

Individuate, Divide and Reign

- King: Times are changing.
- Slave: What do you mean master?
- K: In old times, the power of Kings was absolute, no need for excuses.
- S: And that is the way it should be?!
- K: Was that a question or an assertion?
- S: An assertion master ... what else could it be?
- K: Good. But today we need to find new ways to dominate. Bare power is not enough anymore. Modern times have brought about a sensitivity which I find difficult to understand. As if the powerful are asked to lie about their power.
- S: What do you mean?
- K: Well, while in the past it would have been enough to punish someone's body for his disobedience (e.g., torture him) so as for him to serve as an example to all others, today with the new liberal spirit I'm not any more allowed to act in this manner ... it is considered inhumane.
- S: As one of those who might be punished, this sounds like a good change for me!
- K: You see slave ... there are good reasons for you to be in your position as slave and for me to be in my position as King.
- S: I am sure there are, but please explain to me WHY?

- K: Because you think that your situation today is better than your situation in the past, when I could punish you without much explaining.
- S: Is it?
- K: No, for nowadays I exercise my power by dominating you as such. But my bare power is hidden now and you don't even realize it!
- S: You are the King after all, so you seem to know very well how to use power!
- K: I do ... if only because many of those under my rod allow me to hold it.

* * *

So we are told people *have* minds. But people are not people anymore, they are *individuals*. Nowadays, it is individuals who have minds and it is their minds that serve them to express their particularity.

Individuality has been extensively criticized as well as praised in modernity. Its critics have pointed at the dangers that individuality poses to community. Supporters point at individuality as that which stands in opposition to the blind submission of self (a related term we will talk more about later) to custom and tradition (Guisinger & Blatt, 1994). We agree with both of these benevolent perspectives, but we are not going to dwell any further into them for what we worry about has to do with different, though related, angles of the concept of the individual in the social sphere and more specifically in education.

'Individual' is a funny word. Individual, literally, is a distinct, indivisible entity, often one among many others of a similar kind. A kind (group), an entity from which nothing is divisible. In this sense, individual could be any human being by the mere fact of being an auto-poietic system—in Maturana and Varela's (1987) definition of that which is alive (we come back to their ideas later)—namely, that which self-produces the components that are needed to maintain the system in action and in this sense, let us say different from a robot (at least till today). Individual in this sense makes sense. Individual also makes sense as a person who is part of a group, but then it is not the same individual as when we talk about someone's individuality. The truth be said, the modernist individual/individuating meaning of individual as a sovereign, self-contained entity cut off from others, makes little sense.

In our daily modern sense, then, the notion of individual is at least ambiguous. It points at two directions—one which we will call, for lack of a better word, outside or physical—when we say, for example, ‘there is only one individual (person) waiting outside’, and the other which points inside, when we say, for example, ‘every person is special, we are all unique individuals’. It is about this second sense of individuality that we worry about—the assumed (second) individual within the (first) individual, a duality which reminds us, again, of our previous chapters (the homunculus).

An individual carrying an individual. A bit redundant, don’t you think? Who needs two individuals, especially when one is not at all accessible to our senses and just assumed? A bit like ‘mind’ before. An individual who carries another individual inside. What exactly could this mean? A physical individual that carries a non-material one inside? And why is it that the immaterial one is more real than the material in all that relates to our ‘true’ (authentic from Greek *authentikos* ‘original, genuine, principal’, from *authentēs* ‘one acting on one’s own authority’, from *autos* ‘self’ (see auto-) plus *hentes* ‘doer, being’) being. Is it possible that that which is not accessible to our senses and cannot be measured is more real than that which we can touch, see and measure? (In some ‘religious’ traditions this is so, but could this be so in our ‘enlightened rational’ tradition? Could it be that rational enlightenment is ‘religious’?)

When the individual inside is assumed to express the singularity of our individual outside (our physical individual) as being special and/or unique when compared to other individuals, it sits inside our body, which is indivisible (individual), and yet we see them as having a separate existence—as if the individual would be schizophrenic.

Schizophrenia: a mental disorder characterized by abnormal social behavior and failure to recognize what is ‘real’. What is real? Real must have something to do with things being accessible to our senses and thus to measurement. If not, then the scientific revolution is in trouble. Could it be that the individual (the one inside) is similar to good old ‘soul’, which all individuals (supposedly) have (within certain religious traditions)? Could it be that ‘individual’, in this case, is the secular term for soul? And if it is, what are we supposed to think about it? Should we assume it has the same empirical status as soul, which any ‘rational’ human knows there isn’t? Reader, worry not, we will later account on all that can be said from a post-modern perspective on these issues, including a critique of rationality and enlightenment, but we will try to do it without

overturning an empirical paradigm. As Kant argued, we have no access to noumena, the things themselves; it is only to phenomena, the appearances, constituted in our experience that we have access to. We do impose the structure of our concepts onto the objects of our knowledge and the thing in itself (*ding an sich*) is by definition entirely independent of our experience of it (Ameriks, 1982). In that sense, Kant is right that we have no access to reality. And yet, reality is somewhat available to us through mathematics and sciences, by prescribing the structures of the world as we experience it, while not describing it as it really is. Reality is that we have no access to that which is not available to us (Luhmann, 2006).

