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Ethics in Postmodern Society

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Abstract:

Addressing the moral quandaries inherent in contemporary postmodern society constitutes a highly demanding area of inquiry, necessitating rigorous philosophical and theoretical engagement. This research undertakes a systematic investigation of this issue by initially identifying and deconstructing the key intellectual orientations that inform the discourse. Specifically, the study involves a detailed examination and critique of liberal utilitarian individualism. This critique is executed through the framework of critical social theory, drawing upon the insights of a diverse array of foundational thinkers, including Aristotle, William Cobbett, and the tenets of Jacobin political thought, among others. Our analysis was in-depth, relying on argumentation and critical dialogue to envision the foundations of a sound and viable society, one in which individuals may live free from psychological disorders, or at least with a minimal degree of them.

The prevailing capitalist system has engendered profound social crises rooted in individualism and utilitarianism. This system seeks to erode the social order, a framework in which moral values such as friendship, love, and justice function as cohesive forces. By encouraging each individual to live in isolation, it leads to alienation and disconnection. In the absence of these values, the happiness that human beings aspire to within a humane society becomes unattainable.

Keywords: Individualistic liberal thought, Relativism, individualism, isolation and alienation, and meaninglessness.

Investigating the subject of ethics in postmodern society necessitates delving deeply into analytical philosophy, which undertakes the critical analysis of morality. Our interest in examining this topic arises from the fact that the contemporary era demands a urgent return to the practice of ethics and virtue in order to reconstitute genuinely human societies, rather than mere aggregations of individuals who, driven by egoism, pursue their personal self-



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interests with no regard for the meaning of homeland and patriotism. Consequently, they have mutated into individualistic utilitarians seeking solely to secure what is beneficial to themselves. Hence, they remain oblivious to the true essence of a human society grounded in love, justice, and friendship; as a result, these virtues have become increasingly marginalized in both developed and underdeveloped societies alike.

Under the hegemony of individualistic, utilitarian liberal thought, a society built upon a genuine moral consensus cannot be established. Therefore, through extensive research and analysis, we have concluded that it is imperative to return to Aristotelian thought regarding the study of ethics in society. Aristotle represents a rational realist; he neither prioritizes emotion over reason, as the utilitarians do, nor reason over emotion, as observed among the proponents of the Enlightenment project. Rather, he excludes neither of the two dimensions, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of egoism and self-love. Aristotle is considered the master whose knowledge has profoundly benefited numerous contemporary thinkers and philosophers, such as Paul Ricoeur, who critiqued the proponents of "closed structuralism" and advocated for an openness toward the "Other" to actualize our existential being.

We shall discuss this topic through a philosophical and conceptual analysis juxtaposing two opposing paradigms: the individualistic, liberal-utilitarian paradigm versus the counter-thought represented by social-ethical philosophers. Thus, this study adopts an approach that is simultaneously intellectual, literary, psychological, and cultural.

Relativism

While the term relativism may appear somewhat ambiguous in this context, it becomes clearer through explanation and analysis. Social philosophers have utilized this concept to critique individualism, utilitarianism, or rather, individualistic liberal thought. We can further elucidate this by referencing Haruki Murakami's novel, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. Within Japanese society, which serves as a mirror image of contemporary capitalist society, the characters in the novel transform vices into virtues, giving them the moral green light to be deemed permissible. They partake in numerous collective errors, a phenomenon that reason cannot accept, for errors cannot be transformed into objective truths. Indeed, when individuals collectively participate in the exact same errors, it leads to the proliferation of what may be termed a psychological pathology or mental illness, rather than fostering healthy individuals. Thus, this society remains fundamentally pathological despite its luxury, affluence, and liberation.

The characters within the narrative commit transgressions, as exemplified by Kumiko, the protagonist's wife, and her actions toward her husband. She behaved in accordance with the mores of the society she lived in, which sanctioned these actions, or rather, these vices. Over time, these actions mutated into customs, rendering it entirely ordinary for a woman to betray her husband, desert him, and then freely confess it to him under the guise of personal

autonomy and acting upon her desires and inclinations. This is something reason cannot accept, for a healthy society cannot reconcile itself with relativism.

Relativism prevails in postmodern society, where individuals justify their actions based on circumstances. This line of thought serves the American system in rationalizing its heinous historical actions, as evidenced by its treatment of Native Americans and Black people, who were subjected to systemic exclusion and marginalization under the pretext that they were alien creature's incapable of integrating and coexisting with the white European race. Similarly, what is occurring in Gaza today demonstrates the erasure of Palestinians under the pretext of race, claiming that the land belongs exclusively to the Jewish race. Here, savagery, or cannibalism, so to speak, manifests itself alongside what can be termed Hobbesian force: "Man tends toward a life of selfishness rather than consensus because he is, by nature, evil and savage."¹ This is precisely what is happening, and it is the very outcome to which relativism inevitably leads.

Relativism is characterized by its advocacy for individualism and personal inclinations; meaning that every person acts as they please, stubbornly adhering to their opinion even when in error. Consequently, dialogue among them does not culminate in consensus, but rather in discord. Thus, they disagree with the moral principle of Immanuel Kant, the proponent of the concept of "universalism," which dictates that we must not inflict harm upon others through our actions. Before performing any action, we must ask ourselves whether it can be willed as a universal law applicable to everyone; if it cannot, and if it entails harm, then it must not be performed, as it constitutes an immoral act.

