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THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE GENUS

Journal

What is this chapter about? *In this last chapter of the Philosophy of Freedom, Steiner takes up the issue of individuality and genus in the human being, and explains the degree to which humans are truly individual, or else embedded in their generic identities.*

What is its value? *It is the task of each individual to break through the boundaries of their defining groups, and attain the intuition that enables them to become truly free, and truly unique. In turn, we must learn to understand the individuality of others, and not assess them according to their generic qualities.*

Breaking Through The Limitations Of Genus Identity

By genus, Steiner is referring to race, gender, family lineage, "folk," religion, and nationality. Steiner maintains that people bear "the general characteristics" of the various groups to which they belong, and that genus identity can answer the question of why people "appear in the forms" in which they appear. The collective qualities of genus function as a "medium" through which people express their particular being.

On the question of individuality, Steiner argues that the cultivation of intuition allows a person to break free of the limitations of genus identity and to define him or herself as a true individual.

Study Topics

ethics of free individuality

15.0 Group Member

A person bears the general characteristics of the groups to which he belongs.

15.1 Group Characteristics

If we ask why some particular thing about a person is like this or like that, we are referred back from the individual to the genus.

15.2 Generic Medium For Individual Expression

A man develops qualities and activities of his own, and the basis for these we can seek only in the man himself. What is generic in him serves only as a medium in which to express his own individual being.

15.3 Individual Capacities And Inclinations

A man's activity in life is governed by his individual capacities and inclinations, whereas a woman's is supposed to be determined solely by the mere fact that she is a woman.

15.4 Individual Social Decision

What a woman, within her natural limitations, wants to become had better be left to the woman herself to decide.

15.5 Unique Characteristics

Determining the individual according to the laws of his genus ceases where the sphere of freedom (in thinking and acting) begins.

15.6 Intuitive Conceptual Content

The conceptual content which man has to connect with the percept by an act of thinking in order to have the full reality cannot be fixed once and for all and bequeathed ready-made to mankind. The individual must get his concepts through his own intuition.

15.7 Individual Concrete Aims

It is not possible to determine from the general characteristics of man what concrete aims the individual may choose to set himself.

15.8 Individual Views And Actions

And every kind of study that deals with abstract thoughts and generic concepts is but a preparation for the knowledge we get when a human individuality tells us his way of viewing the world, and for the knowledge we get from the content of his acts of will.

15.9 Emancipation Of Knowing

If we are to understand a free individuality we must take over into our own spirit those concepts by which he determines himself, in their pure form (without mixing our own conceptual content with them).

15.10 Emancipation Of Being

Only to the extent that a man has emancipated himself in this way from all that is generic, does he count as a free spirit within a human community.

15.11 Intuitive Conduct

Only that part of his conduct that springs from his intuitions can have ethical value in the true sense.

15.12 Moral Life Of Humanity

The moral life of humanity is the sum-total of the products of the moral imagination of free human individuals.

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15.0 Group Member

[1] THE view that man is a wholly self-contained, free individuality stands in apparent conflict with the facts, that he appears as a member of a natural whole (race, tribe, nation, family, gender) and that he acts within a whole (state, church, etc.). He exhibits the general characteristics of the community to which he belongs, and gives to his actions a content which is defined by the place which he occupies within a social whole.

[2] This being so, is any individuality left at all? Can we regard man as a whole in himself, in view of the fact that he grows out of a whole and fits as a member into a whole?

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15.1 Group Characteristics

[3] The character and function of a member of a whole are defined by the whole. A tribe is a whole, and all members of the tribe exhibit the peculiar characteristics which are conditioned by the nature of the tribe. The character and activity of the individual member are determined by the character of the tribe. Hence the physiognomy and the conduct of the individual have something generic about them.

When we ask why this or that is so or so, we are referred from the individual to the genus. The genus explains why something in the individual appears in the forms observed by us.



All members of the tribe exhibit the peculiar characteristics which are conditioned by the nature of the tribe.

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15.2 Generic Medium For Individual Expression



Man emancipates himself from generic characteristics.

[4] But man emancipates himself from these generic characteristics. He develops qualities and activities the reason for which we can seek only in himself. The generic factors serve him only as a means to develop his own individual nature. He uses the peculiarities with which nature has endowed him as material, and gives them a form which expresses his own individuality. We seek in vain for the reason of such an expression of a man's individuality in the laws of the genus.

We are dealing here with an individual who can be explained only through himself. If a man has reached the point of emancipation from what is generic in him, and we still attempt to explain all his qualities by reference to the character of the genus, then we lack the organ for apprehending what is individual.

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15.3 Individual Capacities And Inclinations

[5] It is impossible to understand a human being completely if one makes the concept of the genus the basis of one's judgment. The tendency to judge according to the genus is most persistent where differences of sex are involved. Man sees in woman, woman in man, almost always too much of the generic characteristics of the other's sex, and too little of what is individual in the other. In practical life this does less harm to men than to women.



