

OWEN BARFIELD

PARTICIPATION AND ISOLATION: A FRESH LIGHT ON PRESENT DISCONTENTS

Owen Barfield (1898-1997) was born in London and educated at Highgate School. He served in the Royal Corps of Signals during WWI and then attended Oxford University, where he met C. S. Lewis and formed the group known as the “Inklings.” After graduating in 1923, he published the fantasy novel *The Silver Trumpet* (1925) and two books on the nature of language: *History in English Words* (1926) and *Poetic Diction* (1928). He then joined his father’s law firm, where he worked for the rest of his career. After his retirement, he published the novels *This Ever Diverse Pair* (1950), *Worlds Apart* (1960), and *Unances-tral Voice* (1965) as well as the philosophical book *Saving the Appear-ances: A Study in Idolatry* (1957). Between 1964 and 1980 he taught at Drew University, Brandeis University, Hamilton College, the State University of Missouri, Stony Brook University, the University of British Columbia, and California State University at Fullerton. The following excerpt is from a talk given at Dalhousie University, which was published in the spring 1972 issue and included in the collection *The Rediscovery of Meaning and Other Essays* (1977).

LET ME BEGIN BY ASKING, what do we mean by equality (equality, in the most general sense, not simply between human beings, but equality between any two or more units)? Consider an example: a student has lost his text-book, he asks another student in the same course if he has seen it lying about anywhere. “Yes,” says the other, “I saw one lying on the floor in the Students Union; here it is. Had yours got your name in it?” “No.” “Well *this* one has no name in it.” “It must be mine then.” “Wait a minute,” says the second student, “How do you know? Everyone in the course has got one.” And, of course, the question that has to be settled is not just whether the

book that has been found is “the same” as the one that was lost: all the copies of that book are “the same” as each other, they’re equal in every respect, they’re identical with each other. But how do we distinguish *this* kind of identity from the kind of identity between the lost book and the found book, which the first student must establish before he can claim it as his property? Well we generally call the latter kind “numerical” identity, if we’re philosophers, and if we’re not philosophers we don’t bother to have any name for it at all. Because one can only use such a notion for the purpose of avoiding confusion, or clearing it up when it has occurred. That’s for the very simple reason that we’re talking about identity as though it were a *relation*, and “numerical identity” is no relation at all. To say that a thing is identical with itself is to say nothing about the relation because, for the purpose of a relation, you’ve got to have two or more things. Moving backward then from numerical identity (which is no relation at all) the first thing you come to is this—what shall I call it?—“replica” identity. Replica identity, or uniformity, is the relation that comes as near as possible to being no relation at all. When we say of two or more things, copies of the same book for example, that they’re identical with each other, we are saying that the only relation between them is that they are *not* “numerically” identical, that they are two and not one. The only relation between them is their separateness, their side-by-sideness in space, their isolation. Now we do not always use the semi-learned word “identical,” we sometimes use the commoner word “equal,” as though it meant identical, equal in all respects. The one book is exactly equal with the other. What I’m trying to bring out with all this is that the closer any two or more units come to being equal with each other in all respects, the truer it is to say that the only relation between them is their separateness. . . .

Now there is one thing to be noticed about the notion of absolute equality, or identity. It is also the foundation of all merely *abstract* thinking. Abstract thought looks at a number of diverse and separate units—individual trees, or chairs, or human beings—and concentrates exclusively on the respects in which they appear identical with each other. That apparent identity is indeed precisely what it “abstracts” and gives a name to. And yet it is quite unreal. The diversity, the disintegration, is real; the integration is only a convenient fiction. The opposite of abstract thought is imagination, which deals not with identities, but with resemblances; not with side-by-sideness, but with *interpenetration*; and if we want to see the whole system of ab-

stract thought, in which we're so deeply immersed, from outside of itself, so to speak, we must begin by seeing it in the light of imagination. . . .

It is above all when we observe the historical process at work in the development of language that we see how the increasing prevalence of abstract thought has accompanied the diminution of participation. Indeed, they are virtually one and the same thing. It's the increasing power and the predominant use of abstract thinking reflected in the altered meanings of his words which have brought about man's isolation from nature; an isolation which is both a curse and a blessing, or perhaps it would be better to say, a potential blessing. It is a curse because it involves his apprehending nature, not as a nursing mother, or as a fecund and benevolent companion, but as an inhuman and meaningless mechanism. It is a blessing inasmuch as our very existence, as fully individual beings, depends on it.

Sociologically speaking I believe the principle of equality to be both a curse and a blessing in very much the same way, and for very much the same reasons. It is a blessing, and an indispensable one, where it belongs, particularly for instance, in the rule of law: it is a curse when it takes the bit between its teeth, or goes to and fro like a roaring lion, seeking what it may devour, because then it involves the reduction of human relations to side-by-sideness, as I've called it, and so it eliminates mutual participation. So you see, if you look at the evolution of consciousness in the light of that principle or process of participation-versus-isolation, as I do, you inevitably see it not only as applying to the relation between man and nature, but also to the relation between human beings themselves. There is the same transition from unindividualized to individual consciousness, and that also is borne out by the historical study of language. But it is not borne out only by the historical study of language, nor need you go anything like as far back as that will take you, in order to observe the process at work; I'm often amazed when I read a novel written as recently as 150 years ago at the totally different experience on which personal relations were obviously based; family bonds, common ancestry, position in the social hierarchy—these were still matters of immediate inner experience and therefore matters of course for everyone, in a way that has altogether faded from us. For instance, we laugh at Lady Catherine de Burgh in *Pride and Prejudice*, and so did Elizabeth Bennet, but Jane Austen accepts her *fundamental* assumptions as a matter of course. The idea, for instance, of there being any sort of equality between Lady Catherine and Elizabeth, or between Elizabeth herself and her coach-