Nietzschean Critique

Social philosophers critique Friedrich Nietzsche for advocating excessive individualism and disregarding alterity (altruism). This individualistic tendency is most pronounced in Nietzsche's discourse on the "great man" and the "will to power," which has exacerbated isolation within society. To elaborate further, given the isolation of the great man and the concentration on subjectivity or egoism, one cannot expect the emergence of the good anticipated from virtue within society. When an individual isolates themselves from communities and thinks solely of themselves, meaning that the good is retained for the self alone, it poses a danger to humans within society by preventing the discovery of any external good. This is what is known as the "absolute ethical egoism" for which Nietzsche was renowned, or what is termed "grandeur."

Nietzsche speaks of great individuals who are successful in their lives and focuses heavily on them. His intention was, of course, directed toward the good rather than evil, aiming for the individual to achieve greatness independently; by this, he refers to the intellectual and genius elite, as if he were speaking about himself, for he possessed an unimaginable degree of genius. Here, he champions individualism and utility.

¹ Nabil Abdel-Hamid Abdel-Jabbar, *Thomas Hobbes and His Doctrine in Ethics and Politics*, (Dar Dijlah, 2007).

and natural rights. This perspective is precisely what aggrandized genius-politicians, driving them toward the perpetuation of evil and the execution of massacres; consequently, this paradigm catalyzed malevolence rather than benevolence. This concept of the "Übermensch" (the Superman) manifests clearly in totalitarian leaders who ruled the world solely to fulfill their subjective ambitions while disregarding the existence of the "Other." Such a trajectory stands in stark antithesis to the classical teleological conception of virtue, which posits that the Good is inherently universal rather than atomized within the sovereign individual. Consequently, Nietzschean philosophy serves as the quintessential ideological framework undergirding the hyper-individualism of liberal modernity.

Isolation and Alienation

In Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, the protagonist, Toru Okada, suffers from profound isolation, disconnection, and marginalization, which triggers a psychological crisis that plunges him into an abnormal world (madness). This dynamic is further elucidated in the scene where the protagonist encounters his brother-in-law, Noboru Wataya, who explains the reasons behind the wife's disappearance and her desertion of the marital home: "Noboru Wataya said to Okada: 'You've ruined Kumiko's life. I never saw a single promising sign in you.'"² Thus, it can be argued that while the protagonist was in an optimal socio-economic condition, Kumiko accepted him as a husband and loved him; however, the moment he became unemployed, she abandoned him, found him intolerable, and eloped with another man who was materially superior. Instead of standing by him and assisting him through his ordeal, she forsook him, leaving him marginalized, outcast, and despised.

This narrative intersects significantly with Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, revealing the profound influence Kafka exercised over Murakami. *The Metamorphosis* chronicles the tragedy of Gregor Samsa, who tirelessly worked to support his family's domestic expenses despite his loathing for that grueling labor. Yet, when he could no longer sustain this lifestyle and aspired to exist according to his own desires, his family and surrounding social circle abandoned him; he became an outcast, viewed with contempt, and was phenomenologically transformed into a monstrous insect, a cockroach. Here, we witness the apex of alienation, non-belonging, and isolation.

To expand further, Kafka, a brilliant philosopher-novelist, prophetically anticipated the trajectory of individual life within contemporary capitalist society. In a materialistic, transaction-driven society, human worth is strictly contingent upon labor, production, and utility. This commodification induces acute psychological crises within individuals. As their psychological and physiological conditions deteriorate, they are effortlessly replaced, discarded, and crushed like insects. They are stripped of social acceptability, marginalized, and utterly ignored; humanism erodes, rendering human existence worthless. Gregor became

² Haruki Murakami, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, translated into Arabic by Ahmad Hosein Al-Maaini, 1st ed. (Dar Al-Adab, 2021), p. 322.

systemically excluded, languishing in absolute isolation. Even his family, those closest to him, grew to detest him, with the sole exception of his sister. He plunged into an unnatural reality, transformed into an insect, and his trajectory culminated in suicide and death. Through this, Kafka depicts a ruthless capitalist society wherein the individual buries themselves in labor and egoism, entirely indifferent to the "Other." The capitalist apparatus does not recognize the failed or the bankrupt; they hold no station in that society and are systematically excluded. Consequently, this disenfranchised class resorts to isolation and suffering, a path that inevitably terminates in self-destruction. This is the portrait of contemporary man as drawn by Kafka.

We observe an identical phenomenon in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. The protagonist, Okada, was unemployed but consistently strived to ameliorate his life conditions. Nonetheless, his immediate circle, his wife and her family, offered no solidarity; instead, they induced in him a profound sense of exclusion. His brother-in-law deemed him worthless and dysfunctional. Upon learning of his wife's infidelity and her departure with her paramour, Okada felt as though he were residing on an island of feces: "Everything around us is shit, something repulsive and intolerable. What has been the purpose of my life up to this day?"³ Plagued by this sense of exclusion and worthlessness, he would descend into a deep well, remaining there for hours on end, reflecting: "My absence, in all probability, has affected no one."⁴ He further observed: "I was crawling in pitch darkness; all I could see was nothingness, and I was, in reality, a part of that nothingness."⁵ Consequently, he too succumbed to madness. Through this narrative device, the author posits that within an individualistic society, no one empathizes with the suffering and angst of the "Other"; humanism is virtually non-existent, underscoring the author's Kafkaesque influence.

