

There is no such Person as an Individual

Grenville Gilbert

Margaret Thatcher famously said that there was no such thing as society, by which, to be fair, she meant society in abstraction, i.e. as an idea. I agree with her with regard to society as an abstraction but not, in any way, as society in reality. For me, society exists. Unfortunately, what Mrs Thatcher said gave a green light to heightened individualism and egoism. Her policy was the establishment of a free economy with as few rules and regulations as possible.

The resultant market is a perfect place for those concerned solely with self-interest; it enables people to get the most for themselves and to give the least to others. It inevitably produces winners and losers; just look at the stock market. Much of what takes place is informed gambling. They call it supply and demand but against the true world picture, it cannot possibly be so. How, on Earth, can you measure such ideas with so little overall knowledge of the state of things?

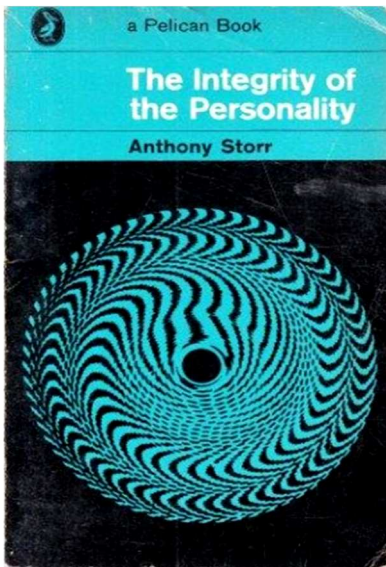
The world of human beings is not made to be that way; a better and fairer outcome is possible. There are those human beings who, through place of birth, ill-health, lack of power, wealth and mobility, colour, race and creed, are not in a good place from which to start playing the market game. They have much to contribute. There are untapped and still to be discovered resources available (witness the unexplored ocean depths). And so, a great number of people are disadvantaged in the ironically named and somewhat absurd, free market economy. Sadly, it is anything but free, for the simple reason that so many people are far from free to participate. For, just as there is no such thing as abstract society, there is similarly no such person as an abstract individual, i.e. a totally separate human being who can live solely by the market. We all live together on planet Earth.

Not just as human beings but alongside billions of other living creatures. We are so obviously inter-dependent and inter-related. The problem is seeing it; just witness the absurd responses of denial to the ongoing process and product of climate change. The great paradox is that human beings are at their most individual when most in relation with other human beings. They are least of all individual human beings when detached from other human beings.

Human beings destroy themselves when trying to incorporate or annihilate others or when allowing themselves to be absorbed by the will or power of others. There can only be one way for human beings to fully be themselves and that is in relationship with other human beings, as well as with all life around them. That is the true nature of society; the sacred nature of things. Our task is neither to encourage selfish individualism nor to impose a rational ordered society by design. We need one another in order to be ourselves.

Capitalism and communism are both destructive political systems. So what is the way forward? It is clear that individualism and collectivism need to develop, not separately, but alongside one another. Individuals within society. There needs to be an international political system that allows for human beings to grow and to develop *pari passu* with one another, and not through any person having any advantage over another. Freedom has never meant licence; it must always be the same freedom for all.

Because of the ways of the natural world, there can never be total freedom. Natural disasters happen. The problem with Mrs Thatcher's political philosophy was that she encouraged the notion of looking after number one first and *then* one's neighbour. It is a great shame that her Sunday School teacher never taught her what Jesus is reputed to have actually



Grenville Gilbert: For many years now, I have been indebted to the late Anthony Storr's ideas in his book *The Integrity of the Personality* (Penguin 1960).

said: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' Neighbour means not crumbs for one from under the table but food for all at the table. It includes enemies. All traditional religions teach the golden rule and are based on compassion.

From a Christian point of view, it would have been useful if Jesus had clarified that in loving your neighbour, you actually become yourself, for that is what he was all about, sufficient to the point of self extinction. In that way, he rose from the dead in the lives of others. St Paul tried to clarify things in his letter to the Christians in Galatia (Galatians 5: 13-15 and 22-26). I think that there is still a future for the human race, but looking around the world, and especially at the politics in our own country at this moment, I am far from certain that anyone has a clue as to what to do. I fear that the human race is most likely to go the way of the dinosaurs; the only difference being that we shall annihilate ourselves!

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As I Please

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