing we can do to support the claims of unique individuality without some sort of external support.

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche

We believe and propose that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche not only saw the problems that would come from an individualistic culture, but have viable solutions to countering the problems that come with it. Neither philosopher wants to go back to the individual defined completely by an external system, nor do they think that such an answer tells us totally what we are as human beings. What each does do though is give us a possible answer that keeps our uniqueness and individuality but grounds it something so that it may have meaning. We will try to express each grounding briefly.

Kierkegaard gives the self grounding in God. He sets up a relational view of the self to a divine power that is in its entirety incomprehensible. This is a relationship that is different than the traditional relationship to God that the church had described in the past. The traditional relationship was that of one to a set of rules and laws. One was defined by these rules and laws and knew exactly what one had to do to become a good person. The person was defined externally by a set of laws. Nothing like this really exists for Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard's relationship to God is one that is completely subjective and personal. Not only that but it seems to be one that cannot even be expressed in language. We cannot now how this relationship completely works out for every person, and may not even know if somebody is in this relationship.

A contemporary interpretation of this view may go something like so. The self is an amalgamation between ones culture and their subjective relationship to God. Culture gives us common footing with each other and the ability relate. Our uniqueness and morality though comes from our subjective relationship with God. This relationship is a relationship to a paradox, to the infinite, and because of that can not be expressed in the terms of the culture. We have grounding for our unique selves through God, but also are dependent on our culture for context.

Nietzsche wanted to hold onto the idea of individuality but also did not deny what sort of influence that culture plays on us. Nietzsche said that we are fully dependent on our cultures and they define who we are and in way what we can become. But the tools that our culture uses to define us are the same tools that we can use to redefine and reinterpret it.

For Nietzsche uniqueness comes from how we creatively interpret our lives and our culture using the very tools that our culture gave us. We must identify with what life is and affirm it. To be totally free we must embrace life and creatively interpret

everything it throws at us. By doing this we have broken out and become higher types. The higher type is active and creative; it does not just take what it is given and not think about it, it turns it to its own use.

Nietzsche has given us a system that does not deny how we are defined by our culture but gives us way to get past it through creative affirmation of it. We can rise above the plodding animals just because we have this ability and help define ourselves.

We have tried to give a brief overview with the sorts of concerns that come out of a culture of individuality. Although this paper did not take the time to address these issues in great detail, I believe it gives an adequate summary of the issues which warrant further discussion. It is important that we as a culture examine the way we talk about morality and the self. Is our language consistent? Kierkegaard and Nietzsche merely suggest some potential solutions that apply to problems that have arisen in recent history, but it is likely that many would not be satisfied with the options that these two philosophers offer. Consequently we are impelled to examine our cultural attitudes toward the self and ask if we are satisfied.

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Erik Berquist is a student majoring in Philosophy, with a minor in Political Science at Minnesota State University, Mankato. He's been actively involved in the Philosophy club as both President and Vice President. During the Spring semester of 2004 Erik started a club devoted to reading and discussing the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. In Spring 2005 the first class devoted to Immanuel Kant was offered at Mankato State University, as a response to interest expressed in the topic by students. Currently Erik is preparing applications for grad school while researching for his senior thesis which will likely cover Kierkegaard's work <u>Concluding Unscientific Postscripts</u>.

Derek Skillings is a student in the Open Studies program at MSU, Mankato; he is concentrating his studies in biology, chemistry and philosophy. He is very active with research in both the biology and philosophy of departments at MSU, Mankato and the Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology. His research interests include near-shore marine communities, phylogeography, and philosophy of biology and language. He is currently applying for graduate studies in marine biology with goal of a PhD.

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Dr. Matarrese received his B.A. from University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and his PhD from Northwestern University. He joined the Philosophy department at MSU, Mankato in 2002. His philosophical interests include continental philosophy, and social/political/legal philosophy.