The individualistic-liberal paradigm inherently breeds isolation and disconnection; a reality vividly illustrated within the text. The protagonist attempts to escape this existential alienation by resorting to alcohol: "And soon I craved whiskey. Mayu Kasahara came and brought the cold can from the refrigerator, and I drank it with her."⁶ However, the sensation of disconnection intensifies once the ephemeral euphoria of intoxication subsides, inducing a perpetual craving to return to it. This escapism extends to sexuality, exemplified by the character Creta Kano, who represents the most sexually active figure in the narrative. Driven to prostitution by a financial crisis, she reflects: "Sex no longer caused me any physical pain, nor did it afford me any pleasure."⁷ Creta lived with her family in absolute solitude, isolated within her room, her routine confined to attending university and returning to her confinement. She suffered alone, unperceived and neglected by her kin. When she turned to prostitution, she perceived it as a world wherein she could externalize her trauma and rebel.

³ Ibid, p. 339

⁴ Ibid., p. 401.

⁵ Ibid., p. 411

⁶ Ibid., p.

⁷ Ibid., p. 161.

Yet, she found neither happiness nor solace; rather, it rendered her psychologically dead, devoid of emotion, indifferent to existence, and entrenched in a state of apathy, isolation, and disconnection that bypassed all traditional norms and morals. Even after liquidating her debts, she did not cease her sex work, transforming it into a sanctuary to escape a grim and savage reality.

Furthermore, we must consider Kumiko, who consistently delayed her return home under the pretext of an excessive workload: "I'm sorry, I'll be late today, perhaps until nine, so I'll have dinner out."⁸ In postmodern society, resorting to addictions, such as hypersexuality and alcoholism, serves as a mechanism to escape reality, thereby fostering the pathology of isolation. This reveals a fundamental contradiction within postmodern society: isolation is paradoxically prescribed as the antidote to overcome alienation and internal anxiety.

Thus, the subjects within an individualistic-liberal world are internally exiled, suffering from the pathology of disconnection due to the absence of genuine love. As previously noted, the sexual act devoid of love is meaningless and unsustainable. Love must be reciprocal, requiring mutual understanding, dialogue, and bilateral emotional investment.

Consequently, we conclude that an autonomous life of unbridled self-determination, if devoid of boundaries or constraints, inevitably leads to madness, to a pathological society. This is manifested in the protagonist's wife, who, after living with her husband for a few months, succumbed to existential boredom, sought out another man, engaged in an affair, and decided to sever her marital ties to pursue this new relationship. The spouses lived in an emotionally unfulfilled relationship; the wife, experiencing an internal deficit, sought a new connection, pursuing love with a new individual, and so on. In this manner, love is transformed into a consumable commodity, driving a relentless search for purely sexual gratification. True happiness remains absent, giving rise to what are termed "neurotic disorders." The absolute gratification of all instinctual needs "does not merely fail to serve as a basis for happiness, but it does not even guarantee psychological health."⁹ Contemporary capitalist society is essentially a consumerist, hedonistic society that pursues pleasure in all things to achieve a life of luxury and superficial happiness. Conversely, social-ethical philosophers, who oppose utilitarianism and individualism, maintain that the relentless pursuit of acquisition, that is, the pursuit of raw pleasure—engenders greed, whereas liberals and utilitarians view it as a virtue.

The Disconnected Self

Individuals exist within diverse societies and, involuntarily, internalize specific social identities derived from their upbringing, customs, and traditions. Every individual belongs to a cultural matrix and strives to realize the inherited good that has shaped their personality; they remain tethered to the past and the legacy bequeathed by their ancestors. This structure stands in

⁸ Ibid., p. 169.

⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The General Theory of the Neuroses*, translated into Arabic by George Tarabichi (Dar Al-Tali'ah, Beirut), PDF.

stark opposition to modern individualistic doctrine, which posits that the individual must be defined solely by their autonomous choices, bearing no ethical responsibility toward their parents, society, or nation. Here, an erroneous socio-cultural framework emerges, so to speak, influencing us subliminally.

Consider, for instance, the systemic proliferation of racism within Western societies, particularly American society, which marginalizes individuals of color. American society is structurally composed of Black and white populations, yet Black individuals endure systemic racism. Consequently, its members fail to become truly social beings; indifferent to the "Other," they pursue exclusively their personal utility.

Under these conditions, the phenomenon of the "disconnected self" emerges, most notably within existentialist philosophy, particularly that of Jean-Paul Sartre. This school of thought has faced substantial critique, primarily because its proponents overemphasize individual freedom, autonomous choice, and subjective anxiety. While this philosophy can catalyze individual renewal and transformation, it operates strictly on an atomized, rather than collective, level. Ultimately, it serves the bourgeoisie or the elite intellectual class by focusing on the individual while neglecting the collective, offering an excessive concentration on the self to justify isolation and evade systemic societal change, a position social philosophers reject. Furthermore, the disconnected self is an ahistorical entity, detached from the past; its proponents deny inherited tradition, meaning the individual is severed from the ancestral and parental lineages that shaped their upbringing and identity.

