

COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE AND ETHICAL INDIVIDUALISM⁸

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Abstract

Many commentators conceive the self in either atomistic or holistic terms, even as our understanding of the self as a node of processing within the wider network for revealing the “wisdom of crowds” has long transcended this dichotomy. Understanding the self as a “center of narrative gravity” leaves room for a robust individualism in the context of rich sociality. Such a conception is already present in the classic individualism of the 19th Century and supports optimism that digital culture at once encourages individual flourishing and cultural progress alike.

Keywords: individualism, atomism, collectivism, wisdom of crowds, self, culture, Lanier, Ridley, digital Maoism, marketplace, exchange

THE PROBLEM OF INDIVIDUALISM

Longtime tech guru Jaron Lanier (2010a) worries that Web 2.0, Open Culture, Free Software, and related trends of aggregation and crowd sourcing in the creation of the artifacts of digital culture represent “a new kind of collectivism” that threatens to undermine the opportunities of young people “to develop as fierce individuals.” Meanwhile, critics of liberalism decry a techno enthusiasm that allegedly presupposes an ardently individualist stance that ignores and undermines the communitarian ideals they favor; for instance, Langdon Winner (2003) dismisses posthumanism on grounds that “the post-humanists’ choice of an unsocial, single unit atomism as the best path to perfectibility is highly problematic.” Such divergent accounts of the place and value of the individual in the information society suggests that we remain deeply confused about the nature and significance of individualism.

Lanier’s concern about “digital Maoism” or “cybernetic totalism” is at once ontological and ethical. In the various aggregating technologies that increasingly condition our interactions in the gathering, processing, and distribution of information, Lanier sees a threat to individuality and originality. He illustrates the challenge by contemplating American Idol, a singing competition in which, “The collective can vote by phone or by texting, and some vote more than once. The collective is flattered and it responds. The winners are likable, almost by definition. But John Lennon wouldn’t have won. He wouldn’t have made it to the finals. Or if he had, he would have ended up a different sort of person and artist” (Lanier, 2006). Much as Nietzsche worried about the impacts of democratic institutions and ideals on strength of character and Mill worried about a cultural tyranny of a timid majority dominating the spirit of the more vital sorts of individuals, Lanier worries that a collectivization of culture and our conceptions of our selves encourages shallow mediocrity. He suggests that the philosophy of what has come to be called Web 2.0 extolls the wisdom of crowds at the expense of individual dignity and creativity, and he believes that this philosophy

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is designed into the very tools we use in forming ourselves and our wider society, which increasingly constitute the very stuff of our lives and consequently inscribe that same philosophy on us. “When they design an internet service that is edited by a vast anonymous crowd, they are suggesting that a random crowd of humans is an organism with a legitimate point of view” (Lanier, 2010b, 4). Worse yet, “Emphasizing the crowd means deemphasizing individual humans in the design of society, and when you ask people not to be people, they revert to bad moblike behaviors” (Lanier, 2010b, 19). He compares the underlying philosophy to earlier attempts to subsume the nature of individual persons in some wider collective: “It is at least possible that in the fairly near future enough communication and education will take place through anonymous Internet aggregation that we could become vulnerable to a sudden dangerous empowering of the hive mind. History has shown us again and again that a hive mind is a cruel idiot when it runs on autopilot. Nasty hive mind outbursts have been flavored Maoist, Fascist, and religious, and these are only a small sampling. I don't see why there couldn't be future social disasters that appear suddenly under the cover of technological utopianism” (Lanier, 2006).

While Lanier bemoans the emergence of collectivist thought in technological utopianism, an equally strident group of critics object to what they perceive to be the overly individualist, asocial, and atomistic conceptions that dominate so much enthusiasm for information technologies. Winner contends that a “key theme in this emerging ideology is that of radical individualism. Writings of cyberlibertarians revel in prospects for ecstatic self-fulfillment in cyberspace and emphasize the need for individuals to disburden themselves of encumbrances that might hinder the pursuit of rational self-interest. The experiential realm of digital devices and networked computing offers endless opportunities for achieving wealth, power and sensual pleasure. Because inherited structures of social, political, and economic organization pose barriers to the exercise of personal power and self-realization, they simply must be removed” (Winner, 1997). Winner sees among proponents of technological transcendence a narrow focus on individual empowerment that is ultimately at odds with the facts of human sociality. “In fact, humans do not live as isolated individuals characterized by bundles of atomistic traits” (Winner, 2003). He suggests that we need to consider an alternate way: “The key premise is that humans are fundamentally social beings whose development depends upon favorable conditions for forming social bonds and sentiments. From this perspective, the path to improvement for humanity involves changing institutions—laws, governments, workplaces, dwellings, schools, and the like—in ways that will nurture the potential of individuals and the groups of which they are members. Real creativity in this regard comes not so much in operating on particular atomistic individuals, but in shaping the rule-guided frameworks and material structures of community life” (Winner, 2003).

