

CULTIVATING INDIVIDUALITY

Fall 2020

Instructor: Natalia Rogach
Instructor Email: nr2549@columbia.edu

1. Short Description:

Talk about “individuality”, about being (or becoming) “yourself” is all around us. But what exactly does this mean? What is genuine individuality, and how can we develop it, in ourselves (through self-development) and in others (by designing appropriate educational institutions)? What is the relationship between being an individual and being a part of society? Is there a tension between the non-conformism often associated with genuine individuality on the one hand, and the demands of community and good citizenship, on the other? Can educational institutions be designed to fulfill both those demands (to the extent they are distinct)? And how might oppressive social institutions hinder the development of “individuality”? In this course, we will explore these and related questions by drawing both on philosophy of education (Dewey, Du Bois, Nietzsche, Plato, Rousseau) and on relevant literary material that is in conversation with the philosophical texts (Rilke, Woolf).

2. During the semester, we will explore the following themes:

Individuality and Non-conformism

What is the relationship between individuality on the one hand and non-conformism and originality on the other? Is there a tension between the non-conformism often associated with genuine individuality on the one hand, and the demands of community and good citizenship, on the other?

Individuality and “the True Self” / Authenticity

What is the relationship between developing individuality and developing (getting in touch with/ discovering) one’s “true self”? Does the concept of a “true self” even make sense? How exactly is it different from a “regular” (“not-completely-true”) self? What are the means by which it can be developed? (For example, does it require greater self-knowledge, eliminating the distortions introduced by customs, following the example of others who live “authentic” lives?)

Individuality and Creativity

Does developing genuine individuality require some kind of creativity — and, if so, what kind? And vice versa — to what extent does creativity require the kind of originality that we often associate with “being yourself”, being a “unique individual”?

Individuality and Social Virtues

To what extent does developing genuine individuality involve developing social virtues, such as sympathy, kindness, concern for the wellbeing of others? How might relationships with others impact the development of individuality?

Individuality and Citizenship

Can one be a “genuine individual” and a good citizen at the same time? Are these things complementary, or are there trade-offs between them? Can educational institutions foster both? This theme is closely related to the preceding theme (to the extent that good citizenship involves having certain kinds of social virtues and entering into certain kinds of relationships with others).

Individuality and Oppression

How might oppressive institutions hinder the development of individuality, and how can the obstacles created by such institutions be overcome? What role can educational reform play in this process?

3. Modality: Remote (Online) Only.