

The Alienated Moralist in An Enemy of the People

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AN INDIVIDUAL WHO DEFIES society because of his moral convictions, and consequently suffers for his independent and unbending stand, is not an unfamiliar phenomenon, whether in the annals of human history or in the experience of contemporary societies. The prophet who proclaims an unpopular message, the religious reformer who turns into a critic of an established church, the whistle-blower who exposes government abuse to mind. This perennial issue was dramatized with great ingenuity and clarity by Henrik Ibsen in his drama, *An Enemy of the People*.

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) published this play in 1882, and it was performed in Scandinavia and subsequently in other European countries. The Norwegian original was translated into various languages. The play, as virtually any dramatic presentation, takes place in a certain place and time—though the place is not identified geographically but merely described as a coastal town in southern Norway, and the time is simply assumed to be coeval with the publication of the drama or its imminent presentation. Yet this fairly concrete framework in no way binds and limits the drama and its mes-

sage to a passing moment of history in a Scandinavian setting. The message is universal in scope and it is as relevant today as it may have been at the end of the nineteenth century.

The central character of the drama is Dr. Thomas Stockmann, Medical Officer of the Municipal Baths of the town. He lives with his wife, Katherine, their daughter, Petra, who is a teacher, and two young sons. Peter Stockmann, the Doctor's elder brother, is a prominent citizen of the town—its Mayor and Chief Constable, and the Chairman of the Baths' Committee. He represents the Establishment, the Authority in the community. Then there are two journalists, Hovstad and Billing, editors of the *People's Messenger*, a liberal paper, at odds with the conservative Peter Stockmann and the class of wealthy people he represents. Aslaksen, the printer of the paper, heads the town's Householders' Association, which comprises the majority of the townfolk. Unlike the newspaper editors, he is not a radical but, as he insists on presenting himself, a man of moderation. He does not want to offend the people in power, though he has the interests of the modest majority at heart. (There are a couple of additional characters, who will be mentioned later.)

The plot revolves round the Municipal Baths. They have been established on the

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initiative of Dr. Stockmann, with the support of his brother, who claims for himself greater contribution to the achievement than is his due. The Baths promise to be a great asset to the development of the town, as they are expected to attract visitors and invalids, who will come to the place during the summers to improve their health. Peter Stockmann, the good citizen and savvy businessman, points to the great benefits of the Baths for each and all:

Taking one thing with another, there is an excellent spirit of toleration in the town—an admirable municipal spirit. And it all springs from the fact of our having a great common interest to unite us—an interest that is in an equally high degree the concern of every right-minded citizen....

Think how extraordinarily the place has developed within the last year or two! Money has been flowing in. ...Houses and landed property are rising in value every day.

Hovstad, the liberal journalist, who is the Mayor's collocator, adds that unemployment is also diminishing, to which the Mayor responds that this lightens the taxation burden of the propertied classes. In short, everybody benefits from the Baths economically, and the "spirit of toleration," social harmony, is an additional blessing.¹ The Baths are the rock on which the bliss of the town is being erected.

This perfect edifice suddenly faces a dramatic change. Indeed, its foundations are challenged. The threat is the result of an objective scientific discovery. Dr. Stockmann, the primary founder of the Baths, finds out through reliable tests that the water supply of the Baths is contaminated with infusoria,² and this endangers the health of the patrons and visitors of the establishment. In the words of Dr. Stockmann: "The whole Bath establishment is a whited, poisoned sepulchre, I tell you—the gravest possible danger to the public health! All...that stinking filth

is infecting the water in the conduit-pipes leading to the reservoir; and the same cursed, filthy poison oozes out on the shore too—"³ The conclusion of Dr. Stockmann is quite clear. The Baths must not be used, unless the pipe system is replaced.

One might have expected to see Dr. Stockmann deeply disappointed at his finding—for it was his creation that turned out to be problematic. Yet there is no trace of such a sentiment. On the contrary, he seems to be elated at his discovery, as it will prevent dire consequences. He is a man committed to do right, and cares little for his own prestige. Moreover, he has the assurance of support of the liberal journal and of the Chairman of the Householders' Association—that is to say, of the people at large. This makes him happy—not because of the feeling of security and power which such support offers, but because it conveys the sense of brotherhood with the community. "By Jove, it's a fine thing to feel this bond of brotherhood between oneself and one's fellow citizens!" And then he has the satisfaction of doing what is good and useful for his native town.⁴ Here is a man happy amidst his fellow men in a closely-knit community. He is involved in the well-being of society and his fellow townsmen respond with approval and support—a situation which is the very opposite of alienation. Not that he needs this support, for he has little doubt that the Baths' Committee, chaired by his brother, will accept his judgment and take the appropriate steps.