man, except perhaps at the moment of death, would have been as preposterous to Jane Austen as Lady Catherine's are to us. In other words we assume the contrary as a matter of course: *they* could not do so, because in their whole way of thinking and feeling, you could not possibly be a gentleman or a lady unless you were born one; everything depended, not on yourself, but on the blood in your veins and arteries. Go back a little further still and you come to that concretely participating bond that united the members of the clan or the tribe. There's a note in one of Scott's novels, I think in *Waverley*, giving an account of a conversation with a Scottish clansman who was asked how he felt about the head of the clan, "I'd cut my bones for him," the man replied. It just makes no sense to interpret this sort of relation simply in terms of exploiter and exploited. We're dealing with a different kind of human being from ourselves. We think only with our brains, but *they* were still thinking partly with their blood as well; and thinking with your blood is the real meaning of what is loosely referred to as "instinct."

Another thing you'll notice in the older books is that the negative emotions like envy, resentment, hatred of superiority, whether real or assumed, petty tyranny, snobbery, all come into play between individuals occupying *the same* rank in the social hierarchy, practically never between one rank and another. They are symptoms of a demand, not for political equality (which is already enjoyed by members of the same class), but for social uniformity. And this, of course, is one of the disadvantages of the supersession of the principle of hierarchy by the principle of equality. However idle and foolish he might be, the airs and affluence of the eighteenth-century fop, the Victorian dandy, and, even later, almost within my own memory, the Edwardian toff, were taken for granted, and often much admired by the Cockney in the gutter. There was mostly very little resentment against what was called "the quality." But once the principle of equality has been extended to cover everyone, there is nothing to restrain everyone from having those negative feelings about everyone else. At least there is nothing given in the nature of things, and requiring no effort on the part of the individuals concerned.

Let me just epitomize the point I've been trying to emphasize with the help of that little digression. Firstly, confused as they now are in most people's minds, equality and uniformity are two entirely different principles, and the demands for them are differently motivated. It will be found that, whereas the idea of equality is rooted in the strength of the superpersonal idea of justice, the demand for uniformity is rooted in the meanness of the

personal sting of envy. Secondly, if we contemplate human society historically, we find ourselves looking back into a state of affairs where a saving *instinctive* awareness of mutual participation underpins the social structure. We find, as a matter of history, that the social structure itself was not the product of a social contract made between individuals constituted like ourselves, but that it arose out of the bloodstream, out of the *life* of human beings, of human beings very unlike ourselves; just as man's existence as an individual being has arisen out of the organic and hierarchically structured unity of the life of nature. But we also see this participation inextricably associated with political and social inequality. We find a continuing awareness of participation going on just about as long as we find an *inner* experience of inequality going on, or one could say, an experience of inequality as hierarchy.

So now if we turn and look again at our own time, we find that inexorable, almost universal, demand for equality: a demand which (confused as it may be) I am convinced arises out of the deepest nature of human beings as they are *now* constituted. The practical question is then, is it possible to retain the kind of participation that makes human society possible without abandoning the relatively new principle of equality, of social equality. There are few more important questions, because the plain truth is that if it is *not* possible, democracy as an experiment has failed.

That was why I thought it worth while to try and analyze the notion of equality with some care and precision: because it seems to me that the future of democracy will depend on whether or not there are soon to be enough people about with sufficient understanding to grasp the respects in which all human beings are equal, and enough imagination to apprehend the respects in which they're not. It needs to be grasped that they are equal precisely in the regard that they are independent or, if you prefer, alienated and isolated from one another. Every single one of them is entitled to have assured to him his separate existence as an independent being, free of any such paternalist or authoritarian control of his choices, as was inseparable from the hierarchical construction of society, and free also from such other interferences as mass-disseminated propaganda disguised as news. And this equality, this political liberty he is entitled to, just because he is *now* capable not only of participating with his fellow-men, but also of *not* participating. Participation is no longer instinctive; it comes only as a result of conscious effort. But insofar as they genuinely participate with one another,

human beings are *not* equal, because they are not merely side by side but are interpenetrating. We had a glance at one domain in which they're willy-nilly interpenetrating to a degree that has not previously been approached in the history of mankind; that was the economic domain, where everyone produces for everyone else and consumes the product of everyone else. But there can be no equality in economic co-operation *as such*; it depends on a combination of different skills, of skilled and unskilled labour, managers making decisions and issuing orders which are obeyed, and so forth; otherwise it just won't work.

The same is true at the other end of the scale, in the life of the mind; there is no equality here, and it is on the inequalities that participation in a large measure depends. This man's capacity for growing wiser participates in that man's acquired wisdom: an ability to learn dovetails in with an ability to teach; the creation of works of art with their appreciation, and so forth. And the survival of democracy depends not on abolishing or castrating these activities because they entail or disclose inequalities, but on devising a social structure nervous and flexible enough to accommodate them within the overall guarantee of political equality to which I have referred. And that, in its turn, will, I am convinced, be achieved (if it is achieved) only out of a much deeper understanding of what human beings are. . . . [And] the only possible way of grasping in any depth both what as individuals we are, and where we are, is by grasping with imagination, where we came from and how we got here. We must realize that our important abstract thought arose out of the imaginal, instinctive awareness of participation that preceded it; and we must realize that our important ideals of liberty and equality, however vigorously they function in revolts against the establishment, were themselves originally nurtured and grew out of a different kind of establishment, which itself had grown out of the whole nature of the human being. It was a nature, it was an establishment involving paternalism and hierarchy. We no longer want the paternalism or the hierarchy, but we still want the roots from which they sprang and from which we spring. Cut flowers fade, and we shan't have many flowers in the garden if we work on the principle that there are no such things as roots.