

# INDIVIDUALITY

CFA VOYSEY

## **The Creative Spirit**

I have written these chapters in the earnest hope of encouraging my fellow-men to believe and feel the creative spirit within everyone, which while stimulating thought, leads on to mutual sympathy and true union. And so through the working of natural laws, we come to create that beauty which draws us onward and upward.

## **A Beneficent and Omnipotent Controlling Power**

Let us assume there is a beneficent and omnipotent controlling power, that is perfectly good and perfectly loving; and that our existence here, is for the purpose of growing individual characters. These are the propositions upon which all the following conclusions are based, and the fertile soil out of which our thoughts must grow. This basis of order, and singleness of purpose, will affect our outlook upon nature, and what we make of her must always primarily depend on our attitude of mind towards her.

## **There is no Finality to Human Thought – Extension is its Law**

The idea of extension is one of the mightiest powers with which we are endowed. However right we are, there remains the idea that we might be more so; there is no finality to human thought – extension is its law. But it seems, human extension and development takes place in alternating spiritual and material directions; as when we sleep for a period, while our bodies being freed from our minds recover those forces that in our waking hours, are the handmaids of our thoughts and feelings. Thus a generation or so is devoted to material needs, and brings forth the engine and the motor and machines in all their manifold forms, making even man into a machine until he shall awaken to a more spiritual activity, and rising above the strengthened forces of his material nature he shall rejoice in a fuller manhood. Surely it is true that war arouses the nobler side of our nature while material prosperity drags us down to the more animal state. So, too, human suffering of all kinds has a softening and mellowing effect and stimulates the growth of all our virtues. Pain produces endeavour, and sorrow brings wisdom. Physical suffering is the parent of pity. We are driven by disease to discover the everlasting laws of nature. And suffering kindles our sympathy for the sorrowful and wages war against selfishness. Dissatisfaction must precede all reform. And so we must overcome evil with good.

As all reforms are first born in one mind, it must be from individual thought and feeling that progress flows. We know that restlessness and discontent are signs of movement. We are advancing most when discontented with ourselves. And we are in that way driven to look for life's essentials, the stable forces of nature, and the most permanent qualities, in order that our building, whatever it may be, may endure. What then are these essentials if not the moral sentiments, spiritual ideas or thoughts having a reality more real than matter; as for instance, reverence, love, justice, mercy, honesty, candour, generosity, humility, loyalty, order, and dignity. These are the real objects of virtue and the common bonds of union between all men in all times and in all places.

Our minds expand with the contemplation of matters of universal interest, and fundamental ideas of lasting importance, while we are narrowed and checked in our sympathy by microscopic enquiry

into personal taste and minor details of daily life, although be it remembered, the details of our daily life are the means by which in great measure, the emotions can be aroused and cultivated, depending as they do on our faculty of comparison for their right effect and application. All questions must be brought before the bar of our reason; and each man must assess their relative values according to his temperament, heredity and tradition – hence our differences and therefore our dependence one on another.

If we all had the same affections in like degree, there would be no exchange of ideas, no progress, and dependence and reliance upon each other would be impossible. Dependence kindles love between man and man – independence tends to stifle it. Difference involves friction, and friction involves heat, and heat is force.

A world without individual differences of mind and body is unthinkable.

Yet paradoxical as it may seem, we unite in the reverence and love we cherish for the moral sentiments, because in their varied degrees there is a common basis. It is therefore upon these faculties that individuality must be built.

## **Intellectual and Spiritual Culture**

Intellectual culture is far more dependent on social and material conditions than is spiritual culture, and so we find individuality cannot be expressed by mere knowledge of affairs, but must rely mainly on moral sentiments and the exercise of reason, in order to establish personality. Hence we find no two minds will record the same facts in exactly the same manner: though making use of the same emotions they will differ in degree. Degrees of intellectual and spiritual culture have always existed, and mark the differences between men far more deeply and truly than any physical differences can do. Seldom do we find the mind and spirit in the same person on equal planes of development.

