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A Letter to a Misanthropic Idiot¹

Dear Fellow Human Being,

Please don't get me wrong! I am not writing about the degree of your intelligence or cleverness. I am employing the word "idiot" in the etymological sense of the Greek word "idiot" (ἰδιώτης), which means "one's own, personal, and private". Its secondary meaning is "peculiar, separate, distinct" from which is derived "strange". Hence, I am not using idiot in the derisive sense of stupid or moron that it has come to have in English and German. I take the term's etymology to be a call for a more nuanced analysis of the human condition.

Particularly in democratic societies, humanity thinks of itself as "free" in contrast to tyrannies, autocracies, and oligarchies. The license plate from the state of New Hampshire states: "Give me liberty or give me death!" The USA is sung of as the "sweet land of liberty" for whom "our fathers died". What follows is an examination of freedom and liberty.

At least since the 1960s and the "Free Speech" Movement in Berkeley, California, in opposition to the Vietnam (or American) War, liberty has been defined in terms of the First Amendment to the US Constitution devoted to the freedoms of religion, expression, assembly, and the right to petition. Although all four of these freedoms clearly *must* have limitations, there are shrill voices that claim that any restriction of any one of these freedoms is a violation of personal liberty: "No one is going to tell me what to do." Particularly, freedom of expression has taken on a political dimension not only in government but in terms of access to the public "marketplace of ideas" in the press and on college campuses. Does the First Amendment allow for a Snake Oil Salesman with a vested financial interest in the production of the Snake Oil have as much right to podium time as the infectious disease physician at a medical briefing on a raging pandemic? Whose liberty is being protected by such "free speech"?

The notion of the free marketplace of ideas was proposed by Oliver Wendell Holmes in his Supreme Court dissent in *Abrams vs. United States* (November 10, 1919) in which he articulated more clearly the "Clear and Present Danger" test of free speech that the Supreme Court had employed in *Schenck v. United States* (March 3, 1919). Holmes' formulation in *Abrams vs. United States* has become the standard. In part Holmes wrote in defense of the competition of the marketplace for one's ideas "as the only ground" for achieving one's goals:

"Persecution for the expression of opinions seems to me perfectly logical. If you have no doubt of your premises or your power and want a certain result with all your heart you naturally express your wishes in law and sweep away all opposition ... But when men have realized that time has upset many fighting

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faiths, they may come to believe even more than they believe the very foundations of their own conduct that the ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas ... The best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market, and that truth is the only ground upon which their wishes safely can be carried out.”

However, if all we have are “opinions”, then what, if anything, is the ground for the truth to be tested in the marketplace of ideas? When the media is increasingly controlled by vested interests or what counts as victory in the marketplace of ideas is the number of followers one has on Twitter, surely there becomes ground for concern that the marketplace by no means automatically has the filters to screen out distortions and deception.

One of the consequences of our current pluralism has been that those who hold to an outlier opinion claim that their opinion has an equally legitimate right as any other always to have a place on the podium as well as equal time for its presentation. Even if the marketplace of ideas at some point has discredited a particular opinion for the majority, the truth appears to be left up to opinion, which throws open the door to forcing a reexamination of the “established precedent” when the political climate changes. This is the ground for the rise of those popular opinions whose cherished beliefs have been unacceptable in the past and now claim their ‘right’.

“Sleeping dogs” eventually wake up, perhaps goaded by ‘dog-whistles’, and our age of political, sexual, religious, and social pluralism has (inadvertently?!) set loose wild dogs that are tearing out hearts and devouring sensitive minds. A radical pluralistic stance appears to leave no grounds for criticizing “the other” except to scream at them (or use violence against them). In the name of free speech, we are left with a chaos of conflicting opinions and the belief that every opinion is of equal worth in the marketplace of ideas.

It is laudable that we be forced by public opinion to reevaluate ever-again the grounds of our democracy. Those grounds are not empirical in the sense that we can just “open our eyes” and see them confirmed by “the data” of everyday experience. Democratic principles are something that we *add to* our world, and no other species appears to be able to even contemplate, much less seek to apply, such principles to its experience.

