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The Age of the Individual: 500 Years Ago Today
Session 1: Origins of Individualism**

The Burden of Individualism

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The notion of individualism is often taken to be the distinguishing characteristic of the entire western tradition. Nowhere has the veneration of the individual been greater than in the American social, political, and economic theory and practice, where the twin pillars of democracy and capitalism rest upon a distinctive understanding of individuality. What usually goes unnoticed is that the interpretation of individuality that continues to be so important today has its roots in Reformation theology. It is, therefore, completely appropriate to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Luther's 95 Theses with a debate about individualism. It is also fitting for this discussion to be sponsored by the Center on Capitalism and Society because the fundamental issue that led Luther to post his Theses was economic. There is a direct link between this year's conference and the conference four years ago when we commemorated two hundredth anniversary of Kierkegaard's birth. The notion of individuality that Luther defines comes to fullest expression in Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel's speculative system.

Luther's entire theological vision rests on his fundamental conviction that salvation comes by divine grace rather than human works. Having begun his religious life as a devout monk, Luther eventually became disillusioned by the crass materialism of the Catholic Church. To support ecclesiastical excesses, the Church hierarchy promoted the belief that salvation could be bought. In Luther's famous thesis, "as soon as the penny jingles in the money-box, the soul flies out of purgatory." This exploitative practice directly contradicted Luther's personal experience. He was torn asunder by uncertainty and haunted by debilitating anxiety. To allay his darkest dread, he tried to gain assurance that he would be saved by fulfilling every iota of the law. However, the harder he tried, the deeper his despair became until he reached the turning point of his life. The moment of revelation that changed everything came with his new understanding of Romans 1:17 – "he shall gain life who is justified through faith." Salvation, he

came to believe, comes through God's grace and not human works – it is given not earned. Furthermore, and this is the crucial point in this context, the experience of grace is not mediated by the church universal, but is the result of the *individual's* private, personal relationship with the transcendent *individual* God. Luther rejected the hierarchical, centralized, and regulated structure of the Catholic Church, and, in terms that today's economists would understand, privatizes, decentralizes, and deregulates religion. To appreciate the far-reaching implications of this revolution, it is necessary to turn to the philosophical background of Luther's theological reformation.

The pivotal figure in the rise of western individualism is the medieval theologian William of Ockham, who is, of course, best known for his famous razor. Ockham's central contributions were developed in the debate between philosophical realism and nominalism on the seemingly arcane issue of the status of universal terms like humankind. These issues can be confusing because nominalism is close to what realism means today. For medieval realists, universals like fairness or humanity are ontologically and epistemologically antecedent to individuals, which or who exist only in and through their "participation" in universal forms or essences. For nominalists, by contrast, only individuals are real and universals are nothing more than empty names (*nom*, hence nominalism) that function as heuristic devices for organizing individuals. For realists, the group has priority over the individual, and for nominalists, individuals have priority over the group. So understood, realism anticipates socialism and communism, and nominalism anticipates democracy and capitalism.

Nominalism posed a profound threat to the medieval Catholic Church because it undercut the economy of salvation on which the Church's financial security depended. The power of the Church was the power of the keys – for the individual, salvation could only be achieved by the

individual's participation in the Church *universal* through the sacraments. Luther effectively cut out the middle man and thereby disintermediated the Church by declaring that salvation is the result of the individual's personal or individual relation to God, who was, in Ockham's terms the *Ens Singularisimus*.

While Luther found relief from his doubt and despair in the doctrine of salvation by grace, it is important to note that for many people individualism actually created considerable anxiety. With their future destiny hanging in the balance, believers sought reassurance that they would be saved. This gave rise to the protestant principle, so important for Calvinism, according to which worldly prosperity became a sign, not the cause, of redemption. Over the course of the centuries, this doctrine underwent a reversal and works came to be seen as the cause rather than the result of grace.

I would now like to skip ahead a few centuries to consider how Luther's individualism appears in Kierkegaard's existentialism. Though he never posed the issue in precisely these terms, Kierkegaard saw Hegel's speculative system as a latter-day version of medieval realism. For Hegel, individuals are constituted by their participation in an all-encompassing organic totality of which they are integral members. Kierkegaard argued that this supposedly totalizing system, which was historically realized in nineteenth-century European cultural Protestantism, early industrial society, and modern mass media, which repressed individuals by making them little more than channels of the crowd. His philosophical mission was to make individuals aware of their freedom to become themselves through their own decisions. In Sartre's appropriation of Kierkegaard, existence precedes essence. For Kierkegaard, individuality is radically temporal – each person constitutes himself or herself through his or her individual decisions. Individuals are radically free, and life involves frightful risk because there are no certain norms or knowable

rules to guide thinking and acting. Neither reason nor morality has a secure foundation and, accordingly, both include as a condition of their possibility a radical decision that is neither rational nor irrational. The recognition of the abyssal nature of freedom often leads to what Erich Fromm labeled “the flight from freedom” in which individuals identify with the crowd or to lose themselves in networks that today have become social.

These seemingly distant theological debates continue to shape our world today. As I have suggested, the distinction between realism and nominalism anticipates the contrast between socialism and capitalism. This distinction might also illuminate the arguments between Keynes and Milton Friedman, and, by extension, the differences between the so-called left and right ends of the political spectrum. Second, artificial intelligence and big data have become something like Platonic forms or essences deployed to program individuals. Ideological politicians join savvy marketers to extol the virtues of individual choice; indeed, one of the accepted maxims of our day seems to be that the more choices the better. However, choice has become less a matter of individual freedom and more a strategy to expand the market by creating desire where there is no need. Marketers do not really want consumers to be free to choose whatever they want; rather, they want consumers to choose what the marketers want them to choose. The commercialization of surveillance creates big data, which makes targeted marketing possible. The purpose of these practices is to program individuals to want what politicians and corporations want them to want.

Without denying the virtues of individuality, it is important not to overlook the burden of individualism. In an important but overlooked book entitled *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*, Alain Ehrenberg argues that the veneration of the sovereign self comes at a high price. Though analysis focuses on France, his conclusions are more widely applicable.

There is a relation between melancholia and depression: both are the unhappiness of self-consciousness heightened to the extreme, the awareness of being *only* oneself. If melancholia has the domain of the exceptional human being, then depression is the manifestation of the *democratization of the exceptional*. We live with this belief and this truth: each person should have the possibility of creating his or her own history instead of submitting to life as if it were a matter of destiny.

Finally, the West's greatest philosopher of the individual warned that individualism can become demonic. Kierkegaard defined the demonic as *Indeslutte*, which means confined, closed in, locked up, or turned in on oneself. Through an undialectical reversal, communications technologies that were supposed to connect us have turned us in on ourselves until, in Heidegger's prescient words, when everywhere people turn, they see – and I would add – hear only themselves. Social media become anti-social. In the age of the Selfie, it is important to remember as Luther and Kierkegaard have taught us that the cultivation of individuality can lead not only to human flourishing, but also to the most profound isolation and despair from which there is in Sartre's words, No Exit.