

THE INDIVIDUAL IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: THE IMPERATIVE OF SELF-ACTUALISATION

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Abstract

This paper explores the position of the individual within contemporary society, emphasizing the imperative of self-actualization in an age marked by rapid social, technological, and cultural change. Drawing on sociological and philosophical frameworks, including the works of Maslow, Kierkegaard, and others, the study examines how modern social structures, globalization, and the culture of individualization shape the capacities, aspirations, and constraints of the self. It highlights the tension between societal expectations and personal growth, demonstrating how pressures of conformity, risk, and networked living can both hinder and facilitate the pursuit of self-fulfillment. By integrating theoretical perspectives with contemporary examples, the paper argues that self-actualization is not merely a psychological ideal but a critical social and existential necessity, enabling individuals to navigate complexity, assert autonomy, and contribute meaningfully to communal life. The study concludes that understanding the interplay between social forces and personal development is essential for fostering resilience, creativity, and authentic identity in modern societies.

Keywords: Self-actualization, individualization, contemporary society, identity, personal development, social theory

Introduction

Contemporary society is characterised by rapid social transformation, driven by globalisation, technological innovation, and the increasing complexity of cultural interactions. These developments have significantly reshaped the conditions under which individuals construct identity and pursue meaning. While modern social arrangements have expanded opportunities for autonomy and self-expression, they have also generated new forms of uncertainty, fragmentation, and existential tension. The individual today is no longer anchored within stable, inherited frameworks of identity but is instead confronted with the demanding task of self-definition in an ever-changing social landscape.

One of the most significant features of contemporary society is the process of individualization. As noted by Ulrich Beck (1992), traditional structures such as class, religion, and extended family have lost much of their binding force, leaving individuals to construct their own life trajectories. This shift places a greater emphasis on personal choice and responsibility, transforming identity into a reflexive project. Similarly, Anthony Giddens (1991) argues that in late modernity, the self becomes something that must be continuously worked on and maintained. Individuals are compelled to make sense of their lives amid diverse and often competing social influences, thereby intensifying the complexity of self-understanding.

However, the expansion of individual freedom is accompanied by a corresponding increase in existential uncertainty. The erosion of traditional sources of meaning has led to what Zygmunt Bauman (2000) describes as “liquid modernity,” a condition marked by instability, fluidity, and the absence of enduring social forms. In such a context, individuals often experience anxiety, alienation, and a sense of dislocation. The challenge of constructing a coherent identity becomes more pronounced as individuals navigate a multiplicity of roles, expectations, and possibilities. The contemporary individual is thus situated within a paradox: greater freedom coexists with deeper insecurity.

The rise of digital technologies has further complicated the situation of the individual. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok provide unprecedented opportunities for self-expression and social connection. Yet, they also encourage the performance and commodification of identity, often leading to a disjunction between the authentic self and the curated self. As Erving Goffman (1959) suggests in his dramaturgical analysis, social interaction involves the presentation of self; however, in contemporary digital contexts, this presentation becomes continuous, intensified, and subject to public scrutiny.

Within this complex environment, the concept of self-actualization emerges as a crucial framework for understanding the individual’s task. Rooted in humanistic psychology, particularly in the work of Abraham Maslow (1943), self-actualisation refers to the realisation of one’s fullest potential and the achievement of authentic selfhood. Beyond its psychological dimension, the idea also resonates with existentialist philosophy, which emphasises individual freedom, responsibility, and the necessity of creating meaning in an indifferent or

ambiguous world. From this perspective, self-actualisation is not merely a personal goal but an existential imperative.

This paper attempts to show that the conditions of contemporary society make self-actualisation both necessary and urgent. The fragmentation of identity, the pressures of conformity, and the instability of social structures compel individuals to engage in deliberate and reflective processes of self-formation. Self-actualisation, therefore, must be understood not simply as a desirable outcome but as a continuous and dynamic process through which individuals negotiate the tensions of modern existence. By examining the condition of the individual in contemporary society and the challenges associated with authentic selfhood, this study seeks to demonstrate that self-actualisation is essential for achieving both personal fulfillment and meaningful social engagement.