The scientific mind is often so absorbed with material facts that reason is allowed to slumber. Logical conclusions quite clear to the spiritually active mind, are lost on the materialistic investigator of matter. His conventional methods of enquiry are inapplicable to a spiritual outlook. Theologians will say science is against religion, but no truth can be harmful to any other truth. What is vital and true in the material world must harmonise and agree with all that is vital and true in the spiritual world. Each individual can, if he will, reason in both spheres and find agreement in all vital principles. It is collectivist dogmas and established formulas about which men fight. If the author of matter and spirit be all-powerful and all-good, it is strictly logical to say the verities in the material sphere must harmonise with those in the spiritual, and that no good mind would allow evil to exist except for a good purpose if it were all-powerful. We may conceive of evil being the result of man's misuse of his powers, and being in a state of development he must be imperfect, and his imperfection is to him evil, but to the Creator it may be a necessary part of His gift to us of free will. And therefore a good in disguise. For by our blunders and mistakes we learn all virtues. No virtue could be known but for preceding sin, no light without darkness. And so in our struggle for sincerity against popular conventions we strengthen individuality. Each man who desires to have a clear mind of his own must think all these questions out for



himself; they cannot be settled by collective action. And it is a mercy it is so, for our personal views are of infinite importance in the moulding of character.

### The Tyranny of Style

Circumstances often change without changing the mode of expression, whereby the latter loses its quality of fitness. In days of mail, a coat of arms denoted the manner of man that wore it. The loss of fitness, to those who regard the law of fitness as divine, is a blemish and a violation of the sense of reverence. We see innumerable architectural features made use of, long after the circumstances that gave them birth have ceased to exist. Forms and symbols are retained, on sentimental grounds, and because of their associations, long after their meaning has been forgotten.

There are two very distinct types of mind that we must recognise in this connection. The one is mistrustful of self, and must have precedent or authority of some sort to lean upon, even though it be only blind custom. Persons of this type *must* have crutches. They are mostly conformists, and lovers of law and order. The other type is more independent, and enquires into the why and the wherefore, and will be found ready to change the mode to meet changed or changing conditions. These are the non-conformists, who tend most to individuality. They also may love order if they have reverence. The former type tends inevitably to collectivism. Conformity is the very essence of collectivism, as we can still see in the influence of Rome on our conduct in every-day affairs.

There are large bodies of men banded together, not for the improvement of character or the encouragement of individuality, but for the coercion of the multitude into preconceived modes and manners. A cry is now raised for a certain style of architecture, which happens to be at the moment what is called 'the English Renaissance', a style which was first introduced into this country at one of the most morally corrupt periods of the nation's history.

The wealthy had travelled and seen the beauties of foreign countries, and impressions received by them in their moral darkness were all of a materialistic nature. While appreciating the modes of foreign work, they were forgetful of the conditions of climate and national character, and expressions of emotion were not what they looked for, and love of truth was neglected. There were cultured architects of exquisite taste, like Sir Christopher Wren, who showed his fine sense of proportion, in the foreign tongue. He, no doubt, was quite conscious that the accentuation of jointing of stone-work, known as rustication, was originally a deliberate attempt to deceive, it being adopted to make walls look more solid than they really were, a direct and immoral effort on the part of the originators, who were quite prolific in that form of falsehood, and possibly like their imitators of today, were quite unconscious they were doing anything wrong.

It is inconceivable that so many of our leading architects at the present time should be reviving these samples of ancient sin, and, at the same time, believe them to be evil. Collectivism and conformity have made them mimic the manners of those they looked up to; sincerity and honesty of expression has been dominated by fashion, and forms are now used for their material qualities only, regardless of their spiritual significance.

The return to the forms and modes of a corrupt period indicates that modes have lost their moral significance, and that men have become so materialistic that they cannot discern more than material qualities, so that buildings to them are nothing more than combinations of form, colour, texture, light and shade. Moral qualities are smothered by the parasite of materialism which has twined its tendrils about every branch.

How powerful conventions may become it is easy to see. A style accepted by general consent is of the essence of a tyrant. Symmetry, for instance, will impose its iron law, and lead the architect to cover his library door with books, if the door by proclaiming itself

should upset the symmetrical balance of the room; surely that which requires fraud to defend it cannot be morally sound.