I will argue that both sides have fundamentally misunderstood the opportunities and the perils that face efforts to make something of one's self in the information age, and that understanding the individual human person and her efforts to become who she is in the context of global digital culture involves coming to terms with the social and cultural institutions that define our relations to one another. Although a rigorous defense of any particular account of the self is beyond the scope of any single essay, it is clear that an account that treats the self as a “center of narrative gravity” responds to the individualist concerns of Lanier without collapsing into the atomism Winner deplors. On this view, it is a profound mistake, both ontologically and ethically, to suppose that individualism is asocial and “atomistic,” and it is equally confused to suppose that social networking and harnessing the wisdom of crowds represents an emerging “digital Maoism” that threatens individuality. Rather, human individuals each occupy a unique perspective that provides access to local and tacit knowledge that these same individuals are eager to harness, develop, and share with the world, operating as so many nodes in a vast network of social interaction and information processing. Examining this conception of the contemporary social order in light of the classic expositions of individualism found in John Stuart Mill, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Ralph Waldo Emerson reveals that our present condition does not entail an account that is either asocial or anti-individualist. To the contrary, contemporary information technology promises to bring to fruition the longstanding individualist ideal that “the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” (Emerson, 1841).

COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE AND THE WISDOM OF CROWDS

The most straightforward answer to Lanier's concerns begins by articulating the role of "fierce individuals" in harnessing the "wisdom of crowds." The basic ideas have been well known at least since Adam Smith, and these insights have been extended and developed in great detail ever since. The unquestionable successes of Google, Facebook, and Wikipedia highlight the value of what Ridley (2010a) identifies as "collective intelligence: the notion that what determines the inventiveness and rate of cultural change of a population is the amount of interaction between individuals." While the notion of "collective intelligence" may sound like the sort of "digital Maoism" feared by Lanier, it must be emphasized that the whole process of harnessing the wisdom of crowds requires a rather robust individualism.

Surowiecki identifies four prerequisites of the wisdom of crowds: independence, diversity, decentralization, and a method of aggregation. Each of these indicates the absolutely essential role of particular individuals thinking for themselves about their own concerns as constitutive of the wise crowd. In their absence, we really do witness bad moblike behaviors. As an example of such failures, Surowiecki describes the various speculative bubbles that occasionally shake our confidence in the wisdom of markets. When markets are genuinely exhibiting the wisdom of crowds, they are a means of gathering, processing and conveying the vast amounts of implicit, tacit, and distributed knowledge necessary for assessing economic value and efficiency. In a well functioning commodities market, every bid represents a marginal bit of information regarding the bidder's knowledge of the desirability of that commodity relative to its supply and demand in light of various substitutions. For example, a pencil manufacturer will use the cheapest sort of wood that can be used for a pencil, which is not coincidentally the same variety that is most in supply relative to all its possible uses. If there is a scarce variety of wood that is especially required for some use, as luthiers need spruce to make violins, then its price will be bid up until the pencil manufacturer settles on some alternative. These market incentives are aligned with the actual facts of supply relative to demand better than the efforts of any central planner as long as the whole process is the aggregation of the independent judgments of diverse actors informed by their own unique perspectives, since such a crowd leverages vastly more information than is available to any expert. Speculative bubbles occur when actors no longer bid in the market based on what they know about the actual uses and availability of commodities and start to bid based on what they believe others believe. The worst sorts of bubbles, such as the infamous Dutch tulip mania of 1637, occur when the price is bid up on the expectation that others will pay an even higher price in the future, where the only reason anyone has for paying the ever increasing prices is their expectation of even higher prices in the future and the only reason for the higher prices is everyone acting on the expectation of higher prices. When they cease to be independent judges and try to guess what the market will say instead of using their actual (imperfect) knowledge as it relates to supply and demand, the market price becomes untethered from the relevant economic facts.