Accordingly, the individualistic-liberal doctrine fails to reinforce inherited virtues. Consequently, these virtues have become increasingly marginalized, and the traditional practice of virtue has lost its primary value. This moral vacuum is mirrored in the novel, where the characters treat virtues as peripheral. Humans have become egoistic, and contemporary life within the capitalist system has led to the abandonment of virtues such as cooperation, love, friendship, and trust, justifying this erosion through circumstantial necessity or the demands of the modern era. Here, relativist thought manifests clearly: individuals rationalize their actions and transgressions based on shifting circumstances, entirely indifferent to objective ethics and virtue. This is illustrated in the narrative when the brother of the unfaithful wife attacks the husband, Okada. Instead of feeling shame for his sister's transgressions, he reproaches, insults, and vilifies the husband, defending his sister and fabricating excuses for her, an assault that ultimately induces the protagonist's psychological break.

Aristotle, in his treatise on ethics, delineates moral virtues, which are cultivated within an individual through their upbringing until they solidify into habit. A person habituated to courage, generosity, and justice will find these virtues dominating their character, dictating their actions as second nature. Conversely, intellectual virtues belong to the domain of knowledge and wisdom, qualities that characterize the nobility, the elite, and the sages, manifesting as prudence and moderation.

For Aristotle, the practice of virtue necessitates a healthy, rational mind (*orthos logos*). Yet, within capitalist society, a healthy mind is absent due to pervasive psychological pathologies; it is an irrational society characterized by liquidity, fragility, and systemic unhealthiness. Aristotelian thought remains fundamentally realistic and rational: the actualization of ethics requires a sound intellect that yields wisdom and knowledge, coupled with an upright upbringing that transforms courage, generosity, and justice into ingrained habits. This implies an openness toward the "Other," love for the "Other," and mutual recognition. This constitutes a healthy society, brought about via a healthy mind, a reality conspicuously absent within the contemporary capitalist framework, which lacks a sound intellect and is, therefore, a fundamentally pathological society. We shall further elucidate and demonstrate this in the subsequent analyses.

We must emphasize that adherence to virtues is indispensable to human life and the social fabric, as it guides humanity toward the Good, a common rather than an atomized, individualistic Good. We learn from our predecessors that what constitutes my good as a human being is inherently identical to the good of others with whom I coexist. Conversely, the virtue of friendship holds no meaning within the framework of individualism. Aristotle affirmed that the virtue of friendship constitutes the foundational archetype of human relations, advocating for a departure from egoism. He champions love, cooperation, and empathy for others, emphasizing that one's personal good must never be antagonistic or hostile to the good of others. This is the primordial meaning of friendship within the essential conceptualization of humanity¹⁰.

Furthermore, it is an ontological impossibility for the self to remain enclosed; the Other continuously affects the self, and the self is reciprocally affected by the Other. Indeed, the self cannot achieve true self-knowledge except through this mutual alterity. Here, an analytical counter position emerges between the "Ego" (*l'ego*) and the "Self" (*le soi*). The Ego represents the antithesis of the Self; it is resistant to change and impervious to external promptings. In contrast, the Self listens so that the Other may speak, and speaks because the other listens. This relational Self manifests in the speaker, the addressee, and the third-person narrative voice. Consequently, the Self is simultaneously the "I," the "You," and the "He/She." This establishes a reciprocal, dialogical relationship between the Self and the Other, a principle heavily advocated by the Aristotelian ethical tradition and social philosophers. They call for cohabitation with the Other to actualize the value of friendship, whereby the Self is continuously shaped by the alterity of the Other within the social fabric. This engenders an indissoluble bond through intersubjective engagement with the Other (the friend). Such a configuration compels the Self to extend friendship to the Other, transitioning from absolute egocentrism to social integration. Ultimately, this contributes to constructing an ethical institution grounded in alterity and justice, precisely because the Self opens up to the broader socio-historical context, escaping its narrow solipsism. Thus, an isolated, self-enclosed self is

¹⁰ Aristoteles, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated into Arabic by Ahmad Lutfi Al-Sayyid (Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyyah, Cairo, 1924).

an impossibility. This perspective directly critiques the Cartesian model of the cloistered, self-contained subject, as well as the Hegelian paradigm predicated upon a monadic, sovereign self-consciousness.

Through the linguistic paradigm of communication between the first-person ("I") and the second-person ("You"), the existence of the Ego is rendered contingent upon the presence of the "Other as You." Moreover, the relationship between the Self and the Other does not terminate at this linguistic juncture; rather, it opens onto the ontological dimension of the Self within society ¹¹, alongside the institutional and ethical laws imposed by the latter upon the modality of existential being. This signifies the authentic existence of a rational self, as conceptualized in Kantian deontological ethics (duty-based morality), since the subject operates within the universal structure of being and within a society composed of ethical institutions governed by mandatory laws. Here, the Self interrogates its positionality within this systemic framework, whereby the recognition of existence is determined within the crucible of this reciprocal social matrix. Consequently, when the Self recognizes the Other, connects with them, and establishes meaningful bonds, thereby demonstrating openness to alterity, one's own existential presence is authenticated through this mutual recognition.

Conversely, the characters in the novel are predominantly characterized by egoism, particularly the protagonist's wife, whose actions ultimately induce her husband's descent into madness. Within contemporary capitalist society, the postmodern epoch, the philosophical frameworks of Aristotle and Paul Ricoeur have been abandoned, relegated to the realm of illusion. Instead, the dominant paradigm dictates that every human being, by nature, is driven exclusively by the maximization of their subjective desires. The systemic consequence depicted via the characters within the narrative is a state of destructive, mutual chaos engulfing contemporary capitalist society, catalyzed by the hegemony of egoism and the unbridled pursuit of instinctual desires.