Yet here he faces a great disappointment. His brother, after exploring the cost of installing new pipes, points to the great expense involved. Moreover, the reconstruction would take two years, during which the Baths would have to be closed. Other towns may take advantage of the situation. Thus, in all probability the whole enterprise, which was so costly, would have to be abandoned. If this line

of action was to be pursued, says the Mayor to his brother, “you would have ruined your native town.”⁵ From being a devoted citizen, the Doctor is suddenly presented as nothing short of a potential traitor.

Flabbergasted, the doctor asks his brother what ought to be done. The answer, characteristically for a man who does not have the integrity of Dr. Stockmann, is evasive and intellectually dishonest. The Mayor does not say: “We have to choose between the town’s prosperity and the visitors’ well-being.” Instead, he mars the clarity of the alternative by suggesting that the medical report on the contamination of the water may be questioned. All this is no more than a “moral” cover-up of the intent not to deal with the real issue and continue to reap the benefits of the Baths. The Mayor is not only determined to ignore the harm to visitors and invalids, but adds hypocrisy to moral obtuseness. Just as his brother is honest and cares for his fellow human beings, so he is dishonest and callous.

Dr. Stockmann makes the point, as he hurls the accusation at his brother: “We are making our living by retailing filth and corruption! The whole of our flourishing municipal life derives its sustenance from a lie!” There is the physical filth and there is the moral pollution. Indeed, one is tempted to see the biological poison as a symbol for moral corruption. The lack of honesty and of moral responsibility decomposes the community itself. Yet the Mayor, in response, has the impertinence to assert that anyone who makes such “offensive insinuations about his native town must be an enemy to our community.”⁶ The sincerely committed doctor is branded as an enemy of his people, as an individual deliberately estranging himself from his fellow-citizens.

The doctor, though shocked by his brother’s stand, is confident of the support of the liberal paper and of the majority of the people, represented by Aslaksen.

He offers his report for publication by the newspaper. While the editors are all too eager to have the issue brought to the public, their motives are not as pure as those of Dr. Stockmann. Their main motivation is to stir up controversy with the conservative Mayor and thus gain a political advantage over the party ruling the town. In the words of Hovstad, the editor of the *People’s Messenger*:

And in this way the ring will be broken up ...and then in every issue of the paper we will enlighten the public on the Mayor’s incapability on one point and another, and make it clear that all the positions of trust in the town, the whole control of municipal affairs, ought to be put in the hands of the Liberals.

Billing, the sub-editor, who exceeds Hovstad in radicalism, looks forward to a revolution.⁷

The stance of the liberal editors reveals the discrepancy between them and Dr. Stockmann. He is concerned about the well-being of human beings; they are interested in gaining political advantage. For him the issue is the health and lives of men; for them the concern is political power. He is committed to Right; they worship Might. The gap between the two orientations, alien to each other, is unbridgeable. Thus, the two sides are on a road to collision—even if actually it does not occur along these lines. It would have been easy to envision a confrontation, with Dr. Stockmann recoiling from the political schemes of the editors and asserting the purity of his public concern, and thus breaking his alliance with the liberal paper. Ibsen chose to enact the collision and the break in a different manner, juxtaposing the fundamental interests, rather than ideological power-seeking, of the liberals with the Doctor’s moral stand.

This turning of the issue of conflict is effected by the wily Mayor who approaches the editors of the newspaper before the report of his brother is printed

and succeeds in forming an alliance with them, as well as with Aslaksen, the representative of the timid majority. Peter Stockmann explains to them the cost of the economic damage that would result from the publication of the report, and that would affect the people of modest means not less than the wealthy. The common threat leads to a joint stand: all the parties, the whole town, stand opposed to the doctor. His appeal to the editor to publish the report meets with an emphatic refusal. For, as Aslaksen explains it, it is not the editor who is in control of the paper, but the subscribers, the public opinion; and “it would mean the absolute ruin of the community if your article were to appear.”⁸ All other attempts of the doctor to publicize his findings are blocked.

Thus, Dr. Stockmann, with Right on his side, faces the united will of the people and the collective interest of the community. A single individual alienates himself from the community by disregarding its General Will, to use Rousseau’s term, and by ignoring its material interest. *Fiat justitia et pereat mundus*, or, more strictly speaking, *Fiat justitia et pereat communitas!* The principle is more important to the doctor than the will of the people, or even the well-being of the people.

Is there a justification, a *moral* justification, for such a stand? Is not the morality of the doctor basically flawed, or even perverse? Does it make sense to adhere to an abstract principle and ignore the well-being of concrete human beings? The answer to this argument is that the moral principle here *represents* the well-being of human beings. The seemingly callous disregard of his fellow townsmen is due to the doctor’s concern for the people coming for cure to the Baths. The readiness to sacrifice the prosperity of the community is motivated by the compassion for wider humanity. The alienation from the town and its people is the consequence of the deep attachment to humanity.