The Constitution of the United States established democracy not merely on majority vote but far more on the separation of powers (Administrative, Legislative, and Judicial). When those three powers are taken to be grounded in “majority vote”, as they appear to be today, then not only are the lines between them blurred beyond distinction, but the possibility of tyranny is enhanced.

We are confronting a crisis that has lurked in the background since the founding of the US republic but has been growing in shrillness in recent decades. It is not just a crisis generated by COVID-19. It is a crisis with respect to the grounding of ideas and political convictions. The reduction of truth to opinion threatens the stability of the marketplace of ideas devoted to the welfare of all and is eroding the foundation that separates the governmental powers established by the Constitution.

“Mere opinions” seek to dominate public space through whatever means are at hand, which clearly undermines any stability in our constitution and public institutions. Our Founding “Fathers” sought to ground the democratic project not only in the separation of powers but also in “unalienable rights”. Thomas Jefferson articulated such rights in the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men [*sic.*] are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The problem, though, is that Jefferson thought of God as an anthropomorphic “Rationalist” (there are other ways to think of and to venerate God), and only of white, male, property owners as “men”. Moreover, although presumably there is little quarrel over what is meant by “life” (although much effort to impose on others and to restrict their liberty with respect to when human life begins only to turn their backs once a child is born), we are by no means in agreement about what “liberty” and “the pursuit of happiness” mean.

Liberty can mean “free choice” in the sense of “no one can tell me what to do”; and, notoriously, the pursuit of happiness is incredibly ambiguous in light of the fact that what brings happiness is profoundly subjective. Both liberty and the pursuit of happiness can lead to the very violation of humanity’s inalienable rights. Am I at “liberty” to destroy the environment? Am I at “liberty” to abuse others in the name of my personal happiness? Am I at “liberty” to endanger the lives of my fellow citizens by ignoring social-distancing (I prefer the term “social-solidarity”)?

The philosopher Otfried Höffe (Emeritus Professor in Tübingen, Germany) proposes in his book, *Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason: A Philosophy of Freedom (Kants Kritik der praktischen Vernunft. Eine Philosophie der Freiheit)*, that there is only one human right inalienable by birth from which all other rights are derived. This one right is “autonomous freedom” and does not mean mere liberty! Freedom here is defined as **the conscious ability to do things that nature, left on its own, could never accomplish**. It is a *universal* right because it is possessed by all human beings **regardless of mental capacities, physical limitations, gender and sexual orientation, skin color, national origin, religious convictions, etc.** We are surrounded by the effects of human freedom: the technical achievements of humanity are staggering (as well as staggeringly dangerous).

In short, where liberty consists of “freedom from” external determination of the self by others, freedom consists of “freedom from” the limits of nature (to a degree) **and** “freedom for” creativity “above” nature.

Liberty, then, is the choice of the “idiot”. This is because liberty is driven exclusively by personal inclinations and self-determination, which are “one’s own, personal, and private”. Liberty is profoundly “subjective”, and (by definition) it rejects any external determination of the self by others.

To the extent that liberty turns its situation into a mere resource of “means” for the achievement of personal “ends”, it is equivalent of the Midas Touch that turns everything into gold. Everything in one’s world is a mere instrument to achieve private ends. The individual is sovereign over the environment and all others in her/his situation and *can do with both what s/he will*.

Liberty **in this sense** is misanthropic because it undermines the very foundations for personal, much less communal, life by legitimizing the subservience of others, the exploitation of the environment, and the blind pursuit of personal happiness. In short, liberty itself is a threat to democracy!

In contrast, autonomous freedom in its two senses of “freedom from” and “freedom for” is a universal capacity shared by all human beings. Furthermore, it is only because and to the degree that we do possess such autonomous freedom that we are a species that **can hold itself responsible for what it does**. We don’t hold plants and animals responsible for their behavior, but we do hold every child as of a certain age (and it’s very early) responsible/accountable for her/his behavior.