Multitudes of examples could be mentioned where candour, truth, and fitness are sacrificed to conformity to so-called style.

### Collectivism

It is the universal law that whatever pursuit, whatever doctrine becomes fashionable, shall lose a portion of that dignity, which it had possessed while it was confined to a small but earnest minority, and was loved for its own sake alone. (Macaulay)

Collectivism, convention and fashion all derive their power through the suppression of the individual. Men's minds and bodies are forced into grooves and moulded into machine-like order; being banded together like soldiers for a common purpose, their united efforts gather accumulating strength.

Collectivism must then be judged by the aim in view, and cannot be regarded as a general principal to be lightly adopted. Like all physical force, it will work for good or ill with equal facility; thus only when we know the aim is good, can we uphold the system. Individuality being the basis of character, collectivism can have but little effect that is not harmful to its development. Conduct can be controlled by collective action, but conduct is not character, nor is it always the result of character. Collectivism is a form of compulsion that cannot have the same ethical value and effect on character that individual free choice must always have. It requires but little effort to swim with the stream, and slide almost unconsciously into the modes and manners of the multitude. We become easily satisfied with a standard more or less defined and established in the mind, whereas the individualist's standard is ever evolving towards a greater perfection.

Many speak and act as if multitudes of men were incapable of self-culture and that therefore collectivism is necessary, and clearly defined lines of action must be imposed upon them. But against definite restriction to individual liberty men have fought in all times. And yet it is not quite possible to agree, that Government should confine its forces to the protection of the weak against the strong, leaving every man to work out his own salvation in the domain of thought and feeling?

We have no right to assume that large masses of men are depraved, or incapable of self-culture. The idea has given rise to all manner of laws that degrade rather than elevate. Moral sentiments are not always recognised as universal, and hence it is we tyrannise over one another. It would seem that if every man is blessed with the same fundamental sentiments, and our differences are only those of degree, much more can be accomplished by persuasion than by force, and by taking for granted that every man has the feeling we should desire to cultivate. If then liberty of thought is essential to the growth of character, combined coercion of any kind which limits thought must check its development. Furthermore, the great danger of collectivist action is in the acceptance of a given idea as final, and fixed in its value; silencing the individual conscience and discouraging personal criticism and enquiry. It also presents a beaten track to the idle traveller who shirks the strain of a rugged way.

Conduct controlled by custom petrifies intelligent reasoning and creative enterprise, and leads us to act like machines with the inevitable neglect of all aesthetic thought. All personal feeling is suppressed, and sincerity is not called upon; therefore Collectivism must enslave, and while killing individuality makes men more materialistic. It also accentuates class differences and encourages prejudice, hence sects are multiplied and contentions ensue. Theories are tried by cliques, and often become discredited by their power to attract the thoughtless and superficial. For example, garden suburb societies spring into being, and gather a certain class of mind that responds to the principle theory of the society, but in



time the union becomes limited by the exhaustion of energy. Great reforms are expected when two or three are gathered together, but disappointment invariably follows.

The fascination of having our thinking done for us is very real to minds already jaded by materialistic interests, and so the needs of the flesh will jostle out the thoughts of the spirit. Thus we find collectivism powerful in relieving us from personal responsibility and anxiety. We require little mental effort in obeying established habits, and after a time become automatic in thought and action. It is a kind of lathe process that turns off all individual knots and angles, and smooths us all down to one standard pattern.

It is difficult to persuade others that pain is a blessing in disguise, that the struggle that strains is strengthening, that to enquire of oneself the why and the wherefore of all our likes and dislikes is immensely helpful, and stimulating to reason and justice. Creative artists must go through this process of reason, if they would avoid becoming slaves to pure innovation and the prey of fashion mongers. Many architects of today say in effect, 'let us have an established mode, a national style of architecture. Save us from the individual, who, if left alone, will shock our prejudices, and violate our established ideas. The standard of past ages is good enough for us and must be kept up, even at the sacrifice of buildings have been produced during the last generation or so, is deeply degrading to the individuals who compete; instead of evolving the character of each edifice out of requirements, and conditions, moulded in sincerity with hearts set on moral sentiments; the mode or style thought to be favoured by the authorities is assumed and set up as the keynote of requirements and conditions must be tuned. The design, instead of proceeding from within outwards, is forced from without inwards. Colonnades and cornices that have done duty for temples, town halls, and theatres, or clothed our public baths, banks and Baptist chapels, crop up everywhere, being compressed or extended to fit the size required. This standardising is, no doubt, good for the immediate profits of trade, but it will not make men mentally or spiritually better. The system that crushes individual sincerity cannot bring lasting credit to any community.

