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Philosophical essay (topic IV)

“Individualization does not mean loneliness, lack of relationships, but the formation of new forms of life in which the individual has to produce and stage their biography on their own.”

In 1993 Ulrich Beck said that *“Individualization does not mean loneliness, lack of relationships, but the formation of new forms of life in which the individual has to produce and stage their own biography.”* It can quite certainly be discussed whether this statement is accurate, or even in context of time *still* accurate, observing that it was made 30 years ago.

In general the statement looks upon individualization in a positive way.

As Beck’s quote mainly debates this term (“individualization”) it is essential to first truly understand what it really means.

Substantially, individualization itself is only a possibility given by society to people so that they can realize their own ideas or preferences. However, what follows as a result of that possibility during a process is to become an individual. This is what matters and what Beck’s statement tries to emphasize.

To better understand what I mean, let’s take the following example:

In China students need to wear standardized school uniforms. Individualization, at least when it comes to expression through clothing, does not happen. The possibility is not given.

However, in most continental European schools students are allowed to wear whatever they want. By allowing the students to express themselves (i.e. their individual identity) through their clothing, a step is taken towards the possibility of becoming “more individual”, called individualization.

Thus, when people get more and more of these possibilities to choose and invent by themselves, they become what we call individuals.

As for that, Beck states that “loneliness” or “lack of relationships” will *not* occur during individualization but rather the development of a single person’s “own biography”.

On the other hand, the question is, how will a person not grow lonely when they discard what others do or what a norm specifies?

To answer this question and everything which follows, we should divide the statement into the two main following insights: First, becoming an individual does not mean becoming lonely. And second, becoming an individual does mean living out a new, own idea of fundamentally anything: Creating an “own biography” in a “new form of life”.

Let's use another example to underline part one: We'll imagine a person who studies cosmic science, has blue hair and a red car and, not to forget, loves rock music. These are that person's lifestyle choices and there is probably not a single individual on the planet who does the same. Person number two does not use any car but rather their mountain bike, studies art and has blond hair. Both of these persons are individuals. These two people, if Beck's statement was false, would be lonely and not related to each other or anybody else. But, what if both of them meet because person number two likes person number one's blue hair, or a friend of them studies cosmic science, too? Going on, it only becomes clear that individualization does not cause loneliness, and, in fact, is even necessary to create connections.

Why? Because, as we just found out, being an individual consists of so many different aspects, (especially when compared to having less individualization) bringing people together on their basis. Or in other words, evoking a curiosity towards each other. That leaves us at the point where we can say that Beck is overall correct with the first part of his statement.

To consider life on the foundation of what we've concluded, we could even assume that individualization is essential when it comes to engaging with people.

Now we can focus on the quote's second part, which doesn't primarily deal with relationships but a person's own development.

We can examine it from completely different positions, as it debates life, and the difference that individualization makes.

We can question the positive impression the statement gave us in the beginning. Again, why? Because of the verb "has to", standing in context with a person's, now, *obligations*: being an individual.

Meaning, it is now a must to people that they create and live out their own interests.

A student who had to wear a school uniform is now forced to think of something else to wear, because school uniforms were abolished.

This exposes everything we've said about individualization from a completely different angle. Does it force people into doing something they don't want to? Could it even create a competition between individuals to become the best individual or the "most iconic"?

Imagine, there'd only be one sort of car from which you could choose or, more precisely, could not choose.

But that's not the case since nowadays you can even choose the color of your wheels or the material the seats are made of. Of course (not to mention painting your car by yourself) there is not an infinite amount of options, but what we can see is that everybody has to at least think about the car they want to have - made possible through the process of individualization.

Because yes, people are forced to do something out of the (previous) ordinary. But they are forced to overthink and to be creative: Through individualization, people actually become self-dependent.

But how come that individualization can just *mostly* be seen that positively, as we said in our explanation?

Concerning this we need to look, again, at what we've concluded in the previous paragraphs, in which we did not only mention self-dependence but also obligations that come with the personal and creative freedom individualization gives us--having more freedom means having more you have to care about on your own, not being dependent on anybody.

Therefore, another simple example: Compare a person working for a large company like Samsung to a person who runs their own business, producing chocolate that comes in forty different colors. Who of them has individualized their life more? It is the person running their own business. With the freedom that person was given by the rule that individualization sets, they quite literally choose to become their own boss. But with that they also choose to become the person who will manage everything, who has to decide on what to do, and so on.

We could even come back to the example of deciding what to wear- The obligation here is quite simple: Deciding what to wear.

By that, we can summarize that with individualization will not only come more self-dependence but also more responsibilities and obligations.

Having analyzed both parts of Beck's statement now, I still want to question whether both of these parts can actually be connected as they are. Because by saying "but" after the first comma it might seem as if Beck wanted to imply that loneliness (part one) excludes the development of own preferences (part two). However, to clarify that, it is simply the comparison directly connected to the effect that individualization has, not between each other. So what is important to observe here is the "individualization does not mean [...]" in the beginning.

By the language Beck uses, he achieves what he wants to: Individualization is important and right. Loneliness and lack of relationships are undeniably something negative, which he then compares to what he thinks individualization is (and which we agreed to for the most part), making it something positive.

Throughout everything that we have concluded until now, we can say that we agree with Ulrich Beck and his view on individualization.

But besides that, we could ask ourselves: Is it only possible to become an individual through individualization? As we constantly have debated what individualization means, whether it's good or not or how it connects to life, we have ignored that, at the end of any life, everybody will have written their "own biography", just as Beck says. Because even without individualization, everybody will have had a different life experience and has thus become an individual.

As for that, we need to look back on everything we've agreed on and we will realize one final fact: Individualization does make it easier not to grow lonely (as we claimed it to be essential) such as it makes it easier for life to have many more different facets, and to produce and stage a biography that is *more* individual.

We should instead look at it the following way: The arguments that were mentioned in Beck's statement are correct, however, under the condition, that individualization just reinforces the meaning and impact of these particular arguments when compared to when individualization is not or less present.

In order to come to a conclusion on this text, and to supplement Beck's statements where necessary, let us look at the findings we have reached in each case:

1. individualization is a process in which the individual, through the possibilities that individualization creates, can increasingly decide for themselves how to live out their personality.
2. individualization means growing self-determination and responsibility, in which case it is
3. the personal preference to like it or not. And,
4. to come back to Beck's quotation, individualization is the simplest and partly the only possibility not only to make contacts by evoking curiosity but moreover to have written a completely own biography characterizing oneself at the end of one's life.

In my opinion and summarizing this essay, we can say that Beck's basic concept is correct and with the "adjustments" 1.- 4. above it could be expressed even closer to real life in the year of 2022.

Ich versichere, dass ich die Arbeit selbstständig verfasst und keine anderen als die angegebenen Quellen benutzt habe und alle Entlehnungen als solche gekennzeichnet habe.

Malida Riemer

zusätzliche Quellen:

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