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Ideas and Opinions

Albert Einstein

Based on *Mein Weltbild*,
edited by Cal Seelig,
and other sources

New translations and revisions
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is the only thing that can lead us to noble thoughts and deeds. Money only appeals to selfishness and irresistibly invites abuse.

Can anyone imagine Moses, Jesus, or Gandhi armed with the money-bags of Carnegie?

SOCIETY AND PERSONALITY

Mein Weltbild, Amsterdam: Querido Verlag, 1934.

When we survey our lives and endeavors, we soon observe that almost the whole of our actions and desires is bound up with the existence of other human beings. We notice that our whole nature resembles that of the social animals. We eat food that others have produced, wear clothes that others have made, live in houses that others have built. The greater part of our knowledge and beliefs has been communicated to us by other people through the medium of a language which others have created. Without language our mental capacities would be poor indeed, comparable to those of the higher animals; we have, therefore, to admit that we owe our principal advantage over the beasts to the fact of living in human society. The individual, if left alone from birth, would remain primitive and beastlike in his thoughts and feelings to a degree that we can hardly conceive. The individual is what he is and has the significance that he has not so much in virtue of his individuality, but rather as a member of a great human community, which directs his material and spiritual existence from the cradle to the grave.

A man's value to the community depends primarily on how far his feelings, thoughts, and actions are directed toward promoting the good of his fellows. We call him good or bad according to his attitude in this respect. It looks at first sight as if our estimate of a man depended entirely on his social qualities.

And yet such an attitude would be wrong. It can easily be seen that all the valuable achievements, material, spiritual, and moral, which we receive from society have been brought about

in the course of countless generations by creative individuals. Someone once discovered the use of fire, someone the cultivation of edible plants, and someone the steam engine.

Only the individual can think, and thereby create new values for society, nay, even set up new moral standards to which the life of the community conforms. Without creative personalities able to think and judge independently, the upward development of society is as unthinkable as the development of the individual personality without the nourishing soil of the community.

The health of society thus depends quite as much on the independence of the individuals composing it as on their close social cohesion. It has rightly been said that the very basis of Graeco-European-American culture, and in particular of its brilliant flowering in the Italian Renaissance, which put an end to the stagnation of medieval Europe, has been the liberation and comparative isolation of the individual.

Let us now consider the times in which we live. How does society fare, how the individual? The population of the civilized countries is extremely dense as compared with former times; Europe today contains about three times as many people as it did a hundred years ago. But the number of leading personalities has decreased out of all proportion. Only a few people are known to the masses as individuals, through their creative achievements. Organization has to some extent taken the place of leading personalities, particularly in the technical sphere, but also to a very perceptible extent in the scientific.

The lack of outstanding figures is particularly striking in the domain of art. Painting and music have definitely degenerated and largely lost their popular appeal. In politics not only are leaders lacking, but the independence of spirit and the sense of justice of the citizen have to a great extent declined. The democratic, parliamentary regime, which is based on such independence, has in many places been shaken; dictatorships have sprung up and are tolerated, because men's sense of the dignity and the rights of the individual is no longer strong enough. In two weeks the sheeplike masses of any country can

be worked up by the newspapers into such a state of excited fury that men are prepared to put on uniforms and kill and be killed, for the sake of the sordid ends of a few interested parties. Compulsory military service seems to me the most disgraceful symptom of that deficiency in personal dignity from which civilized mankind is suffering today. No wonder there is no lack of prophets who prophesy the early eclipse of our civilization. I am not one of these pessimists; I believe that better times are coming. Let me briefly state my reasons for such confidence.

In my opinion, the present manifestations of decadence are explained by the fact that economic and technologic developments have highly intensified the struggle for existence, greatly to the detriment of the free development of the individual. But the development of technology means that less and less work is needed from the individual for the satisfaction of the community's needs. A planned division of labor is becoming more and more of a crying necessity, and this division will lead to the material security of the individual. This security and the spare time and energy which the individual will have at his disposal can be turned to the development of his personality. In this way the community may regain its health, and we will hope that future historians will explain the morbid symptoms of present-day society as the childhood ailments of an aspiring humanity, due entirely to the excessive speed at which civilization was advancing.

INTERVIEWERS

Mein Weltbild, Amsterdam: Querido Verlag, 1934.

To be called to account publicly for everything one has said, even in jest, in an excess of high spirits or in momentary anger, may possibly be awkward, yet up to a point it is reasonable and natural. But to be called to account publicly for what others have said in one's name, when one cannot defend oneself, is indeed a sad predicament. "But to whom does such a thing