#### **Modes Helpful to the Expression of Individuality**

Gothic architecture grew out of the careful consideration of requirements and conditions, and obedience to the natural qualities of materials; in fact, all the best building throughout the world has grown in that way, and was ever so created, until men became corrupted by materialistic ideas, and then the mode of expression was regarded as more important than the conditions and requirements with which they were dealing. The fascination of the mode of a Grecian Temple led to the endeavour to adapt it to a mansion house. Individual grappling with conditions and requirements by men of lofty moral sense, has given us the finest and purest architecture. A reverence for climatic and other natural national conditions spiritual, as well as material, has produced in this country its glorious cathedrals, colleges and Tudor houses.

Could we but revive the individualistic spirit and stimulate moral sentiments, then, we should once more have a noble national architecture, without any revival of any particular style, either native or foreign. Certain conventions, dictated by a complete knowledge of material and needs, would naturally lead to the use of many familiar forms. The principles of the lintel and the arch, which are based on material qualities, must for ever remain true principles. But if we cast behind us all preconceived styles, our work will still possess a style, but it will be a living natural and true expression of modern needs and ideals: not an insincere imitation of other nations or other times.

The tyranny of imposing a mode of expression in any of the arts must seriously check individual sincerity and lead to an indifference to truth, which is the most corrupting of influences.

Men cannot be honest while imitating sentiments which they often neither feel or understand. It is because we are not sincere in our building, not aiming at individuality, but are dominated by collectivism, that our Public Buildings are so dumb and death-like; many have the qualities of good proportion, clever, ingenious construction, sensible use of material, and such like charms, but for the expression of living sentiment and spiritual force – such as our old houses and cathedrals present – they are silent, dead, soulless piles of mortifying insincerity, which only sadden us.

The lack of noble sentiment in our modern buildings is due to the materialism of the age, which has led to the assumption of a foreign style, and the acquisition of material qualities only. Thought and feeling are ignored, hence the works are still-born. Individuality is not called for, but conformity to old conventions and standard modes are imposed by collective opinion. We are not allowed to work out our own salvation, but must tread the road that is easiest for the duffer. Democracy, as it becomes more articulate and better organised, becomes more mechanical, and less able or willing to recognise individuality. Convention relieves the individual from thought and anxiety. We say 'there is safety in numbers', and that in a multitude of councillors there is great wisdom. But this false philosophy is itself the outcome of fear, and must be uprooted before we shall acquire true independence and manly courage.

Our domestic architecture has advanced much more than that of our public buildings, because we have cast off the tyranny of styles, and refused to be hampered by any preconceived mode. While devoting the whole mind to meeting most fitly, all the existing requirements and conditions; on the other hand, unfortunately, materialism has led to the consideration of material fitness only. For their homes many people say, 'Give us personal ease and comfort – we do not want sentiment.' The styles as taught in the schools have been gradually discredited in the search for greater fitness, and the process was greatly accelerated by the introduction of machinery, which has revolutionised our methods of production, construction and design.

Of course, we look not for dignity in the front door while struggling to make it look better than it is. If it is not oak, must it not be painted to look like it? Were individual conscientiousness more appreciated, the artist would be allowed greater freedom, instead of as now being treated as a tradesman and paid hireling, who's duty it is only to carry out instructions and make good bargains.