Despite these occasional lapses, markets and other institutions for leveraging the wisdom of crowds are profoundly useful, as long as we can assure ourselves that they are actually doing their job of aggregating the information expressed in the independent judgments of diverse individuals whose behavior is responsive to their own judgments and not any effort to coordinate their judgments with others. If individuals are simply conforming to the expectations of others, then the information they contribute to the crowd is at best redundant and liable to distort the outcome of the process by emphasizing some matters beyond their actual significance. If individuals are insufficiently diverse, then the crowd enjoys no greater access to information than the individuals that make it up; Surowiecki submits that a committee of graduates of Ivy League business schools will actually have far less information at its disposal than a committee of folks from more diverse backgrounds, even if that means including individuals who are "less expert." If the crowd is directed by some central authority, then individuals are apt to contribute their expectations regarding what that central authority wants instead of their unvarnished judgments regarding the relevant facts, which again flattens the information available to the crowd. Thus, it is imperative to the wisdom of a crowd that its constituent individuals express themselves as individuals.

Ridley similarly argues that local and tacit knowledge available only to particularly situated individuals can be aggregated and processed by networks of trade and social interaction into wisdom that transcends what any particular individual could possibly know alone. “The knowledge of how to design, mine, fell, extract, synthesize, combine, manufacture, and market these things is fragmented among thousands, sometimes millions of heads...My favorite example is the camera pill—invented after a conversation between a gastroenterologist and a guided missile designer” (Ridley, 2010a). On Ridley’s account of cultural evolution on analogy with biological evolution, human progress happens “when ideas have sex,” and this process results in the development of “the collective brain” that can comprehend far more than any human individual can. The knack of early humans to enter into exchange “was to cause specialization, which in turn caused technological innovation, which in turn encouraged more specialization, which led to more exchange—and ‘progress’ was born” (Ridley, 2010b, 56). Ridley explains the ascendance of homo sapiens in contrast with Neanderthals by indicating, “without trade, innovation just does not happen. Exchange is to technology as sex is to evolution.” Similar considerations account for the gradual disappearance of technologies from among isolated groups, such as the Tasmanians who found themselves cut off from wider trade networks when sea levels rose. “There was nothing wrong with individual Tasmanian brains; there was something wrong with their collective brains” (Ridley, 2010b, 79). The lesson Ridley draws from all this is that, “Human cultural progress is a collective enterprise and it needs a dense collective brain” (Ridley, 2010b, 83).

These are not especially new insights. As Ridley acknowledges, economists like Friedrich Hayek have long emphasized the importance of “the great society” for harnessing our vast reserves of distributed information, while Adam Smith’s account of the invisible hand increasing the wealth of nations is especially concerned with the efficiencies and innovations that result from the division of labor and specialization. Hayek’s “great society” (not to be confused with Johnson’s later use of the phrase) needs to be a place of fierce individuals, because its greatness consists precisely in harnessing all the distributed and local knowledge of individuals freely engaged in their individual pursuits, culminating in the greater wealth and prosperity of the whole society. Our social interactions are simply not worth as much even in simple material terms if we all pursue the same goals, projects and values; the greater social welfare requires that we develop ourselves as diverse and distinct individuals. Insofar as the philosophy of Web 2.0 and its kin is informed by the notion that these new technologies enable us to finally network and aggregate the independent and diverse judgments of decentralized individuals, that philosophy requires individualism.