In short, the denial of autonomous freedom and of the assumption of responsibility for one’s agency is the very definition of misanthropy. To deny autonomous freedom and responsibility undermines the inalienable right that every human being has by birth.

Were we to retrieve our commitment to inalienable rights grounded in universal capacities obtained by birth, we would be able to shift our focus from concern merely with **external achievements** to consider **the internal basis of our ability to be a creative species capable of assuming responsibility for our decisions and agency**. We could define ourselves as more than a species possessing a “culture of skills” to understand how significant it is that we can embrace a universal, “moral culture”. A moral culture is not reducible to technical, social, or political “correctness” but stands “above” both. If “moral culture” is equivalent to “social rules” that allow us to successfully negotiate a community, then every Drug Cartel and Mafia Clan is “moral”. How do we “know” that that is not the case?

Moral principles are not the technical imperatives that we must follow to accomplish a specific task (e.g., build a house, develop applications for CRISPR, send out space probes, etc.). Moral principles are “higher” than the civic law, that is, those social rules each society creates to govern public interaction among its citizenry. Technical imperatives, the civic law, institutional rules, social practices, etc., can all be performed “properly” and still be non-virtuous and unjust. How do we know? Because there are principles – moral principles – that everyone embraces (unless they are physically desperate, or they have been “beaten out” of us)! These moral, higher set of principles are what we employ to “give ourselves permission” to do something not because we “can” but because we “ought” to do it. Only the individual knows what that principle of permission in her/his particular situation was because it is never accessible in the five senses!

Among these wider, universal principles² are: not allowing ourselves to be treated or to treat the other as merely a means to an end rather than an end in her/himself, acknowledging the

² No more than one can prove/disprove that one is acting on the basis of a physical law that is true at all times and places, there is no proof/disproof that one is acting on a universal, moral principle. Immanuel Kant’s first form of the *categorical imperative* offers a criterion to avoid merely acting on the basis of self-interest: We ought to act on the basis of a principle *that “we would want”* to be universal, like a law of nature. However, this is no excuse to turn capricious self-interest into a universal law. It is a commitment to rein in action merely based on self-interest.

autonomous freedom (hence, dignity) of all other rational beings,³ not lying, not taking one's own life out of frustration, developing one's talents, responding to the suffering of others,⁴ not intentionally testifying falsely against another,⁵ keeping promises,⁶ not taking advantage of the inexperience of others,⁷ proper care of animals,⁸ ecological concern for nature (the material basis for all theoretical and practical reason),⁹ and more.

We are the species that possesses autonomous freedom and the capacity to hold ourselves responsible. If we ground our judgments and actions in the "truth" of our genuinely inalienable rights, then we can checkmate the idiocy of unbridled opinion and capricious liberty. To do anything less is misanthropic!

Respectfully,

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³ These two imperatives are the second and third forms of the *categorical imperative* articulated in Section II of the *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals*. Rejecting the treating of others as a mere means to one's ends constitutes the ground for Kant's rejection of racism, slavery, colonialism, and aristocracies. See "Was Kant a Racist? With an Addendum: On South Sea Islanders in Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals" at <https://criticalidealism.org>.

⁴ These four moral principles are Kant's examples of duties owed to oneself and to the other as *categorical imperatives* in Section II of the *Groundwork*.

⁵ This moral principle is discussed in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (AA V: 30, 155-156) to illustrate that moral principles are universal because everyone recoils in horror over the false testimony. The discussion of this moral principle is preceded by an account of humanity's ability to control even its most powerful, physical interest: sexuality (AA V: 30).

⁶ See the *Metaphysics of Morals*, AA VI: 219-210.

⁷ See the *Groundwork* AA IV: 397.

⁸ See the *Metaphysics of Morals*, AA VI: 443-444.

⁹ See *Ibid.*, AA VI: 443.