While artists are alive to all practical considerations, and are ready to meet all requirements and conditions imposed upon them, recognising such as the best foundations for design, there is still left a wide field in which the emotions can, and should, operate to the mutual advantage of all. It is only blindness to these qualities that has led to the servility of art workers. To save his pocket he has often to lose his soul. Frankness is not to his worldly advantage. It has not always been so, nor can it for long remain. Our spirits must have an awakening, and we must see that the imposition of any style, dictates a mode of expression false and foreign to the designer, and the employment of forms, originally intended to deceive the eye, violates the conscience and vitiates the taste.

It has often been observed that the architecture of a people, must always be a true reflection of their moral and spiritual condition. And in an age where you find a prolific display of deceptions, you may be sure that the people are more materially than spiritually advanced, and more collectivist than individual.

In early Tudor times the aristocratic idea was more alive than it is today, and there was in consequence much patronage of individuals. Moral sentiments were then as fashionable as motor cars are now.

Another mode helpful to the growth of individuality, and all its attendant blessings, would be the removal of all doctrinal restrictions from men when in the pulpit. But we must not pursue this



thorny subject, as many will think the mere mention of it is enough to condemn individuality altogether. Nevertheless our zeal for freedom of thought grows out of a reverence for truth and faithfulness; and, while the cultivation of ethics must involve the recognition of law and order, loyalty is only possible to the free mind. Obedience you may have from the slave, but loyalty a man can only bestow freely, and it is an addition to, not a part of, his obedience.

Many are the channels through which the ship of personality may navigate, and multiform the winds of emotion that blow hither and thither, safety only being possible while one mind holds the helm. You may lead and encourage the Captain by kindness, which cannot weaken responsibility, but never must external authority usurp the throne. We must see more and more clearly the difference between obedience to an inner monitor and conformity to outside pressure, whether proceeding from one or many, and this perception will make us recoil more and more from collectivism.

The study of dress is very illuminating to this question of individuality. Instinctively we feel the outward semblance of equality as conducive to social intercourse, hence the fashion for dressing all men like waiters when they are to dine together. The desire to hide material differences is the underlying principle of all uniforms. It is the same for large bodies of men required to express unity of purpose. The Military and Naval uniforms enhance the effect of terror and apparent power of an enemy. It is a splendid institution even for bank clerks, or Stock Exchange men. There can be no harm in having them labelled with silk hats. But there is yet a fascination in perceiving the difference of vocation in differences of dress; and the more attention the individual gives to his own costume, the more enlightening it becomes. He cannot disguise his temperament or help telling you if his sympathies are more with a period in history than with the grace of Nature. He will conform or not to the fashions of those he respects, according to the power of his own sentiments. A natural shyness, and desire not to attract attention, will lead him to suppress his personal feeling almost to extinction. More powerful still is the inclination felt by the individualist, to differentiate; fashions will be avoided by him which he finds favoured by those socially beneath him. This is a natural instinct often found operating quite unconsciously.

The point most worthy of attention, however, is not a question as to the relative values of uniformity or variety; but an enquiry as to how to influence the development of any costume, so as to make it a benefit to personal character. At present it seems mainly governed by commercial considerations.

If, however, dress is to be regarded as a means of culture, as well as a protection, and an affair of commerce from the production of which millions get their living, moral sentiments will have to be acknowledged and taken into account much more than they are at present. Reverence, truth, honesty, candour, generosity, humility, order, and directness will have to dominate and suppress the collective energy of change-mongers. Human machines for stimulating human wants are very good for trade, and help men to amass wealth. If wealth is our sole aim, there is no more to be said; but if our aim is the cultivation of character, greater individuality will conduce to greater sincerity; and any dislocation of trade that might follow from the suppression of collectivism, would be amply compensated by the general culture accruing. It cannot be doubted that, but for fashion, men and women would take keener delight in beautifying costume. Interest in the grace and loveliness of forms, colours and textures of everyday life must work magic on our characters, and send into oblivion much of our sordid materialism. Change the motive for our dressing, from competitive rivalry into an act of reverence towards the body, expressive of the higher qualities of mind, and you then convert costume into a means of culture and minister of beauty. Individualism, then, is the main cure for the present ugliness of dress, and the more we tend to follow fashion, the more collectivist we shall become; and by aiding the

commercial instinct in the tradesman, we starve to death those sentiments we all value, and would gladly encourage.