Moreover, the stand of Dr. Stockmann

versus the town is not limited to the weighing of the gains and the losses of the community and the outside visitors. It is not confined to a hedonistic calculation. It transcends these considerations and harps on the issue of truth and falsehood, honesty and deception—principles transcending the concrete case of the pestiferous Baths. In an address to a public assembly of the townspeople, Dr. Stockmann makes this point quite clear:

I will impart to you a discovery of a far wider scope than the trifling matter that our water-supply is poisoned and our medicinal Baths are standing on pestiferous soil. ...I have already told you that what I want to speak about is the great discovery I have made lately—the discovery that all the sources of our *moral* life are poisoned and that the whole fabric of our civic community is founded on the pestiferous soil of falsehood.⁹

Dr. Stockmann does not confine his criticism to this general indictment of the community, but makes more specific accusations. While he indicts and ridicules the piggishness of the conservative leadership of the town, he does not consider them to be “the most dangerous enemies of truth and freedom.” This distinction is reserved for “the damned compact Liberal majority.” For “it is the majority in our community that denies me my freedom and seeks to prevent my speaking the truth.”¹⁰ Thus the confrontation between the doctor and the town turns into a discussion about the place of the individual—a thinking individual with well-substantiated opinions—in a democratic society. Is *vox populi, vox Dei*? Is there no inherent link between majority opinion and the right opinion?

Hovstad asserts that “the majority always has right on its side” and Billing adds, “And truth too,” to which Dr. Stockmann responds:

The majority *never* has right on its side.... That is one of these social lies against which

an independent, intelligent man must wage war. Who is it that constitute the majority of the population in a country? Is it the clever folk or the stupid? I don't imagine you will dispute the fact that at present the stupid people are in an absolutely overwhelming majority all the world over. But, good Lord!—you can never pretend that it is right that the stupid folk should govern the clever ones! ...The majority has *might* on its side—unfortunately; but *right* it has *not*. I am in the right—I and a few other scattered individuals. The minority is always in the right.¹¹

Ibsen's attack on democracy is clearly exaggerated and vulnerable. The majority may not have a monopoly on being right, as Hovstad maintains, but there is no ground for asserting that it *never* has right on its side. Whether the majority is stupid or not would depend on the matters to which it addresses its judgment: in some cases it may be sensible, in others it may reveal stupidity. The few scattered individuals may be right, but—and here is the rub—who has the capacity and the authority to decide *which* individuals are wise and right? Dr. Stockmann denigrates the wealthy conservatives, and points to himself as the authority. Plato had his own preference for the knowledgeable philosophers, and Ibsen may be echoing the Platonic belief, without elaborating on it, a belief which has been open to criticism since the days of Aristotle.

Thus, Ibsen's criticism of popular opinion is not adequately substantiated, or convincingly proved. That *Might* does not assure *Right* is indisputable. But who is right and how can right be asserted by a generally accepted standard is not made clear. The case of Dr. Stockmann makes it quite clear that he is right in the specific circumstances described in the drama, but this specific case does not provide a general answer as to how to resolve controversies between individuals and majorities.

Still, if the drama does not offer an answer to a query belonging in the do-

main of political theory, it does point to the grievance of an individual who is right and faces a resentful majority, and thus becomes painfully alienated from the majority. That such a situation is possible is well known, as indicated at the opening of this essay. It is noteworthy that a prominent analyst and critic of modern democracy pointed to the adverse impact which the pressure of majority opinion may have on individuals and on individuality. It was Tocqueville who pointed out that, while during the American Revolution individuality was encouraged, once the republics were established, the tendency of public opinion to repress an individual stand prevailed. "In democratic States organized on the principles of the American republics...the authority of the majority is so absolute and so irresistible that a man must give up his rights as a citizen, and almost abjure his quality as a human being, if he intends to stray from the track which it lays down." This has dire consequences: "I am inclined to attribute the singular paucity of distinguished political characters to the ever-increasing activity of the despotism of the majority in the United States."¹²

Whether this comment holds true at the turn of the millennium, which witnesses diversity of opinions combined with an overwhelming pressure of political correctness, is an issue left to the reader's reflection and judgment. What has to be borne in mind, however, is the great danger of the pressure to conformity in some democratic societies, despite the legal assurance of freedom of expression of opinion. It is the extra-legal pressures—which prevail in matters political and aesthetic, social and cultural—in respect of which one has to be on guard. In this sense the warning of Tocqueville, and of Ibsen, may not be dated and irrelevant. Indeed, the alienation of the individual from the public, as described by Ibsen, may be preferable to

the self-effacement of the individual and his adjustment to the dictates of the prevalent opinion.