To actualize virtue in its proper form, courage is an indispensable prerequisite. We must possess the readiness to endure whatever existential risks we encounter throughout our life course. Furthermore, we must listen attentively to critiques regarding our own moral deficiencies. In this respect, virtue stands irreconcilably opposed to the tenets of relativism, whose proponents reject dialectical accountability. We must remain steadfastly realistic, avoiding the deception and mendacity that obstruct the cultivation of virtue. Such vices impede our path toward achieving "standards of excellence," ultimately rendering moral practices entirely meaningless.

Virtue inherently rejects deception, falsehood, and betrayal, refusing to legitimize behaviors that fracture the bonds of solidarity and affection among individuals. Thus, it is imperative to return to the ethical standards of friendship and trust, which necessitate the cultivation of

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, translated into Arabic by Dr. George Zenati, 1st ed. (Arab Organization for Translation, Beirut, 2005).

justice and courage, alongside the eradication of racism and systemic discrimination. Crucially, virtues are acquired through praxis, that is, the active, habituated exercise of justice, courage, and honesty.

Because virtue demands courage, defined as the capacity to endure harm or danger, it plays a pivotal role in human life due to its structural link with care and moral attentiveness. An individual incapable of enduring adversity is classified, in ethical terms, as a coward. Furthermore, virtues require active practices; one must be courageous in embodying honesty and justice while eschewing betrayal. Those who fail to manifest these attributes are deemed cowards within their specific socio-historical milieus. Paradoxically, when the cultivation of virtues is most urgently required, vices simultaneously flourish. This is manifest in contemporary celebrity culture, where individuals pursue capital, profit, and fame. In this context, the performative exercise of virtue for the sake of reputation, financial gain, and structural influence ceases to be virtuous; it is marked by inauthenticity, mendacity, and deception, entirely devoid of truth. Consequently, the authentic essence of virtue evaporates, mutating into a mechanism for public visibility and exhibitionism (mere performance). This dynamic engenders what may be termed the "Sophoclean self" ¹², a self-sufficient, acquisitive entity driven by insatiable greed and individualistic utility, single-mindedly focused on securing permanent gains. Within this hyper-competitive paradigm, the individual oscillates between total triumph and catastrophic failure, culminating either in superficial happiness or absolute ruin.

For virtue to be authentically efficacious, it must be practiced without regard for extrinsic consequences. If an individual is committed to the execution of justice, they must persevere along that path irrespective of the outcomes. Justice is a collective ethical responsibility, a moral imperative for which humanity must collectively struggle. Individuals coexist in close proximity; if we internalize the solipsistic notion that the plight of the "Other" does not concern us, this indifference will inevitably rebound upon us. We will eventually endure the exact same suffering as the individual we refused to aid. When a person is subjected to injustice, it is our moral duty to intervene rather than remaining passive spectators. By defending them, we collectively liberate ourselves from that tyranny, for a day will inevitably come when we find ourselves in an identical predicament. Solidarity is an ethical obligation; we are bound to support others and amplify their voices. Herein lies the exercise of courage within the practice of justice. Ultimately, we arrive at the conclusion that the co-presence of justice, courage, and honesty serves to sustain the internal relationships within moral practices.

Conversely, we encounter an antithetical proposition regarding the conceptualization of virtue: the idea that virtue itself can inadvertently generate evil. For example, in the novel, the protagonist's wife, Kumiko, performs a facade of fidelity and devotion by ostensibly assisting

¹²The author uses the term "Sophoclean self" here, referencing the concept of classical tragic hero structures and self-sufficiency explored in contemporary virtue ethics (e.g., Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*).

her husband with domestic expenses, leaving early in the morning and returning exhausted at night to retreat into bed under the pretext of fatigue. Yet, this performative virtue was a source of profound malice; she was deceiving her husband with another man, harboring a latent aversion toward him and desiring a separation. The husband, having invested immense trust in her, was ultimately met with cruelty and betrayal. In this instance, the husband's dedicated loyalty inadvertently empowered the aggressor. Through his self-sacrificing devotion, the wife found the latitude to inflict systemic injustice and oppression upon him. This demonstrates that identifying virtues as contextual practices does not imply an uncritical endorsement of all such practices across all circumstances. Where deception and falsehood prevail, the authentic trajectory of virtue is derailed. Virtue constitutes the foundational bedrock of society; existence devoid of virtue is transformed into a living hell. Thus, virtue demands absolute purity, honesty, and moral constancy.

To reiterate, proponents of liberalism stand in direct opposition to Aristotelian thought. They tend to adopt the paradigms of the social contract philosophers, prioritizing mutual utility. They have institutionalized concepts of liberty and rights that ultimately facilitated the hegemony of egoism within a modern society that has systematically erased the Aristotelian teleological vision. Individuals within this societal framework are atomized egoists, living in profound isolation, entirely indifferent to the "Other."

