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Schopenhauer's Disvalue of Society

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Schopenhauer's Disvalue of Society

Research studies have shown that social interaction is an important contributor to good health and longevity (Umberson and Montez 2010). In *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Schopenhauer provides an argument against society which takes aim at the supposed value of friendship and social interactions by highlighting various disadvantages or costs of society, such as interpersonal discord arising from “having to do with others,” mutual accommodations and restraint on one’s freedom from being with others, and obstruction of self-reflection in the presence of others. While I agree with Schopenhauer’s claim that society comes with various costs, in this paper I argue that Schopenhauer’s argument against society is incomplete and does not present strong reason to be alone or avoid making friends because his argument merely points out the disadvantages or costs of society without addressing the benefits of friendship or social interactions. A good argument, or an informed decision in life, in general, should always consider both the pros and cons, or the good and bad, of the matter.

I argue that the experience that one gains from making mutual accommodations with others and resolving interpersonal discord is an invaluable life skill and a benefit, or good, of society. I also argue that having friends to share in one’s joy is a key contributor to one’s happiness. These benefits, I argue, outweigh the costs, or the bad, of society. I also argue that self-reflection in society is possible and superior to self-reflection in seclusion. Therefore, social interaction should be promoted instead of social isolation. I chose to pursue this topic specifically because of my personal experience living with a roommate and having attended a high school which places a strong emphasis and value on reflection as one of the important habits of mind.

In his argument against society, Schopenhauer points out that interpersonal discord is one of the “countless and unavoidable” burdens and disadvantages arising from “having to do with others” (Schopenhauer: 14) and a cost or bad of society. He argues that it is better to be alone, instead of being in a social relationship, because “no man can be in perfect accord with anyone but himself—not even with a friend or the partner of his life; differences of individuality and temperament are always bringing in some degree of discord, though it may

be a very slight one” (15). Epictetus shares Schopenhauer’s sentiments towards seclusion, asserting that if a man wants to be happy he should be alone, because love tethers people to the fate of others, which is outside of one’s control, and discord will be unavoidable due to differences of individuality and temperament (Epictetus: 8). To draw an example from my own life, I have experienced some discord from sharing a room with a roommate. This discord has concerned issues of bedtime, visitor hours, and phone conversations in the room during late hours. During periods of such discord I sometimes wished to be alone, living without a roommate, to avoid the burdens and disadvantages from “having to do with others,” as pointed out by Schopenhauer.

While seclusion has some advantages, it also has its drawbacks as highlighted by Schopenhauer: “A long course of seclusion makes [our tempers] so sensitive that the most trivial incidents, words, or even looks, are sufficient to disturb or to vex and offend us—little things which are unnoticed by those who live in the turmoil of life” (Schopenhauer: 22). A person living alone who never experiences the disagreements or discord that arise from social interactions will live a sheltered life, with a perception that everything in life is smooth and that his beliefs and way of living and doing things are the best and the only way. He will not have an opportunity to learn to resolve disputes or make compromises if he never encounters disagreements or discord with others. Seclusion, therefore, can cause people who live a sheltered life to become fragile during adverse times, while social interaction can teach us to become more resilient in the face of adversity. To return to the case of my roommate, I have learned to make mutual accommodations and compromises with my roommate to mitigate discord. We discussed terms that we both agreed to abide by regarding the appropriate hours for visitors and phone conversations in the room and reasonable time to turn off all the lights in the room at night. Had I lived alone, I would have missed out on the opportunity to acquire such beneficial real-life experience and lessons, which only take place during social interactions.

Schopenhauer further argues against society, asserting that it is only when a man “is alone that he is really free,” because “all society necessarily involves, as the first condition of its existence, mutual accommodation and restraint upon the part of its members” (14). Although people may need to make mutual accommodations with others during social interactions, such accommodation is not a restraint on their freedom since it is a choice. Epictetus argues that other people cannot obstruct one’s freedom because no one can make a person believe or desire or pursue anything that person does not wish to, unless he lets them. Threats of force, for instance, only work if he chooses to care about the stakes (Epictetus: 6). In regards to my roommate situation, I chose to take on the burdens of society by making accommodations and compromises with my roommate because I do indeed care about the stakes of our relationship. While I was not “really free,” according to Epictetus or Schopenhauer, due to my having to

make mutual accommodations with my roommate, I still experienced ample personal freedom in my choice to make a slight compromise to protect the large stakes of our valuable relationship.