Ridley’s account is especially valuable as a corrective to the misunderstanding of markets and liberalism as expressing an asocial or even antisocial individualism. By emphasizing the collective nature of the enterprise of progress, Ridley makes it clear that this is a vision of **social** interaction and **human** progress, not some escapist or solipsistic individualism that imagines the good life in isolation from or ignorance of society. It is, nonetheless, a familiar liberal individualist account of progress. Ridley’s conception of human networks of exchange as forming an extended marketplace of goods and services combined with an even more profound marketplace of ideas that facilitates human progress in both material and spiritual terms is ultimately a contemporary update to Mill’s classical liberal vision of society as a place in which our various “experiments in living” can find their test and inform the ever improving lives of each of us, and Ridley concludes his discussion with a direct reference to Hayek’s conception of “the catallaxy.” This is how liberals account for the good of human society, and it is perfectly congruent with the insights of Aristotle regarding the necessity and desirability of human sociality. As Aristotle noted, we live together because we live so much better that way, for none of us is self-sufficient. Thus identified, the value of sociality extends just as far as each of us represents something new and different from everyone else. The benefits of society derive precisely from the reality of distinct and diverse individuals who inform it and constitute it. The liberal individualist view is not only consonant with that Aristotelian insight, it positively emphasizes its truth and articulates the mechanisms whereby it operates. Only a profound and ironic failure of the analytic imagination could lead so many friends of community and sociality to dismiss this system of extended and mutually beneficial cooperation as something antagonistic to the values of community and sociality.

BLURRY BOUNDARIES AND DYNAMIC ONTOLOGIES

While communitarian critics of the liberal social order struggle to imagine the genuine sociality that emerges from the liberal account, it seems that Lanier just cannot get it out of his mind. For him, the vision of a vast network of people participating as nodes in a distributed information processing system stands boldly in the foreground, obscuring the particular lives of those people to such a degree that they seem to have completely melted into the machinery. As we rely more and more on our collective intelligence to inform ourselves as individuals, how can we be sure that individuals can assert themselves without being lost in the crowd? To address these concerns, we need an ontology of the individual that accounts at once for our individuality and our sociality. While the philosophical underpinnings of Web 2.0 and crowd sourcing endorse individualism (a point Lanier acknowledges and even emphasizes) without collapsing into a shallow and asocial atomism, what this philosophy so far leaves out is any robust account of what it means to be an individual and how exactly individual persons relate to the supra-personal entities that emerge from their interactions.

The project of Hayek, Smith, Ridley, and others working in economics and politics does not require a robust ontology of the individual, and there is even reason for them to avoid taking any particular stand on these metaphysical controversies. In the context of exploring the information processing of the wisdom of crowds and the institutions that promote it, it is legitimate and wise to leave out any commitment to an ontology of self, since questions that are “metaphysical not political” (to invert Rawls’ mantra regarding political liberalism) are contentious and not directly pertinent to how or why these institutions work. However, ontology is at the very heart of the concerns of Lanier and Winner alike. Lanier spills a great deal of ink to establish exactly what Ridley and Surowiecki (not to mention Smith, Hayek, and a host of others) have already emphasized: innovation and genius requires the passionate and personal interest of particular individuals. However, in the context of various new technologies, this plain fact has been obscured by the reality that individuals overlap in a dense web of relations and interactions, and the boundaries that separate individuals from one another are consequently not sharp or absolute. In the context of information technologies that emphasize and enhance the value of networks, the blurriness of these boundaries has become more and more apparent as our lives become more and more entangled with one another, even as the particular nodes of interaction become increasingly distinct as independent and diverse points of view.

Conceiving ontological boundaries as blurry and dynamic is neatly illustrated by the dynamic and vague ontologies developed on the fly by search algorithms like Google, in contrast to the neatly defined and predetermined categories originally attempted by Yahoo. When the internet was young and aptly described as a vast library in which all the books are chaotically piled in the middle of the floor, the vision of Yahoo! was to organize it and make it accessible by determining hierarchical and nested categories for all the things online. If you were interested in Plato, for example, instead of a brute text search on one of Yahoo!’s competitors, you could find the Yahoo! category for “philosophy” and burrow into nested subcategories (e.g., something like Philosophy>Western>Ancient>Golden Age of Athens>Plato) to find everything online about Plato. But that vision was not up to the task for at least two reasons: first, there is too much material online, and it is constantly being added to and transformed in various ways; second, the exact sort of things people are looking to find do not always neatly fall into one or another predetermined category. The solution to these problems arrived with Google’s leveraging the wisdom of crowds in online search. While the exact nature of Google’s search algorithms are under wraps and constantly changing (to combat those who would game the results), it involves treating individuals’ online behavior as data that informs how online material should be organized. In a sense, Google invents an ontology on the fly that answers to the dimensions of your particular search terms based on what the internet itself has declared is important by such means as page links, clicks, and networks of similar concerns. Google search results are an aggregation of the independent, diverse, and decentralized judgments of everyone online. This permits a truly dynamic ontology that never considers itself finished and never draws sharp boundaries around what is in and outside the bounds of some search.