The Individual in Contemporary Society

The condition of the individual in contemporary society is shaped by a complex interplay of social, economic, technological, and cultural forces that both expand and constrain human possibilities. On the one hand, contemporary life, often described as “late modernity”, offers unprecedented levels of personal freedom, mobility, and access to information. On the other hand, these same conditions generate new forms of uncertainty, fragmentation, and existential tension that complicate the individual’s quest for a coherent identity. Understanding the individual in this context requires a critical engagement with the structural and philosophical dynamics that define contemporary existence.

One of the defining features of contemporary society is the increasing emphasis on individualization. According to Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002), traditional social structures such as family, religion, and class no longer rigidly determine life paths. Instead, individuals are compelled to construct their own biographies through a series of choices. This process, often described as individualisation, shifts the burden of identity formation from society to the individual. While this enhances personal autonomy, it also introduces a heightened sense of risk and responsibility, as individuals must navigate life without stable, predefined frameworks (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

Closely related to this is the reflexive nature of identity in contemporary society. Anthony Giddens (1991) argues that the self has become a “reflexive project,” meaning that individuals must continuously interpret, revise, and sustain their identities in response to changing social conditions. Unlike in pre-modern societies, where identity was largely inherited and stable, contemporary individuals are engaged in an ongoing process of self-construction. This reflexivity is intensified by the proliferation of information and the constant exposure to diverse lifestyles and value systems, which both enrich and destabilize the individual’s sense of self.

Furthermore, the rise of digital technology and social media has significantly transformed the nature of individuality. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok provide spaces for self-expression but also encourage the performance and commodification of identity. Individuals are increasingly pressured to curate idealised versions of themselves for public consumption, which can lead to a disjunction between the “presented self” and the “authentic self.” As Erving Goffman (1959) insightfully noted, social life involves elements of performance; however, in the digital age, this performative aspect is amplified, often resulting in superficial or fragmented identities.

Another important dimension of the contemporary individual is the experience of alienation and insecurity. Zygmunt Bauman (2000) characterizes contemporary society as “liquid modernity,” in which social forms and institutions are in constant flux. This fluidity undermines long-term commitments and stable identities, leaving individuals in a state of perpetual transition. Similarly, Manuel Castells (2010) highlights the emergence of the “network society,” where individuals are embedded in global flows of information and capital but often experience disconnection from immediate social bonds. These conditions contribute to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and a loss of meaning. In addition, contemporary society is deeply influenced by consumerism, which shapes how individuals perceive themselves and others. Identity is increasingly constructed through patterns of consumption, where choices of goods, lifestyles, and affiliations become markers of selfhood. This commodification of identity risks reducing the individual to a set of market-driven preferences, thereby undermining deeper forms of self-understanding. The pressure to conform to consumerist ideals can obscure authentic desires and values, making it more difficult for individuals to achieve genuine self-realisation.

Within the African and specifically Nigerian context, the situation of the individual is further complicated by the tension between traditional communal values and modern individualistic tendencies. African societies have historically emphasised relational identity, where the individual is understood in terms of community and social obligations. However, contemporary influences, such as urbanisation, Western education, and globalisation, have

introduced new forms of individualism. This creates a dual pressure on individuals to balance communal expectations with personal aspirations, often resulting in identity conflict and moral ambiguity. In sum, the individual in contemporary society is characterised by both expanded freedom and heightened vulnerability. The erosion of traditional structures, the rise of reflexive identity, the influence of digital technology, and the pressures of consumer culture collectively shape a condition in which selfhood is both a possibility and a challenge. The contemporary individual is thus not a fixed entity but an ongoing project, constantly negotiating between autonomy and social influence, authenticity and performance, stability and change. It is within this complex and often contradictory context that the imperative of self-actualisation becomes not only relevant but necessary.

Crisis of Identity

The crisis of identity constitutes one of the most defining features of the individual's condition in contemporary society. As traditional structures that once provided stable frameworks of meaning, such as religion, family, and community, gradually lose their authority, individuals are increasingly confronted with the task of constructing their own identities. While this shift enhances personal freedom, it simultaneously generates profound uncertainty and fragmentation, making the formation of a coherent sense of self more difficult. The contemporary individual is thus caught in a tension between autonomy and disorientation, where the absence of fixed reference points complicates the process of self-understanding.