Judgment according to gender.

The social position of women is, in most instances, so low because it is not determined by the individual characteristics of each woman herself, but by the general ideas which are current concerning the natural function and needs of woman. A man's activity in life is determined by his individual capacity and inclination, whereas a woman's activity is supposed to be determined solely by the fact that she is just a woman. Woman is to be the slave of the generic, of the general idea of womanhood.

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15.4 Individual Social Decision

So long as men debate whether woman, from her "natural disposition," is fitted for this, that, or the other profession, the so-called Woman's Question will never advance beyond the most elementary stage. What it lies in woman's nature to strive for had better be left to woman herself to decide. If it is true that women are fitted only for that profession which is theirs at present, then they will hardly have it in them to attain any other. But they must be allowed to decide for themselves what is in accordance with their nature. To all who fear an upheaval of our social structure, should women be treated as individuals and not as specimens of their sex, we need only reply that a social structure in which the status of one-half of humanity is unworthy of a human being stands itself in great need of improvement.

they must be allowed to decide for themselves what is in accordance with their nature



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15.5 Unique Characteristics



Unique character of the single individual.

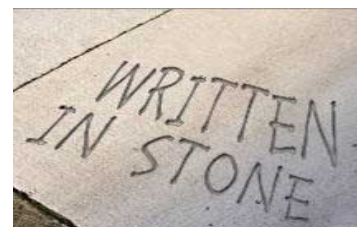
[6] Anyone who judges human beings according to their generic character stops short at the very point beyond which they begin to be individuals whose activity rests on free self-determination. Whatever lies short of this point may naturally become matter for scientific study. Thus the characteristics of race, tribe, nation, and sex are the subject-matter of special sciences. Only men who wish to live as nothing more than examples of the genus could possibly conform to the generic picture which the methods of these sciences produce.

But all these sciences are unable to get as far as the unique character of the single individual. Where the sphere of freedom (thinking and acting) begins, there the possibility of determining the individual according to the laws of his genus ceases.

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15.6 Intuitive Conceptual Content

The conceptual content which man, by an act of thought, has to connect with percepts, in order to possess himself fully of reality (cp. pp. 57 ff.), cannot be fixed by anyone once and for all, and handed down to humanity ready-made. The individual must gain his concepts through his own intuition. It is impossible to deduce from any concept of the genus how the individual ought to think; that depends singly and solely on the individual himself.



Conceptual content cannot be fixed.

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15.7 Individual Concrete Aims

So, again, it is just as impossible to determine, on the basis of the universal characteristics of human nature, what concrete ends the individual will set before himself. Anyone who wants to understand the single individual must penetrate to the innermost core of his being, and not stop short at those qualities which he shares with others. In this sense every single human being is a problem.

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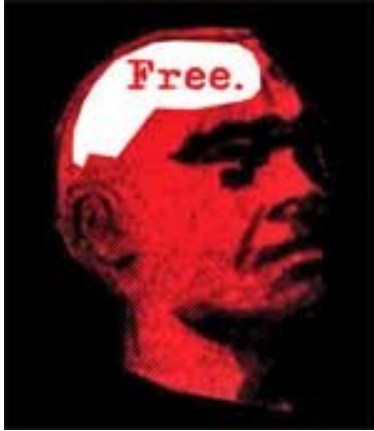
15.8 Individual Views And Actions

And every science which deals only with abstract thoughts and generic concepts is but a preparation for the kind of knowledge which we gain when a human individual communicates to us his way of viewing the world, and for that other kind of knowledge which each of us gains from the content of his own will.



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15.9 Emancipation Of Knowing



How to knowing an individual.

Wherever we feel that here we are dealing with a man who has emancipated his thinking from all that is generic, and his will from the grooves typical of his kind, there we must cease to call in any concepts of our own making if we would understand his nature. Knowledge consists in the combination by thought of a concept and a percept. With all other objects the observer has to gain his concepts through his intuition.

But if the problem is to understand a free individuality, we need only to take over into our own minds those concepts by which the individual determines himself in their pure form (without admixture). Those who always mix their own ideas into their judgment on another person can never attain to the understanding of an individuality. Just as the free individual emancipates himself from the characteristics of the genus, so our knowledge of the individual must emancipate itself from the methods by which we understand what is generic.

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15.10 Emancipation Of Being

[7] A man counts as a free spirit in a human community only to the degree in which he has emancipated himself, in the way we have indicated, from all that is generic.

No man is all genus, none is all individuality; but every man gradually emancipates a greater or lesser sphere of his being, both from the generic characteristics of animal life and from the laws of human authorities which rule him despotically.



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15.11 Intuitive Conduct

[8] In respect of that part of his nature for which man is not able to win this freedom for himself, he forms a member within the organism of nature and of spirit. He lives, in this respect, by the imitation of others, or in obedience to their command.

But ethical value belongs only to that part of his conduct which springs from his intuitions.