To illustrate this kind of dynamic ontology, consider the musical genre “heavy metal.” Significantly, the exact origins of the genre are hotly contested, but it is agreed to have emerged out of the late 60s and early 70s efforts of bands like Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath. When I was growing up, Led Zeppelin was widely considered the prototype of the genre, and they would routinely occupy top spots in readers’ polls in music magazines identifying things like “All-Time Greatest Heavy Metal Act.” As the genre took hold among a new generation in the 80s, the heavy blues influence that dominates Zeppelin’s sound gradually faded, so much so that by the mid 2000s I found myself in a curious conversation with a student wearing a Zeppelin T-shirt when I commented on the Iron Maiden album that was just released. In my mind, these were related phenomena, since anyone into Zeppelin would also be into Maiden, at least in the tribal way that Metal fans identify with the whole genre. What I didn’t appreciate is that the categories had long since changed, with Zeppelin and Maiden now widely (but not universally) regarded as members of distinct genres (my student described them as “Heavy Blues” and “80s Metal” respectively). What it means to be “heavy metal” is different from what it was when I was growing up.

There is plenty of room to dispute this new ontology, and competing taxonomies abound among aficionados, just as they do among members of any living, dynamic tradition. A look through the Wikipedia article on Heavy Metal reveals the extent to which these matters remain unsettled and will surely remain unsettled for however long as the genre is a real going concern. As long as the tradition is a living and **evolving** thing, the story of what it means to be “metal” will not be over. As the example shows, those meanings are not fixed even for the long extinct creatures on the family tree. Zeppelin stopped adding new music to their repertoire after John Bonham’s death in 1980 (though even that boundary is contested on account of their various later projects with Bonham’s son), but what a Zeppelin song **means** is still subject to change as its relative location and gravity in the space of popular music shifts and changes. To understand what Zeppelin is, you need to understand the wider environment in which it lives and the company it keeps. In light of this, we can begin to understand the source of Lanier’s concern. In a world in which what a thing is can only be given in terms of its various connections in a wider network of meanings as revealed by the wisdom of crowds, the nature of the individual qua individual may seem displaced.

However, it has already been emphasized that there is no network of meanings without the individual nodes and confluences that define the individuals that make it up. The Wikipedia articles on metal exist only because there are individuals who are passionate about what metal is. In the evolution of musical genres, as in biological evolution, there are individual organisms whose nature cannot be fully given without an accounting of the environment in which they operate, but this is no reason to deny the reality of the particular individuals. The boundaries between species do not constitute any essential feature of the organisms in question, but that does not prevent us from identifying the squirrel in our backyard as an individual squirrel, and it does not mean that our categories are arbitrary or groundless. Fuzzy boundaries do not automatically result in “world wide mush.” As Daniel Dennett (1995) shows, while any competent zoologist can identify individual chimpanzees, there is no organism that can be uniquely identified as “the first chimpanzee” from birth. In the evolutionary tree of life, there are offspring and ancestors, and it makes good sense to identify particular branches with the designation “species.” But the designation of some individual as the first member of a species, as opposed to the rather eccentric offspring of some earlier species, will come later as a “retrospective coronation.” “There is not **and could not be** anything internal or intrinsic to the individuals—or even to the individuals-as-they-fit-into-their-environment—from which it followed that they were—as they later turn out to be—the founders of a new species...whether or not the individual who has that mutation counts as a species-founder or simply as a freak of nature depends on nothing in its individual makeup or biography, but on what happens to subsequent generations—if any—of its offspring” (Dennett, 1995, 99-100, emphasis original). Species cannot be neatly delineated in terms of sharp, essentialist boundaries. Nonetheless, we have to include species in our ontology if we really wish to capture all the information relevant to our efforts to understand the natural world, eschewing an atomistic “greedy reductionism” that would suppose there are only individual organisms and no species after all. “**Of course** you can’t explain all the patterns that interest us at the level of physics (or chemistry, or any one low level). This is undeniably true of such mundane and unperplexing phenomena as traffic jams and pocket calculators; we should expect it to be true of biological phenomena as well”

(Dennett, 1995, 102, emphasis original). A metaphysics that can make sense of what there is in biology will have to admit entities with blurry boundaries.