One might object to Epictetus' assertion that "no one can make a person believe or desire or pursue anything he does not wish to, unless he lets them" by pointing out that Epictetus' argument might hold in an idealistic society or utopia but would fail in the real world where we are often obliged to act against our free will due to family obligations, social norms, or rules and regulations. For example, while it is true that no one could force me to make mutual accommodations with my roommate, the fact that moving out to live in a single room was not an option due to housing limitations essentially forced us to work things out between the two of us. While society does present constraints that limit our choices, we are able to choose to work within those constraints. This is just what my roommate and I did.

Schopenhauer discusses another cost or bad of society by first emphasizing the value of self-reflection and later asserting that social interaction obstructs self-reflection. Schopenhauer highlights the value of self-reflection, stating,

[T]o draw from experience all the instructions it contains, it is requisite to be constantly thinking back,—to make a kind of recapitulation of what we have done, of our impressions and sensations, to compare our former with our present judgments—what we set before us and struggle to achieve, with the actual result and satisfaction we have obtained. To do this is to get a repetition of the private lessons of experience,—lessons which are given to everyone" (Schopenhauer: 13).

Schopenhauer echoes Epictetus' argument that it is only when a man is alone that his thoughts are protected from the influence of the thoughts of non-virtuous men (Epictetus: 5), which will enable him to think independently, to reflect on the challenges and strengths of his past and current actions, and to make improvements in the future. I agree with Schopenhauer that self-reflection is a good habit of mind and serves as beneficial "private lessons of experience." To develop this point, consider another example from my life. At the high school I attended, reflection was one of the important habits of mind that was emphasized throughout my education there. It is through reflecting on our past actions that we reinforce our strengths or improve upon our past efforts. I am grateful for the feedback from my peers and teachers and for the opportunity to revise my essay drafts. When writing a computer program, I routinely revise my code numerous times to make improvements. Every essay or

coding revision provides a learning opportunity, or “private lesson of experience,” as touted by Schopenhauer.

Although I agree with Epictetus and Schopenhauer that being alone and doing things alone give one an opportunity to learn to become self-sufficient and resilient, I disagree that self-reflection is only possible when alone. I argue that, not only is self-reflection possible with others, self-reflection in society is superior to self-reflection in seclusion, as illustrated by another example from my life. At the end of a two-day camp in 4th grade to learn about the California Gold Rush, the other campers and I gathered around a campfire to reflect on our camp experience. Each camper shared with others how personally meaningful the camp experience was to him or her. Teamwork is another example which illustrates that self-reflection can be done in society. When team members, who collaborate on a project, meet to discuss the progress of the project, each member reflects on his individual efforts and accomplishments, provides a critical evaluation of what he has done, why it is important, and how it has contributed to the progress of the team project. Then, the entire team discusses the team’s overall progress and makes future plans. By sharing our experience, reflective thoughts, and critical evaluation with others through teamwork and collaboration, we benefit from others’ feedback with diverse perspectives which are unavailable to those reflecting alone.

Boethius emphasizes the value of friendship and, thereby, the importance of society, in saying, “there is no delight in possessing any good whatever, without someone to share it with us” (qtd. in Aquinas, Q. 4, A. 8). An example from my own life supports Boethius’ claim. In 7th grade, I participated in a Mathcounts Competition for middle-school students. My parents did not attend, because I had not informed them until the evening before the competition when I asked my mother for a ride to the math competition the next morning. My mother had to work the next day, and by the time she learned of the competition that evening, it was too late for her to rearrange her work schedule to attend the competition. It was my first math competition, and not knowing what to expect, I was pleasantly surprised to win first place in the Oral Competition. Although winning brought me great joy initially, I quickly wished that my parents and friends were there to share in my joy. In contrast, I recently participated in a programming competition known as Battlecode Final Tournament at MIT in February 2019. I invited my friends to come, but they already had prior obligations and could not attend. My mother surprised me by purchasing last-minute airline tickets to come and watch me compete. She arrived moments before the competition! Although I did not win at the Battlecode Final Tournament, my mother’s presence to cheer for me while updating my relatives of the competition’s progress greatly enhanced my happiness because I was able to share my joy with my loved ones.

Schopenhauer might respond to my criticism that he considered only the costs or bad of society without addressing the benefits or good of friendship by pointing out that the praise of friendship has already been offered by many philosophers, so it would be redundant for him to discuss the good of friendship. However, I think that his argument against society or social interaction would be more comprehensive if he would also comment on the other philosophers' arguments praising the value of friendship.

While I agree with Schopenhauer's claim that society comes with various costs or negative values, I disagree with his view that the benefits of being alone in order to avoid "the burdens and disadvantages, the dangers and annoyances, which arise from having to do with others" outweigh the benefits of friendship as key contributors to one's happiness. As pointed out by Boethius, all goods are worthless without friends to enjoy them with. Therefore, the burdens and annoyances that arise from social interactions are small trade-offs for having friends to savor the goods in life together.

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