Jacobinism

Jacobinism represents a socio-political and moral ideology that emphasizes liberty and equality through civic virtues such as patriotism and familial cohesion. Standing in opposition to individualism and utilitarianism, Jacobinism champions alterity and gravitates toward moral simplicity. It underscores the foundational virtues of courage, honesty, and industrious labor. In this regard, the Jacobin tradition aligns with the revolutionary trajectories of Aristotle and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It "does not prioritize pure reason to an extreme degree, but rather relies upon intense enthusiasm and robust moral-religious devotion"¹³. Among its most prominent theorists was the English writer William Cobbett, who maintained that for a society to preserve its structural cohesion, it must purge itself of envy and that unbridled desire for liberty that inevitably degenerates into individualistic egoism. Cobbett advocated for diligent labor, patriotism, and collectivist altruism, fiercely opposing capitalism, which he characterized as an insatiable institutional evil driven by usury.

In our contemporary age, it has become imperative to embody this line of thought, particularly within Arab societies. Individuals no longer exhibit genuine attachment to their homeland; indeed, one may argue that patriotism has largely faded. Increasingly, people aspire to leave their countries in search of opportunities elsewhere. In this context, the revival of Jacobin thought appears particularly relevant to our societies, where the widespread prevalence of individualistic thinking, detached from any sense of national belonging, has

¹³ Gustave Le Bon, *The Psychology of Revolution*, translated into Arabic by Adel Zuaier (Hindawi, 2028), p. 85.

made it easier for dominant global powers to shape and control nations according to their own interests. Jacobinism, by contrast, is a revolutionary doctrine that advocates love of one's homeland, solidarity among citizens, and the construction of a cohesive social order.

Contemporary capitalism has profoundly eroded the human spirit, or more precisely, humanity itself. It seeks to extinguish spirituality, faith, and love. It is precisely this concern that motivated the Algerian leftist thinker and novelist Faïsal Lahmar to address the issue in his recently published novel *The City of Saint Augustine*. In this work, he exposes what he portrays as the sinister intentions of the global system of domination: the transformation of human beings into soulless machines, a process that inevitably leads to the disappearance of morality and virtue. As a remedy, he proposes a return to the thought of Saint Augustine, for whom love constitutes the very foundation upon which society is built. According to this vision, the ultimate purpose of a life consistent with human nature is the capacity to love while remaining firmly connected to reality.

Through a philosophical and imaginative narrative, Lahmar depicts the future existence of humanity within a so-called "smart city" devoid of spirit. It is a world inhabited by affluent individuals, yet stripped of love, faith, religion, morality, and virtue. The novel warns that such a mode of existence is profoundly perilous: once love disappears from human relationships, life itself loses its meaning. Hence, the author returns to Saint Augustine's philosophy, observing that: "They seek to make individuals live in isolation, leading the majority toward suicide and death: a world without secrets, an immature world, a world without intimacy."¹⁴

Meanwhile, people have gradually become submissive to these destructive ideologies, often embracing them unconsciously. They have abandoned morality and virtue, sacrificing both their dignity and their freedom. They have become programmed, manipulated, and conditioned to pursue the seductive promises of a new way of life.

Contemporary life increasingly resembles a perpetual fight club, a continuous struggle and confrontation. It is characterized by relentless change and innovation in every sphere of existence. Even morality has become relative and pluralistic under the influence of utilitarianism, individualism, and liberal conceptions of personal freedom. Within the global consumer economy, individuals are granted almost unlimited freedom to determine for themselves what is right and wrong, giving rise to what is commonly described as liquid morality: an unstable ethical framework lacking permanence or objective foundations.

Consequently, humanity has moved away from the Kantian moral paradigm, which grounded ethics in duty, rational discipline, and the imperative never to harm others through our actions, while insisting that reason should govern human conduct, toward a fragile and fluid morality shaped primarily by personal preference. Under this new ethical order, individuals are encouraged to pursue whatever pleases them, to seek pleasure and gratification without restraint. Yet, often without realizing it, this trajectory culminates in self-destruction, producing

¹⁴Faïsal Lahmeur, *The City of Saint Augustine* (Novel), *op. cit.*, p. 48.

divided and morally disoriented individuals. As the protagonist of *Fight Club* declares: "I am trash. I am the dirt and the madness of this cursed world. This world has corrupted humanity, and now history expects me to clean up the chaos left behind by the masses."¹⁵

Thus, contemporary society appears increasingly engulfed in disorder. Rampant consumerism, excessive individual freedoms, existential fragility, and the erosion of solidarity have rendered the restoration of social cohesion exceedingly difficult. The inevitable consequences are boredom, psychological distress, and rising rates of suicide, reflected in the anguished confession: "I hate my life. I wanted to escape this fragile existence."¹⁶ At the heart of this crisis lies the disappearance of meaning.

The Creation of Meaning

Contemporary society suffers from a profound crisis of meaning in the philosophical sense of the term. Individuals have become increasingly materialistic, devoting themselves primarily to work and the accumulation of wealth. Conversely, love (eros), friendship, concern for others, and openness to the Other have either disappeared or are rapidly fading, as previously noted. Consequently, psychological disorders have become more widespread, while human beings have gradually been transformed into programmed, robotic machines that merely execute predetermined tasks, all the while believing that they are living in comfort and prosperity.