In education, we talk a lot about individuals. Learning processes, we say, should be adapted to individuals and their ‘capacities’ [Latin *capacitatem* (nominative *capacitas*) ‘breadth, capacity, capability of holding much’, noun of state from *capax* (genitive *capacis*) ‘able to hold much’, from *capere* ‘to take’ (see *capable*)]. Individuals have different capacities. That is why some are able to understand better than others and do better than others in tests. If so, humans are not equal (equality now is not any more self-evident not even in the tradition that cherished Jefferson’s/Franklin’s declaration); each individual needs the educational process to be adapted to him or her.

Here we should be careful. No one denies that different people might learn differently. But, when we speak about different individuals having different capacities to learn, what exactly do we mean? Do we mean that humans might learn at different rates? Or do we mean that some humans might be able to learn some things that other humans might not?

Pay attention that the first question allows all humans to learn it all, at different rates though, but all are equal in the possibility of learning it all, given enough time. The second is trickier, not all humans can learn it all, even when given enough time. This second understanding implies that even when given extended periods of time, not all humans might be able to learn it all. Some humans can learn more/better than others, not all are equal. The difference is not anymore one of time at task (to rehearse = quantitative), but qualitative: some humans are better/more ‘intelligent’ than others. ‘Intelligent’ is one of those adjectives applied to certain individuals but not to others, one which cannot shine all by itself and is in need of another adjective to shine (e.g., dumb).

Who would be interested in supporting the first or the second option? Somebody could ask if science has not already offered a ‘scientific’ answer to this question. Well, it all depends on what you believe science to be. If

you believe traditional psychological perspectives to be a science, then you might believe that indeed there are qualitative differences among humans; but if you look into the hard sciences, you will find it difficult to justify any such differences. From within the hard sciences the genetic differences between humans is about 0.1 percent on average (Wong, 2014), not the 30–40–50 percent that fails our schools. We have little to say about the 2–4 percent of individuals who fail because of physiological differences (all empirically available), otherwise called deficiencies, other than we believe they should be supported and encouraged to reach the most they can, and what is even more important, we believe they should be recognized and respected for whatever they do.

Standing on the side of the psychological (social) sciences as opposed to the hard sciences has more to it than just a preference; it has the acceptance of hierarchies in that which is human—high/low, smart/stupid, intelligent/dumb.

Come to think about it. If you are among the successful (which usually means the well-to-do), there is no reason for you to be on the side of the hard sciences. Being there would mean you give up on your ‘birth right’—the right to say you are what you are by your special nature and not by the fact of being simply human. Your individuality counts, it makes you different, better, qualitatively better. If you are among those who fail, you have two options. The first is to side with the hard sciences, which means agreeing that the only difference is one of toil and sweat, investment in and through the rehearsal of the activity to be done; the second choice is to side with the social sciences and agree that you are qualitatively worse and thus (through this agreement) free yourself of doing the extra effort (invest more time in rehearsing) to reach the same level all others can. It seems that at times some humans prefer to accept that they are qualitatively worse than others rather than agree they are unwilling to put more effort.

But let us be careful here, for otherwise we might end up putting the responsibility on the poor—who are exceedingly represented among the percentages that fail in schools, again for being poor. Making an extra effort or spending the extra time is not always easy. Many times the poor and the marginalized cannot afford to make the extra effort or spend the extra time needed to rehearse that which they want to know how to do. This of course does not mean that all want/need/or will learn the same; it just means all could. Moreover, when learning individuals (the ones outside) express their learning, they do so in multiple different ways. We

all might learn the same poem or algorithm, but what we do with it later is different and we are judged by these expressions as being better or worse fitted for certain activities or as holding to some type of ‘intelligence’—a word to which we will return later.

Individuals (remember it means indivisible) are always with others. Never alone. Even when you think of individual as singular and unique (as when we think of it as inside), its singularity and uniqueness can only be perceived as a difference from other individuals who, for the sake of the comparison, need to be present thus, again, not allowing for an individual conception as solipsistic. Moreover the individual ‘outside’ can never be individual for if we recognize him, he cannot be alone—I need to come into contact with the individual to point at his/her existence, to recognize him, even if only recalled in my mind, thus making him indivisible yes, but from what is now a couple.