Recognition in the mind of individuals, of the moral significance of all humanly created things, is all we ask for. It ought not to be necessary to write or speak about such a matter. It is so powerful a force that one marvels that it is so commonly neglected and so often absent from the mind altogether. The spirit of man requires nourishment as much as his body; and yet how content many of us are to starve our spiritual nature, and cultivate a calm endurance of the ugliness around us.

It is interesting to note how some modern scientists are beginning to show a restless discontent with materialism pure and simple, and are seeking to articulate the divine impulse of the spirit.

We long to see it demonstrated and accepted by all men that the spirit behind all matter is more loveable than matter itself; and, while it cannot be handed from one to another, it is not to be possessed by all. Through individual thought and feeling we shall see, and create, what collectively we can only defile.

### **Love, Justice, Mercy and Generosity**

Love, justice, mercy, and generosity are qualities that must be felt by those who would seek them in the works of man – each and all may chant songs of praise in stone as much as in a story. Our buildings, our books, and our furniture cry out at us for shame! When greed has ground down every worker and drowned justice and mercy beneath its arrogant elaboration.

The sacrifice of enrichment and display, or even accommodation in order to gain greater perfection in secret places, and care for servants instead of costly carvings, are the directions in which much can be done to establish the character of generosity.

Concentrated ornament will help us towards making that ornament finer and more effective, as well as assisting towards the improvement in the quality generally. The building covered with indifferent decoration invariably exhibits a sacrifice of general quality. Structural parts are cheapened to pay for gaudy display. A sense of order which precedes and follows from punctuality and precision, and inspires faith, can be conveyed even in the arrangement of a tradesman's notice. One simple type instead of many will show a steadiness that reminds us of a reliable man, it is orderly and controlled, simple and frank, not decked out with flourishes and formed with variegated proportions. Why, if we have any information to convey, should we seek to dazzle the eye and satiate the brain? Like the modern shopkeeper, who thinks he can charm the buyer by showing all the wares at once.

Material matters have developed at such a pace it is hard to avoid being swept along with the tide. To be mindful of more than the needs of the flesh when shopping, is most difficult to the average mortal; so much is studiously prepared to intoxicate and bewilder the higher instincts. The sense of beauty which is common to all is carefully poisoned at the fountain head by our early training in modes. Our knapsack of knowledge has one small compartment into which certain examples of the beautiful are placed, and these we take out on our travels and compare with what we meet in order to formulate our judgement. The process is like the mechanical stonecrusher, it destroys the heart in every thing that falls beneath its weight. We have thus grown to rely on museums as essential for the poor who cannot travel.

With what result? Is the peasant work of today to be compared for spiritual beauty with the work of the 13th and 14th centuries? It is not the experience of travel that quickens the spirit, but experience of thought and feeling. We have relied too much and too long on material things. Museums full of unused articles divorced from the purpose of their being, are like mausoleums. Oh! departed voices, still audible to the sympathetic spirit, what intense joy might we not feel, if we could but thrill with the



sentiments that gave you birth, and drink beneath the substance of your being until we are intoxicated with the same emotions.

We must be generously disposed before we can impart to matter that quality which will keep it alive in our affections. The beam must look strong enough for its task as well as be so. The thin, skinny mullions with cottonlike lead glazing suggest only meanness. Generosity can only show in our work when we are forgetful of our own gain, and bursting to bestow the best that is in us, and glory in straining every nerve towards perfect feeling and fitting expression. The generous love of beauty will prompt attention to the meanest detail. To the generous mind no detail is too small, or

too insignificant to be worthy of our efforts to make it beautiful. The bestowal of grace is a devotion as much when manifested in the kitchen as in the cathedral.

#### **On the War of 1914-18**

Surely it is evident that the most far-reaching and important effect of the present war, will be to force men to distinguish more clearly between intellectual and spiritual culture, and thus to encourage the latter and by so doing strengthen and sustain individuality.

*CFA Voysey, Individuality, Chapman & Hall, London, 1915.*