From this perspective, people imagine themselves to be happy and prosperous, to the extent that they wish this mode of life to remain unchanged and often resist anyone who dares challenge the prevailing model of industrial and technological progress. Yet genuine human flourishing requires a reconciliation between reason and instinct within advanced industrial society¹⁷. Herein lies a fundamental contradiction: how can a society that has achieved extraordinary technological sophistication still require human beings to work excessively long hours? Ideally, machines should perform much of this labor, thereby allowing individuals to cultivate their natural capacities and fully experience their humanity.¹⁸

Instead, contemporary life has become largely unregulated in its aspirations, revolving almost entirely around consumption. Human beings must therefore seek meaning, for life without purpose inevitably leads to existential failure and spiritual death. As the saying goes, "We are the ones who create meaning."¹⁹ Meaning is never attained effortlessly; rather, it demands commitment, perseverance, love, and patience. It is realized through meaningful work, through extending assistance to those who suffer, and through enduring hardship with courage and dignity.

¹⁵Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, trans. Ahmad Khaled Towfik (Telegram Network, 2020), p. 108.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 218

¹⁷Abdel-Ghaffar Makkawi, *The Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School*, University of Kuwait, 13th Annual Annals (1993), pp. 31–32.

¹⁸Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, trans. Haggag Abu Jabr (Beirut: Arab Network for Research and Publishing), p. 131.

¹⁹Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, trans. Dr. Talaat Mansour, 1st ed. (Kuwait: Dar Al-Qalam, 1982), p. 130.

When individuals experience love and know themselves to be loved, they discover that their lives possess meaning and value. This awareness generates the motivation to live creatively and to offer the very best of themselves. In this sense, love triumphs over loneliness, despair, and depression. The love intended here is not merely romantic affection; it is a spiritual and existential form of love. Neither is it reducible to desire, possession, or obsessive attachment. Rather, love consists in perceiving the person with whom we live and interact in the best possible light, recognizing the goodness and beauty that reside within them. Such recognition positively transforms both the one who loves and the one who is loved, enabling each to flourish through the experience of being genuinely valued by others.

The creation of meaning also requires embracing suffering rather than fleeing from it. To live authentically is to confront reality instead of escaping it, to refuse cowardice and weakness in favor of courage and resilience. This courage is expressed through empathy and concern for others, rather than through obsessive self-preoccupation. Individuals who remain imprisoned within themselves inevitably become overwhelmed by fear, suffering, and anxiety. By contrast, when we transcend individualism and excessive self-love, directing our attention toward the needs of others, we experience a deeper form of love. In helping another person, we often feel as though we are restoring that person's life. This constitutes the authentic experience of love, through which our own existence is fulfilled. As Paul Ricoeur argues, one's existence is constituted through the recognition of the Other. Only then do we truly taste the richness of life and realize that we are living human beings rather than emotionless machines or lifeless idols.

Those who live in isolation within capitalist societies seldom experience genuine love. As Don DeLillo writes in *White Noise*: "You will share a deadly loneliness and the resentment of consumers who have lost their identity as a community."²⁰ In such societies, individuals are preoccupied with work and the accumulation of wealth in order to consume ever more goods and sustain an affluent lifestyle. Even sexuality becomes emptied of emotion and authentic feeling, reduced to yet another commodity. Men labor for long hours in pursuit of increasingly idealized and commercially manufactured images of femininity promoted through advertising and consumer culture. The human body itself becomes a marketable object, encouraging an endless pursuit of novelty, fashion, and artificial standards of beauty.

Under these conditions, genuine affection disappears, while human relationships are increasingly governed by material desire and sensual gratification. Rather than seeking to establish a stable family, individuals pursue limitless pleasure, only to find themselves ultimately alone. This helps explain the growing prevalence of suicide in advanced capitalist societies such as the United States, France, Japan, and the United Kingdom. When the human heart is emptied of love, life itself becomes a form of hell. Love alone provides security, creates meaning, and enables individuals to recognize the significance of their own existence.

²⁰Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (Novel), trans. Yazan Al-Haggag, 1st ed. (Suez, Egypt: Dar Al-Tanweer for Printing and Publishing / Baghdad Library, 1984), p. 64.

The Illusion of Happiness

Individuals in contemporary capitalist societies are relentlessly driven by the pursuit of happiness, to the extent that happiness itself has become the central objective of life. Yet such happiness is ultimately illusory, fleeting, and inherently unstable, particularly in economically advanced societies where life revolves around consumer pleasure and the incessant pursuit of novelty and change. Within this framework, the quest for meaning gradually disappears. Every day becomes another attempt to attain happiness, a pursuit that ultimately exhausts the individual, reinforces egocentrism, and deepens attachment to the self.

Rather than conceptualizing happiness as an intrinsic telos (ultimate end), individuals are compelled to construct an existential purpose, invest in its validity, and assume absolute responsibility for its enactment, which includes the psychological fortitude to endure the suffering inherent in its pursuit. Within this framework, authentic well-being (eudaimonia) emerges not through direct seeking, but as an epiphenomenon (a secondary result) of a meaningful existence; thus, happiness paradoxically claims the subject rather than the subject possessing it. Happiness, therefore, cannot constitute the ultimate purpose of human life, for it is merely a transient emotional state. Its impermanence becomes evident whenever the fulfillment of one desire is immediately followed by the emergence of another. Human beings consequently remain trapped in an endless cycle of wishing, achieving, and desiring anew, especially within consumer societies where satisfaction is constantly postponed by the promise of further consumption. This perpetual cycle generates an existential void: moments of joy are brief and quickly fade, leaving individuals once again confronted with emptiness and dissatisfaction.