Individual ‘inside’ suffers from the same problems as mind, for by being inside he or she is not available to be known. In general, talking about individuals in the educational sphere—a sphere dominated by social interactions—is ridiculous, to say the least. Even if there are individuals, these come into being by human acts of coupling, not individuality, and have no expectation of survival if left as such (individuals/alone). An individual child, just born, left all by himself will not survive, someone needs to feed him and care for him before he can do it by himself and even then he will not be alone for he will be populated by other people and interactions (we will return to this later).

Learning is not an individual activity, the same as no other human activity is ever individual. If this is so then, what is this talk about individuality in education all about? We have to admit that talking about the individual and attaching to him or her unique singular qualities has the benefit of allowing us to identify those who can be pointed at as carrying the responsibility for the success or failure of the educational activity.

What is truly interesting is that traditionally failure seems to be more individualized than success. The child has not learned enough, or has not invested enough effort and thus has failed. These characterizations are relatively courteous for they carry no necessary essentializing meanings. If the child did not invest enough effort, that is to say, if he did not work hard enough, there is still a chance, a possibility he will in the future do and thus the failure does not characterize his being (his mind, his individuality inside) but is just a descriptor of his activity outside that can be changed, if by chance or fate he comes to work harder. When we get nasty,

as we do so many times in education, we come to characterize the failure as the product of the individual, this time inside an individual who can be ‘lazy’ or ‘dumb’. Now things get more difficult; we have characterized the inside and given that the inside is not available to us, we should first question how we dare do this. As with the mind, we have asked neurologists and neurosurgeons if they have come to find ever dumbness or laziness when wondering in people’s heads and their answer has been a clear and loud no! If they have not found it who are we, educators (or adults, in general), to say that this is the way things are. Putting the blame on the individual, inside his individuality, which is unavailable to our senses, sounds nasty. What are we trying to do when doing this? Are we making sure that only the one who has not learned successfully takes the blame thus saving ourselves and the multiple contexts that surround us the need to bear any responsibility?

Interestingly, on the other hand, when dealing with success we are much more predisposed to share the blame. The very, very successful students also get to be blamed, but this time we call them with cherished terms; some we even call ‘genius’, another word that identifies individuals inside but paradoxically hiding its historical etymological meaning from the Latin *genius* from which we get the gene, that which we all carry. It is funny how words change their meanings or should we say how we change their use (for meanings they do not have). Shouldn’t we ask about the historical context in which we change the use of words?

When pointing at the inside and putting the blame on the individual characteristics that are only available to us (those in power—teachers, adults) for we have the power to identify them, to state their existence, what can we expect the ‘individual’ to do? He, as the neurologists, knows nothing about what dumbness is, inside. He just knows it has been stated by an authority that has the power to bring it into being. He must wonder: If dumbness is hidden and only available to the powerful that make it come into existence, is there anything that “*I*” can do?

Again, we worry not just about the usage of words but about what alternatives the ‘representations’ we hold can offer to those who fail. It is not that we don’t know of children who invest no efforts (some of us were those children), we just worry about the metaphors and the representations we create with the words we use and the options these constructs offer to those who get these representations attached to them. A failing child characterized and essentialized in his inside knows not what to do. He can only join in the representation and adopt it knowing now there is

nothing he can do for it is his essence and this cannot be changed for it is invisible and recognized only by those who presumably know best. What is worse, he might realize the value of the representation and adopt it as an adaptive step in a world dominated by the powerful, those able to make definitions, even when these are unavailable for empirical examination. If he is dumb, he can stick to his laziness for hard work will not change the facts. A justification now on the side of the oppressed has been made available. Better to rest on an unavailable lack for which we have no response-ability than to take response-ability for our lives.

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- King: Difficult to follow.
 Slave: What is so difficult? They make sense to me!
 K: I think the argument does not work well.
 S: Enlighten me Your Majesty.
 K: I'm sure height influences your possibilities of jumping and hand size your potential to play piano, so individual differences make a difference.
 S: Well I'm not so sure you can argue that. We could have different piano sizes for different hand sizes as we did before mass production started (and have even today). As for jumping, while males relative to females jump higher, this appears to be due to larger thigh and calf girth. I've read somewhere that when jump height was examined in relationship to girth, no gender differences were found.
 K: Ahhh ... how do you know all this?
 S: Birth, lineage?
 K: What?
 S: I meant Google. In any case, these differences are not the ones the authors are complaining about. They are all available to all observers and are measurable too.
 K: So what are they complaining about?
 S: The ones you base your kingship on.
 K: You are lucky I'm in a good mood today ... taxes day, you know! If we lived in an older era, you know how I could use my power on your body... Those were so less complicated times!
 S: Yes, you have mentioned that already.
 K: That today is taxes collection day?

S: No, no. You're right that things were less complicated in the past when it came to power. With power so nicely hidden nowadays, things are way more complex!.

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