Applied to persons, this metaphysics addresses the competing concerns of Lanier and Winner alike. We can embrace a fully social and nonatomistic account of what it means to be a particular human being, complete with our constitutive relations to others, while finding a particular place for the individuals and their role in the unfolding of the whole system of interaction as the independent, diverse, and decentralized judges whose points of view are aggregated into the machinery responsible for the growth and evolution of the whole. It should be no surprise that this sort of ontology of the self is foreshadowed in Aristotle, who was interested in biological nature even as his thinking was so often blinkered by an essentialism he inherited from Plato. While Aristotle's account of species is burdened with an unwarranted essentialism, his account of friendship nicely captures the sense in which individual persons overlap with one another to their mutual flourishing. When I regard an intimate as "a second self," such that her life is literally a **part** of my own life, the distinctions between us become blurry and faded even as the distinctions between us and others may become more stark. "When men are friends, they have no need of justice" (Aristotle, c.350BCE).

Moreover, even as we find ourselves entangled in one another's lives such that neither can be properly identified apart from the other, each of us still exerts a distinct force on the whole at our own "narrative center of gravity," such that neither is fully dissolved into the whole. The notion of the self as a center of narrative gravity calls attention to the way a human biography tends to cohere as the story of a single thing. While my life's story will have to include numerous others as literally **part** of the story, such that there is no sharp boundary to distinguish the parts that belong in my biography as not also belonging in the biographies of my friends and associates, there remains a narrative unity to my own life as my own. The stories overlap, but they are not merely the same. As Dennett (1992) emphasizes, this unity emerges even in the extreme case of brain bisection such that a single human individual can be described literally as being of two minds. Although certain sorts of contrived experiments can expose the fact that the hemispheres of their brains are informationally severed from one another, these subjects do not generally experience themselves as less unified than the rest of us.

The hypothesis that the self is a center of narrative gravity cannot be definitively established by any simple knockdown argument, but it is well suited to addressing the concerns of Lanier and Winner alike, and it accounts for the dynamic and nonessential nature of entities that becomes especially apparent to us now that we find ourselves in a richly networked world. This conception of the self indicates that human individuals really are metaphysically like species and musical genres. One's self emerges from the particular facts of one's brain processes just as the species relates to the individuals that constitute it, while those brain processes are informed by and identified in the wider network of our experiences and relations with others, such that the designation of this or that process as being "mine" or "thine" in its origin and significance is often enough a vexed question, like asking whether this or that individual is **really** a new species or whether Zeppelin is **really** a metal band. While the notion of the self as a center of narrative gravity dispenses with the atomism of "one soul per customer," it does not dissolve the individual into nothing. It accounts for the tensions and differences in point of view that are encountered in even the most intimate friendships, while admitting the many finer discriminations among the various and sometimes competing drives, instincts and desires that make us up as individuals. It also scales seamlessly to account for suprapersonal entities like friendships, communities, and nations without the greedy reductionism of atomism or holism. The community of headbangers is made of passionate individuals who do not necessarily agree about whether Zeppelin is the fountain of all that is truly metal, and we each learn more about ourselves and our particular places in the world when we debate the matter on Wikipedia.

When an entity is the result of a process of distributed information processing in the form of an iterated selection algorithm, which stands at the heart of both the invisible hand of the market and the adaptationist perspective on evolution through natural selection, then the ontology of that entity will have to acknowledge dynamic, blurry boundaries. There is good reason to suppose that human individuals as well as the suprapersonal entities they

constitute are such entities, and this fact is especially apparent now that so much of our lives unfolds in the context of a dense information network. Atop our biological evolution is a vast and evolving culture which informs our identities at every turn and causes us to overlap with others around us in complicated ways along all sorts of particular dimensions, even while each of us occupies a particular place as a node of processing that must be admitted as a locus of attraction and repulsion in the wider information processing system of society. Acknowledging this allows us to avoid both the Scylla of atomism and the Charybdis of totalizing holism. As it turns out, this conception of the matter is already apparent in the classical formulations of 19th Century ethical individualism. If anyone counts as a champion of the “fierce individuals” Lanier worries will be dissolved into the “hive mind” of the network, it has to include Mill, Emerson, and Nietzsche, each of whom was equally concerned about the loss of individuality that might accompany participation in a wider social world that too often demands a base and mediocre conformity in lieu of our own independent, diverse, and decentralized judgments. It turns out that Lanier’s concerns are simply their concerns in a contemporary guise.