Accordingly, it is essential to internalize a fundamental philosophical insight: there is no necessity for human beings to remain continuously happy. What truly matters is discovering the reason that makes life worth living. Such a search is, in essence, the search for meaning itself. A meaningful life is not measured by uninterrupted pleasure but by the values that orient human existence, the responsibilities one willingly assumes, the relationships one cultivates, and the capacity to confront suffering with dignity and hope.

From an existential perspective, meaning is not something passively received but something actively created through responsible engagement with the world. It arises through work that serves others, through authentic love that transcends self-interest, and through the courage to transform suffering into an opportunity for personal and moral growth. Once life is grounded in meaning, happiness ceases to be an elusive goal; instead, it becomes the natural outcome of a life lived with purpose, commitment, and moral responsibility.

Ultimately, the contemporary crisis is not merely a crisis of economic systems or technological development, but a crisis of meaning. The erosion of solidarity, the dominance of consumerism, the triumph of radical individualism, and the commodification of human relationships have produced a spiritual and existential vacuum. Recovering meaning therefore

requires the restoration of those values that affirm our shared humanity, love, responsibility, compassion, solidarity, and openness to others. Only by recovering these values can individuals reclaim their humanity and build societies founded not solely upon material prosperity, but also upon moral integrity, spiritual fulfillment, and authentic human flourishing.

Unlike happiness, which is confined to brief and transient moments, meaning constitutes a profound, enduring, and continuous experience. It enables individuals to endure suffering, cultivates patience, and strengthens their capacity for resilience and perseverance. Happiness, by contrast, seeks comfort and tends to avoid suffering. Human life cannot be sustained without meaning; once meaning disappears, life itself is deprived of its vitality and spirit.

In conclusion, the principal findings of this study may be summarized as follows:

Moral relativism dominates postmodern society, where individuals tend to justify their actions according to circumstances rather than objective moral standards.

From the standpoint of relativism, moral judgment becomes narrow in scope, one-sided, and susceptible to extremism.

Nietzsche's concept of the will to power has contributed to increasing social isolation and alienation.

Nietzsche's philosophy represents the individualistic orientation that underpins modern liberal individualism.

Capitalist society is portrayed as an irrational and fundamentally unhealthy social order.

Through his novel *Fight Club*, the American novelist and social critic Chuck Palahniuk offers a powerful critique of contemporary society, particularly American society, despite its technological and economic advancement, depicting it as a chaotic world whose social order has become exceedingly difficult to restore.

The capitalist system is characterized by greed, which Aristotle regarded as a vice. Within capitalist society, a person's worth is measured primarily by productivity, profit, and economic performance. Winners are celebrated and socially accepted, whereas losers are marginalized and excluded. As a consequence, the very meaning of humanity is diminished, contributing to increasing rates of suicide.

Liberal individualism has fostered selfishness, isolation, and social fragmentation.

Addiction to sex and alcohol represents a desperate attempt to escape loneliness and existential isolation.

Individuals shaped by the liberal individualistic order experience a profound sense of internal exile, resulting in an ever-deepening feeling of alienation.

A conception of self-determination devoid of ethical limits or constraints ultimately leads to a disordered and irrational society.

Nietzsche's ideal of the Übermensch (Superman) encourages excessive individualism, self-centeredness, and social isolation.

The separation of human beings from communal life gives rise to ethical egoism.

The Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami may likewise be regarded as a social critic who challenges liberal individualism while advocating an ethical vision inspired by Aristotelian virtue.

Social philosophers generally reject Nietzsche's ethical position because it conflicts with their understanding of morality and virtue. They reject utilitarianism, egoism, excessive self-love, and radical individualism, while showing greater affinity with Aristotle's conception of virtue ethics.

Within liberal utilitarian thought, the concept of virtue has gradually been relegated to the margins.

Among the most significant consequences of contemporary capitalism is the abandonment of essential human virtues such as cooperation, love, friendship, and trust.

Contemporary capitalism points toward the emergence of a new social order in which virtue has lost its significance. Future "smart cities" may become environments where human beings live without emotions, resembling machines. Individuals will be evaluated according to systems of performance and scoring: those who achieve the highest rankings will be accepted, whereas those who fail will be expelled to impoverished communities lacking even the most basic conditions of life. Such a model seeks to construct a society devoid of humanity, spirituality, love, and genuine social relationships, founded instead upon radical individualism—a trajectory that ultimately leads to loneliness, psychological collapse, and suicide.

Contemporary society therefore requires a renewed engagement with Jacobin political thought, as well as the ideas of the English thinker Quentin Skinner, in order to build genuinely humane communities grounded in love, solidarity, civic responsibility, and patriotism. The spread of radical individualism has weakened attachment to the homeland, leaving citizens alienated from their own countries and deprived of the bonds of friendship and civic belonging.

The Algerian novelist and science-fiction writer Faisal Lahmar proposes a return to the philosophy of Saint Augustine as a means of rescuing humanity from a new civilization devoid of spirit, faith, and love.

Virtue is incompatible with deception, falsehood, and betrayal. Consequently, there is an urgent need to restore the ethical principles of honesty, trustworthiness, justice, and courage.

The cultivation of virtue requires practical moral discipline, demanding that individuals possess the courage to speak truthfully and reject betrayal in all its forms.

Commitment to the virtues is indispensable for both individual and social life, since virtue promotes the common good rather than merely advancing private interests.