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Individuality or Simply Influence?

In years past, it was argued that the true beginning of individualistic thinking had begun during the Middle Ages, however, that does not mean that that is the case. What makes someone an individual? How is individuality developed? How is it oppressed? Is individualism real? These are questions that people have pondered for centuries. The short answer is yes individuality does exist separating itself from groupthink, but not in the way that most people believe it to occur. Individuality is actually brought about through group thinking. What makes it separate from the group is one’s interpretation of the information that is provided by a group. Domenico Scandella (more commonly known as Menocchio) is a perfect example of how an individual can take multiple influences and develop his own outlook on how the world truly is.

When the reader is first introduced to Menocchio he is being interviewed by the Italian Inquisition on accounts of blasphemy against the Church. Needless to say, that Menocchio’s ideas are quite unique to both modern and older audiences alike when it comes to his views of religion. For example, when describing the creation of the world Menocchio depicts a very different scene than what the Bible describes, “I have said that, in my opinion, all was chaos. . . and out of that bulk a mass formed – just as cheese is made out of milk – and worms appeared in it, and these were the angels. The most holy majesty decreed that these should be God and the angels, and among the angels, there was also God, *he too having been created out of that mass at the same time*”. [[1]](#endnote-1) In this quote, Menocchio describes his version of the story of creation using symbolism through cheese and worms where the cheese represents the chaos that existed before creation and from that [the most holy majesty] created God and the angels to govern the Earth. This goes against multiple key elements in the Christian faith. First, God is supposed to be the creator of everything. Second, the way that the world was created was not through chaos but in an organized order. However, is this analogy truly that unusual (despite making his beliefs known to anyone who would listen in a society that was very unforgiving to those who strayed from the norm)? In a way, it is understandable how Menocchio came up with this metaphor for creation (despite it being so bizarre) since it is something that could be observed. Observation of nature, was one of the many ways that an individual learned the practicality of life and how the life cycle worked (especially for those who had a harder time to access an education). Therefore, it is understandable, to an extent, how Menocchio was able to come up with such a bizarre but strangely appropriate analogy when it comes to the matter of Earth’s creation. Thus transferring an element of group thinking into an individualistic outlook by taking his experience while applying it to an issue that he was passionately involved in.

Moreover, it is apparent that a great deal of Menocchio’s ideas and beliefs stemmed from his readings over the years. However, one must give credit to the printing press, which was developed in the fifteenth century which gave the public a new way to access knowledge since books suddenly became easier to supply because there was a method to make books became more efficient. Previously, monks were the ones that made a majority of the books and kept them in the monasteries since the literary works were so valuable since each book was made from scratch, “The invention of the alphabet which broke this monopoly for the first time about fifteen centuries before Christ, wasn’t enough, however, to make the written word accessible to everyone. Only printing made this a more concrete possibility”. [[2]](#endnote-2) Because of the spread of literature, Menocchio was able to have access to many more ideas and beliefs than he would have a century before. However, what was key to transfer this new wealth of knowledge from group thinking to individualistic thinking was how Menocchio perceived the literary works, “More than the text, then, what is important is the key to his reading, a screen that he unconsciously placed between himself and the printed page: a filter that emphasized certain words while obscuring others, that stretched the meaning of a word, taking it out of its context, that acted on Menocchio’s memory and distorted the very words of the text”.[[3]](#endnote-3) In fact, Menocchio has described how reading has prompted him into considering his own beliefs and if they are correct, “The diversity of beliefs and practices described by Mandeville led Menocchio to ask himself about the foundations of his own beliefs and acts”.[[4]](#endnote-4) However, that is not all.

Menocchio’s work as a miller also allowed for him to come in contact with many kinds of people thus exposing himself to other influences that could affect his own outlook, “The occupation of miller, consequently, was one of the most widespread, and their prominence in the medieval heretical sects and, in even greater measure, among Anabaptists is not surprising”.[[5]](#endnote-5) Indeed, by haven been exposed to other ideas, beliefs, and experiences one’s perception of themselves, their beliefs, and what they have come to know through experience could change aspects of themselves and thus affect those around them. Thus establishing a sense of individualism in an area that has not been exposed to such elements.

Menocchio is a very interesting case in that through his perception of the world around him and the access to literary works that expanded his horizons he was able to change what was considered groupthink, and by his own unconscious perception developed his own ideas and presented his own individuality through his ideas. However, despite living during the time of the Renaissance, which was argued to be the true showing of a person identifying as an individual with their own ideas, this does not mean that such ideas and traits of individuality. It is more than likely that there has always been individualistic elements throughout all time periods. It is all a matter of how each person perceives the information given to them and then formulates their own ideas. Perhaps the reason why the Renaissance is considered the time where individualism became the most apparent is due to the fact that the development of technology made documentation of various subjects a lot easier to do.

Work Cited

Ginzburg, Carlo. *The Cheese And The Worms*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins

University Press, 1980.

1. End Notes

   Ginzburg, Carlo. *The Cheese And The Worms*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins

   University Press, 1980), 53. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 119. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)