A key factor contributing to this crisis is the process of individualisation. According to Ulrich Beck (1992), modern society has dissolved many of the traditional determinants of identity, transforming life into a series of choices rather than a predetermined path. Individuals must now actively construct their biographies, deciding on their careers, relationships, values, and lifestyles. This freedom, however, comes with the burden of responsibility and the risk of failure. As Anthony Giddens (1991) argues, identity in late modernity becomes a reflexive project, requiring continuous monitoring and revision. The self is no longer given but must be constantly negotiated, which can lead to instability and self-doubt.

The erosion of stable identity frameworks is further intensified by the fluidity of contemporary social life. Zygmunt Bauman (2000) characterises this condition as "liquid modernity," in which social forms and institutions are no longer durable but subject to rapid change. In such an environment, long-term commitments and consistent identities become difficult to sustain. Individuals are encouraged to remain flexible and adaptable, often at the expense of depth and continuity in their sense of self. This fluidity fosters a condition in which identity becomes fragmented, provisional, and susceptible to external influences.

The proliferation of digital technologies and social media has also played a significant role in deepening the crisis of identity. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok create spaces where individuals can construct and display curated versions of themselves. While these platforms enable self-expression, they also encourage comparison, validation-seeking, and the performance of idealised identities. As Erving Goffman (1959) suggests, social interaction involves the presentation of self; however, in the digital age, this presentation becomes continuous and amplified, often leading to a disjunction between the "authentic self" and the "performed self." This gap contributes to feelings of inauthenticity and internal conflict.

Moreover, consumer culture exacerbates the crisis of identity by equating selfhood with patterns of consumption. In contemporary society, individuals are often defined by the goods they purchase, the lifestyles they adopt, and the images they project. This commodification of identity reduces the self to a market-driven construct, undermining deeper forms of self-understanding. As a result, individuals may adopt externally imposed identities that align with societal expectations rather than their authentic values and aspirations. This dynamic reinforces a sense of alienation, as individuals become estranged from their true selves.

The crisis of identity is particularly pronounced in contexts where traditional and modern value systems intersect. In many African societies, including Nigeria, identity has historically been rooted in communal relationships and shared cultural practices. However, the forces of globalization and modernisation have introduced individualistic values that sometimes conflict with communal expectations. This creates a dual pressure on individuals to reconcile personal autonomy with social obligations, often leading to confusion, moral tension, and identity conflict. The individual must navigate between competing frameworks of meaning, further complicating the process of self-definition. Thus, the crisis of identity in contemporary society arises from the interplay of individualisation, social fluidity, technological influence, and cultural transformation. The individual is required to construct a coherent sense of self in a context characterised by instability and multiplicity. This condition generates anxiety, fragmentation, and a persistent sense of uncertainty. However, it also underscores the importance of self-actualisation as a necessary response. By engaging in critical self-reflection and striving for

authenticity, individuals can begin to overcome the challenges posed by the crisis of identity and achieve a more integrated and meaningful sense of self.

Social Conformity and Mass Culture

In contemporary society, the individual's quest for self-actualisation is often complicated by the pervasive influence of social conformity and mass culture. While modernity promises unprecedented freedom and autonomy, it simultaneously exerts subtle pressures that encourage individuals to align their behaviors, tastes, and values with collective norms. Social conformity, reinforced by mass media, consumer culture, and institutional expectations, can restrict authentic self-expression and contribute to the erosion of individuality. As a result, the pursuit of self-actualisation becomes a deliberate effort to resist homogenising forces while cultivating an authentic sense of self.

Mass culture, defined as the widespread dissemination of standardised cultural products through media and entertainment industries, plays a central role in shaping individual behavior and social expectations. According to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2002), the "culture industry" produces entertainment and art that promotes passive consumption and conformity, reducing the capacity for critical thought. Individuals internalise norms, lifestyles, and desires presented through mass media, which can subtly direct their preferences and values. In such an environment, the individual risks prioritising socially prescribed identities over self-determined paths of growth and fulfillment.

Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) highlights the role of socialisation and cultural capital in shaping tastes, behavior, and perceptions of self-worth. Mass culture not only informs what is considered desirable or respectable but also creates social pressures to conform to dominant ideals of appearance, success, and lifestyle. These pressures are intensified by mechanisms of social comparison, where individuals measure themselves against curated images and achievements of others, particularly in digital contexts such as social media. In this way, conformity is not enforced solely through coercion but through subtle forms of social conditioning and symbolic reward.