Dr. Stockman is clearly not one to efface himself because of threats and intimidation by society. As we have seen, he openly challenges the people at the meeting, and declares: "Yes, my native town is so dear to me that I would rather ruin it than see it flourishing upon a lie." In response, the meeting votes to declare him an enemy of the people.¹³

On top of public resentment and intimidation, Ibsen exposes his hero to the lure of temptation. The adoptive father of his wife, a rich tanner—whose tannery pollutes the water—takes advantage of the fall in the share value of the Baths to buy up the shares with the intention of leaving them in his will for Katherine and her children, if Dr. Stockmann recants his report, thus making the shares soar. Though this may mean penury to his family, the doctor declines to follow this road to moral capitulation. Neither intimidation nor temptation will make him swerve from the path of righteousness.

Dr. Stockmann becomes estranged from his brother and the upper social class he represents, as well as from the politicized liberal sector, and from the ordinary gray mass of the people represented by the Householders' Association. On some occasions it seems as if he is going to lose the allegiance of his wife as well, as she expresses her concern about the economic difficulties that the family will have to face with her husband's dismissal from the post in the Baths. Yet, when he is assailed on all sides, her loyalty as a wife gets the upper hand and she sticks by her husband. Such devotion was never in doubt as far as his daughter, Petra, was concerned. Then, there is Horster, a ship captain, a straightforward and honest man, who offers help and housing to the persecuted and impoverished family.

Thus, in the dramatic evolving of the

play, Dr. Stockmann stands almost alone, defying the community he has loved. The small group of people round him, his family and the friendly captain, do provide solace and prevent the doctor from becoming a tragical hero. Indeed, he is not an Oedipus or a King Lear. He asserts himself, his dignity and his conviction, despite his alienation from his fellow men. He faces them openly, despite their resentment and hatred. He remains steadfast in his belief, he does not compromise, and he refuses to leave the town. Indeed, he asserts his valiant stand *urbi et orbi*, as he tells his wife, "I am the strongest man in town," and then adds, "I am the strongest man in the whole world." Then he makes this philosophical comment: "the strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone."¹⁴

Thus the doctor stands as a defiant Prometheus. Yet, unlike Prometheus, he is not bound to a rock, doomed to suffering, but faces the enemy, the modern god of popular opinion, valiantly, supported by the conviction that he is right and the people are wrong. He is alienated from his people, but he stands by his commitment to do what is right, and to insist that a community must base its existence on truth and right, and not on iniquity and self-deception. He is alienated, but not dejected. He suffers materially, but not morally. His overall sense of spiritual well-being is derived from his sense of having overcome all the temptations and all the threats, and stood by what is right. He remains a man standing for and committed to moral rectitude—a defiant and militant moralist.

At times Dr. Stockmann can be accused of arrogance, when he asserts his superiority against the people. One can perhaps discern a misanthropic streak in him when he villifies the people of his town and humanity at large. For he asserts that moving to another town would make him find there "the common people just as insolent as they are here." The same would

be the case, he says (echoing Tocqueville), in the free West (America), where the compact majority is no different. In this misanthropic mood he even dreams of solitude: "If only I knew where there was a virgin forest or a small South Sea island for sale."¹⁵

Yet, such total alienation, such withdrawal from life and from a relationship with people, is not consistent with the dominant characteristic of the doctor, and does not seem to be the intended

message of Ibsen. Dr. Stockmann has to be seen as basically committed to humanity, as a man who loves his fellow men. His indignation and his resentment have to be interpreted as the consequence of his disenchantment with the humanity he loves. Rather than turning back on the people, his people, he chooses to continue and confront them—not merely out of defiance, but perhaps entertaining the hope of their eventual moral improvement.

1. Quoted from Henrik Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People*, in *Ghosts and Two Other Plays*, translated by R. Farquharson Sharp (London and New York, 1941 [1911]), Act I, 147. 2. Infusoria is a micro-organism. Whether it is pathogenic in the way described by Ibsen—causing typhoid and gastric fever (Act I, 160)—is obviously doubtful, but, of course, it is not the medical details but the

principle involved that matters here. 3. *Ibid.*, Act I, 160. 4. *Ibid.*, Act II, 174. 5. *Ibid.*, 176. 6. *Ibid.*, 183. 7. *Ibid.*, Act III, 186-187. 8. *Ibid.*, 204-205. 9. *Ibid.*, Act IV, 214. 10. *Ibid.*, 216-217. 11. *Ibid.*, 217. 12. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Part One (1835), translated by Henry Reeve (London, 1946), Chapter XIV, 194-195.