CARRYING ONE’S SOLITUDE IN THE MIDST OF THE CROWD

Critics of individualism have long mistaken the metaphysics of blurry boundaries for an objection to individualism. As it turns out, 19th Century champions of individualism appreciated the blurriness of the boundaries that separate individuals from one another and which identify particular persons as against the wider social networks they constitute. “Atomism” seems to have been invented in the imaginations of critics who suppose that the individuals extolled by Mill, Emerson, or Nietzsche would have to come into being *ex nihilo* and remain forever aloof from their fellow humans. These critics contend that individualists have failed to account for the social nature of humans, but it is the critics who have failed to see the fuller picture. It is precisely because of our sociality and the resulting temptation to lose our independence and diversity in the mediocrity of the crowd that individualism becomes an important concern.

Mill (1859) expressly recognizes the role of our cultural inheritances in forming our individual identities when he writes, “A person whose desires and impulses are his own - are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture - is said to have a character. One whose desires and impulses are not his own, has no character, no more than a steam engine has character.” There is no hint here of an “unencumbered self,” but a direct appeal to maintain one’s independence and diversity as a center of force that evaluates and pushes back with respect to a wider social world. The goal of individual liberty is not merely one’s own improvement, but “human advancement” generally. “The despotism of custom is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement...the only unfailing and permanent source of improvement is liberty, since by it there are as many possible independent centres of improvement as there are individuals.”

Likewise, Emerson (1841) advises us to “Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the Eternal was stirring at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being.” Indeed, Emerson sees no tension whatsoever between advocating heroic individualism on the one hand while simultaneously asserting the ultimate unity of humankind in the divinity of the Oversoul. Although his repeated cries for self-reliance and finding one’s solitude may be easily mistaken as enjoining an atomistic conception of the self, there is no question that Emerson understands the importance of sociality and friendship. “There is a class of persons to whom by all spiritual affinity I am bought and sold; for them I will go to prison, if need be.” Since a lengthy meditation on the nature of Emersonian solitude would carry us too far afield, it will have to suffice to recognize that solitude does not mean becoming a hermit. To the contrary, one’s solitude consists in getting in touch with one’s own highest conception of one’s self, and this is something one does to the great benefit of those all around. Meanwhile, the importance of self-reliance and independence of judgment in the process of revealing the deeper truths regarding the nature of the good life is ever present: “Your genuine action will explain itself, and will explain your other genuine actions. Your conformity explains nothing.” Unless I am the

particular individual I am in all authenticity, I have nothing to teach my fellows. In conformity, the wisdom of crowds gives way to the madness of the mob Lanier rightly fears.

Though possessed of a radically different temperament, these Emersonian themes are picked up and extended by Nietzsche. Like Emerson, Nietzsche champions a hard and determined “heroic individualism” while eschewing any atomistic or solipsistic notion of the self. In the course of his exhaustive documentation of the profound affinity between Nietzsche and Emerson, Stack (1992) argues, “Emerson and Nietzsche, despite their respect for, and promotion of, individuality, were primarily concerned with superior types of human beings who would rejuvenate culture, who would provide a center about which a higher, ennobling, life-enhancing culture could be spun. The streak of existential individualism that runs through the writings of Emerson and Nietzsche is real enough and sincere enough, but atomistic individualism was not the goal of their philosophical aspirations.” Echoing Emerson’s call for self-reliance, Nietzsche (1882) declares in *Gay Science* 335, “We, however, **want to become those we are**—human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves.” In aphorism 290 of the *Gay Science*, Nietzsche explains that, “One thing is needful: that a human being should **attain** satisfaction with himself, whether it be by means of this or that poetry and art; only then is a human being at all tolerable to behold.” Of special significance in these passages is the original emphasis calling our attention to the assertion that becoming an individual is an accomplishment. We are not born who we are; we set out to become something. Making something of one’s self is a creative act, and it happens in the full context of a culture and a society.