The influence of mass culture is further evident in consumerism, which has become a primary mode through which individuals negotiate their identities. Consumption patterns, ranging from fashion and technology to leisure and entertainment, serve as markers of personal and social identity. As Jean Baudrillard (1998) argues, in a consumer-driven society, objects and commodities are imbued with symbolic meaning that individuals adopt to construct and communicate identity. While consumer culture may offer opportunities for self-expression, it also risks reducing individuality to the adoption of externally defined symbols, potentially obstructing authentic self-actualisation.

Digital media amplifies the pressures of conformity by providing platforms for public performance and constant social comparison. Social networks such as Instagram and Facebook encourage individuals to present idealised versions of themselves, often reflecting societal expectations rather than personal authenticity. As Sherry Turkle (2011) notes, online interactions can foster a "performance-based self," where validation from others becomes central to identity construction, creating tension between the performed self and the authentic self. Despite these pressures, the relationship between the individual and mass culture is not purely deterministic. Contemporary individuals possess the capacity for critical reflection and selective engagement with social norms. The pursuit of self-actualisation requires awareness of these external influences and a deliberate effort to integrate personal values with social realities. Developing an authentic sense of self in the context of mass culture involves recognising conformity pressures, resisting superficial markers of identity, and cultivating personal goals and virtues that reflect one's unique potential and aspirations.

Thus, social conformity and mass culture significantly shape the landscape in which contemporary individuals pursue self-actualisation. While these forces can limit authenticity and encourage homogenisation, they also provide an arena in which critical reflection and self-determination become essential. Navigating the tension between societal expectations and personal growth is a central challenge for the modern individual, underscoring the imperative of self-actualisation as a conscious and ongoing endeavour.

Technological and Digital Influences

In contemporary society, technological advancements and digital platforms have become central forces shaping the individual's experience, identity, and pursuit of self-actualisation. While technology offers unprecedented opportunities for communication, learning, and self-expression, it also presents challenges that complicate the development of authentic identity. Digital media, in particular, influences how individuals perceive themselves and others, often encouraging performative behaviors and fostering a tension between the curated self and the

authentic self. Digital technologies have transformed the ways in which individuals interact with the world. As Manuel Castells (2010) observes, the “network society” is defined by the pervasiveness of information and communication technologies, which connect individuals across vast distances but also reshape social relationships and the perception of self. The accessibility of information and global connectivity has expanded opportunities for self-expression and knowledge acquisition, providing platforms for individuals to explore diverse perspectives and engage in creative pursuits. This capacity aligns with the goals of self-actualisation, which emphasise personal growth, exploration, and fulfillment (Maslow, 1943).

However, the digital environment also introduces pressures that may undermine authentic self-development. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok encourage individuals to curate and perform conceptualised identities for public validation. Sherry Turkle (2011) highlights how online interactions can foster a “performance-based self,” where self-worth becomes contingent on likes, comments, and social recognition. The constant presentation of curated images and lifestyles can create a divergence between the projected self and the authentic self, complicating efforts toward genuine self-understanding and self-actualisation. Moreover, the digital age intensifies social comparison. Individuals are continuously exposed to selective representations of others’ lives, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and diminished self-esteem. As Jean Twenge (2017) notes, the extensive use of social media correlates with increased levels of stress and reduced life satisfaction, particularly among younger populations navigating identity formation. This phenomenon underscores the paradox of digital technology: while it offers tools for self-expression and connection, it simultaneously creates pressures that may distort the individual’s perception of self and hinder authentic growth.

In addition, technological dependence and constant connectivity can fragment attention and disrupt reflective practices essential for self-actualisation. The ubiquitous presence of smartphones, notifications, and digital entertainment often prioritises immediacy and distraction over deliberate reflection, introspection, and goal-directed activity. As Nicholas Carr (2010) argues, such technologies can alter cognitive processes, reducing capacity for sustained attention and deep thought, both of which are necessary for meaningful self-development and the pursuit of personal potential. Nevertheless, digital technologies also provide tools for empowerment and self-realisation. Online learning platforms, creative software, virtual communities, and professional networks can facilitate skill development, creativity, and purposeful engagement. When leveraged critically and mindfully, digital technologies can enhance self-knowledge, personal growth, and social contribution, key dimensions of self-actualisation. The challenge lies in balancing engagement with technology against the risks of distraction, performance pressure, and external validation.

