

The Existential Woes of Belonging

DAMLA KOLSUZ

The Existential Woes of Belonging

"A hideous ecstasy of fear and vindictiveness, a desire to kill, to torture, to smash faces in with a sledgehammer, seemed to flow through the whole group of people like an electric current, turning one even against one's will into a grimacing, screaming lunatic." "The horrible thing about the Two Minutes Hate was not that one was obliged to act a part, but that it was impossible to avoid joining in." (Orwell, G. 2021:24) says George Orwell in his novel 1984, while describing the destructive way of unconsciously fitting in with the crowd. One might think that this quote is an over exaggeration, a mere work of fiction, fitting for such a dystopian novel. Perhaps, only when we someday face the pressure and suffocation of trying to swim against the current of a majority of opposing people, can we truly understand the feeling and perspective behind this quote.

Existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre has a saying "Man is condemned to be free... Because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does." Fickle things that they are, possibly people have looked for an escape from this condemnation and found their salvation in the hands of the majority. Giving away their free will and judgement, they've confined themselves to the vote of the majority, the "norms" of society, and let themselves be classically conditioned (Pavlov) into doing what they see, creating a shadow theatre of hypocrisy. Perhaps they believed that they themselves wouldn't be personally responsible for their actions if they were done for a group. According to Soren Kierkegaard, the father of existentialism, "existence" should point to a quality of an individual, rather than just taking up space in the universe, where only someone that is in an act of conscious wanting and decision making can really exist (Cevizci, 2010:939). When looked at from an existentialist perspective, perhaps some people, so submerged in a group, really in a matter of speaking, cease to exist.

This escapism from existence by the erasure of individuality, while it may sound bad when written plainly as such, may actually be glorified by a shocking variety of tactics. One of the most visible examples of this is perhaps executed by states. 'The Ideological State Apparatuses', as Louis Althusser calls them, for example, are a variety of ways in which states condition their citizens by subtle propositions, forming and reshaping their ideologies into a standard that is beneficial to the states, rather than the individuals. Michel Foucault also has a theory regarding this reshaping process. He suggests that states give people roles in order to turn them into 'subjects'. These roles, while making people feel important and significant, simultaneously limit their actions by making them fit into their roles' designated regulations. "If sharks were men, would they be nicer to the little fish?" Mr. Keuner is asked by his landlady's little girl in the story "If Sharks Were Men", in "Stories of Mr. Keuner" by Bertolt Brecht. "Certainly." Mr. Keuner answers, proceeding to tell her about the way the sharks would keep them in boxes, where they would make all kinds of arrangements to keep them cheerful and healthy until their time, providing them with amusements, art and festivals, since cheerful fish taste better than melancholy ones, and opening schools where they were taught how to swim to the jaws of sharks, and that the sharks, in return for the fish's absolute obedience, provide for them, just like the ideological state apparatuses of Althusser, keeping the fish distracted and reshaping their values. "Furthermore, there would be an end for all the fish being equal," continues Mr. Keuner, "some would be given offices and be placed above the others... some would even be allowed to eat smaller ones. That would be altogether agreeable for the sharks, since they themselves would often get bigger bites to eat", conveying the subjectification (Foucault) of the bigger fish, who think themselves important until they're swallowed by the sharks themselves.

"Freedom is to say $2 \times 2 = 4$, if that's granted, the rest will follow"(Orwell,G.2021:92) writes Winston in 1984. It's to say, where a person is given the means of voicing the truth as they know it, they have the environment to become an individual. One of the biggest threats to one's beliefs and knowledge may be majority vote. This was demonstrated in the Asch Conformity Line Experiment (1951), where a group of students were put into a "vision test" where they would match the length of a target line with its identical, a simple task that was done correctly nearly by everyone when done individually, but the stooges that answered before the only participant in each group during the experiment gave the wrong answer in front of him and the participant conformed and gave the clearly incorrect answer in about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the trials.

Similarly, "belonging" became a new moral and mental compass within itself, where "morally right" started to identify with the majority vote, and people started separating each other as "our" and "other" while making irrelevant decisions, because as deceitful as the word belonging might be, one of its roundabout results of it is separation. The way to belonging often passes through the exclusion of others. Some reflections of this in literacy can also be seen in the story "If Sharks Were Men", where the sharks, in order to wage wars against other sharks, teach their little fish that there's an enormous difference between themselves and the little fish belonging to other sharks, and 1984; "There is a word in Newspeak: duckspeak, to quack like a duck. It is one of those interesting words that have two contradictory meanings. Applied to an opponent, it is abuse, applied to someone you agree with, it is praise."(Orwell,G.2021:65)

According to modern psychology, mirroring and emphasizing are common quirks of the human mind. We cannot escape being affected, mentally or behavior wise, by the actions of the people we surround ourselves with. The more people we let in and feel a sense of belonging to with toxic features we ignore and desensitize ourselves for, the more we take said features on and lose of our authentic selves. The more we lose of our authentic selves, the more we become a mere cast of the values the group holds. And soon we have our own version of a ship of Theseus paradox, where we start questioning whether we're still the same person or not.

Despite all its shortcomings, yearning to belong is one of humankind's most prominent instincts. Be it in families, in friend groups, with a religion, belief or ideology, just the knowledge that they're not alone is relieving to many. However, the most overlooked type of belonging may be the most crucial, and the cure for all things who belong. Belonging to oneself first and foremost, is one of the musts of achieving individuality in a group. The ability to leave any group when it becomes toxic for yourself or others lies in this simple trait. Arthur Schopenhauer gives the porcupine metaphor, where a group of porcupines need to huddle together to avoid the cold, but once they get too close, they end up pricking each other with their quills and resolve to stay a little apart from each other within the group, to describe the need for some space of oneself, even within a crowd.

Similarly, Karl Jaspers, another existentialist philosopher who asserts that existence doesn't only show itself singularly in the world, but also in an intersubjective setting, since one can only truly reach their own identity while in interaction with other 'existences', states that while others may try to turn us into people like them and encourage us to be a part of the cattle, they might also strengthen us with love in the struggle in the way to existence. Thus, freedom of existence relies upon its relation with other existences, looking for its "kampfbede liebe" (loved fight). He suggests that one should both stay by themselves and learn to develop and look for existence together with others. However, only after people isolate themselves and take the risk of loneliness, and look within themselves for their own existence, can people be freed, and only with people who have been freed as such can you have authentic and meaningful interactions and only these people can truly exist(Cevizci,2010:1150).

So how can we truly reach this state of individual existence? "Sapere aude", loosely translated as 'dare to use your own mind', says Immanuel Kant, in order to express the way to enlightenment. With all the pressure that comes with belonging to a group, this might truly take courage. However, once a primary sense of belonging to oneself that is prioritized over the instinctual need to appease and belong to a crowd is developed, daring to use our own minds may no longer remain such a harsh challenge.