His explicit rejection of atomism is perhaps most clear in Nietzsche’s conception of becoming one’s self as involving a “politics of the soul.” Like Dennett, Nietzsche recognized that the fuzziness of the ontological boundaries in question are not only as between individual persons and the suprapersonal entities they constitute but also between the person and the subpersonal drives that constitute the individual. He at once renounces an atomic conception of the self and explores the possibilities for the creation and discovery of a better conception in its place:

←“One must also above all give the finishing stroke to that other and more portentous atomism which Christianity has taught best and longest, the SOUL-ATOMISM. Let it be permitted to designate by this expression the belief which regards the soul as something indestructible, eternal, indivisible, as a monad, as an atomon: this belief ought to be expelled from science! Between ourselves, it is not at all necessary to get rid of “the soul” thereby, and thus renounce one of the oldest and most venerated hypotheses—as happens frequently to the clumsiness of naturalists, who can hardly touch on the soul without immediately losing it. But the way is open for new acceptations and refinements of the soul-hypothesis; and such conceptions as “mortal soul,” and “soul of subjective multiplicity,” and “soul as social structure of the instincts and passions,” want henceforth to have legitimate rights in science” (Nietzsche, 1886).

Nietzsche is forever reminding us that the meaning and constitution of any given individual is a function of his wider cultural and biological inheritance, and that making something of one’s self out of the chaos of one’s drives and instincts is always an accomplishment and not something given from the start. As Thiele (1990) explains, “The individual is not so much a reality as a goal. The heroic task, assumed only by the few, is to become a sovereign individual.” It requires genealogy, aesthetic sensibility, honesty, and creativity to execute Zarathustra’s imperative and “become who you are!” Combining both the assertion of one’s individuality and one’s indebtedness to others in becoming who we are into a single obligation, Nietzsche observes that, “One repays a teacher badly if one always remains nothing but a pupil” (Nietzsche, 1883, 190). This sums up in a single observation the ethical force of “Ethical Individualism,” and it neatly addresses the ontological concerns of Lanier and Winner alike.

Returning our attention to the problem of the individual situated in a social world that explicitly seeks to leverage the wisdom of crowds, we can see that Lanier is right to fear a complacent conformity that flattens our cultural experience and undermines our efforts to make ourselves into the fierce individuals necessary for the whole enterprise. At the same time, there is reason for optimism. As the testimony of the 19th Century individualists

indicates, society has long threatened individuality, while liberty and individual empowerment have been the antidote to the poison of empty conformity. While it may be far easier today to sink into the oblivion of anonymous mediocrity, it is also far easier to stake out one's own place in the culture and invent new possibilities and investigate ever widening horizons. In light of this, cultural evolution has the resources to be a self-correcting system. Given the vast numbers of individuals now plugged into the networks of evolving human culture, we have every reason to think that new experiments in living, in creating and becoming who one is, are liable to abound all around us, challenging whatever rut we may find ourselves in. In the churning and dynamic culture of the information age, individuals are forced to exercise their individual judgment at every turn. Lanier's own advice for avoiding the threat of digital Maoism as it is expressed the tools of the information age is to "resist the easy grooves they guide you into" (Lanier, 2010b, 22).

That there are such easy grooves cannot be disputed, but they are more shallow today than in any other moment in human history, and not despite our increased reliance on the wisdom of crowds but because of it. We have unleashed the potential of individuals to finally become exactly who they are; are we to suppose they will choose to be less that they might be? If they do, will we not notice? Will we not call their attention to it? Will we not flame them mercilessly until they are forced to either recant and make something of themselves after all or, resisting our accusations and defending themselves, show us once and for all that they really were individuals all along? It is difficult to imagine a world in which everyone has a voice, but they all sing in unornamented unison, for Lanier's advice to resist the easy grooves is itself a part of the wider of system, an input into the vast information processing of society, and we have reason to think it will be heeded insofar as it is wise and as long as individuals have the liberty and power to bring to bear their own independent, diverse, and decentralized judgments.

While proponents of individualism should remain vigilant against the threat of base conformity and thoughtless mob mentality in all its manifestations, there is nothing intrinsically collectivist about the philosophy of our new technologies as they strive to leverage the wisdom of crowds. In the extended marketplace of ideas, individualism wins insofar it is true. There is good reason to be optimistic that there will be room for all sorts of "fierce individuals" in the flourishing culture of our online future.

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