In conclusion, technological and digital influences exert a dual effect on the contemporary individual. They expand opportunities for learning, expression, and connectivity, while simultaneously introducing pressures toward performative identity, social comparison, and fragmentation. Navigating these influences requires self-awareness, critical engagement, and reflective practices, making the pursuit of self-actualization both more complex and more essential in the digital era.

Alienation and Loss of Meaning

In contemporary society, alienation and the loss of meaning are critical challenges confronting the individual’s pursuit of self-actualisation. As social, economic, and technological transformations accelerate, traditional structures that once anchored identity and provided existential purpose, such as family, community, religion, and stable occupational roles, have weakened. This erosion of enduring frameworks contributes to a sense of estrangement, isolation, and disconnection from both oneself and the wider social environment. The result is a profound tension between the individual’s desire for authenticity and the pressures of an increasingly fragmented and impersonal society. Émile Durkheim (1951) theorised the concept of anomie to describe conditions in which societal norms and values become unclear or inconsistent, leading to disorientation and alienation among individuals. In contemporary societies, rapid modernisation, urbanisation, and cultural pluralism have produced forms of social anomie that intensify feelings of meaninglessness and moral uncertainty. Individuals struggle to locate stable reference points for decision-making, life planning, and identity formation, contributing to existential stress and diminished psychological well-being.

Similarly, Karl Marx (1978) emphasises alienation as a consequence of systemic structures, particularly in the context of labor and production. Marx argued that when individuals are estranged from the products of their labour, the labour process, their fellow humans, and their own essence, they experience a profound loss of autonomy and purpose. Although Marx’s analysis focuses on economic structures, his insights extend to contemporary social and cultural contexts, where individuals often experience alienation from authentic relationships, communal bonds, and even their own potential for self-realisation. The digital and technological environment further complicates experiences of alienation. Social media and online platforms, while providing

avenues for connection, can simultaneously foster superficial relationships, performative identity, and emotional isolation. Sherry Turkle (2011) describes how technology-mediated interactions may create an illusion of intimacy while reducing opportunities for deep, meaningful engagement. Individuals may feel socially connected yet emotionally unfulfilled, exacerbating a sense of existential emptiness and disconnection from authentic selfhood.

Moreover, Zygmunt Bauman (2000) characterises contemporary life as liquid modernity, marked by constant change, uncertainty, and the impermanence of social structures. This fluidity destabilizes long-term commitments, relationships, and personal projects, leaving individuals in a perpetual state of adjustment. The resulting alienation is not only social but also existential: the individual's sense of self and purpose becomes fragmented, undermining opportunities for meaningful self-actualisation. The loss of meaning in contemporary society is also evident in the increasing emphasis on consumerism and external markers of success as substitutes for intrinsic fulfillment. As Jean Baudrillard (1998) notes, consumer culture offers symbolic goods and lifestyles that promise satisfaction but rarely deliver authentic fulfillment. Individuals may pursue material and social validation at the expense of self-reflection, personal growth, and ethical engagement, resulting in a disconnection from their deeper potential and values. In response to alienation and loss of meaning, self-actualisation emerges as an imperative. Achieving self-actualisation requires critical self-reflection, the development of personal values, and the pursuit of authentic goals that transcend external pressures and societal expectations. By cultivating awareness and intentionality, individuals can resist the forces of alienation, reconstruct a coherent sense of self, and reclaim meaning in their lives. Self-actualisation, therefore, is both a personal necessity and a response to the structural and existential challenges of contemporary society.

Self-Actualisation as Existential Necessity

In contemporary society, self-actualisation is not merely a psychological aspiration but an existential necessity. Faced with the challenges of identity fragmentation, social conformity, alienation, and the pressures of mass and digital culture, the individual must actively engage in the process of self-realisation to attain authentic existence. Without deliberate efforts toward self-actualisation, individuals risk succumbing to inauthenticity, alienation, and purposelessness, highlighting its role as a critical response to the structural and existential pressures of modern life. Existentialist philosophy underscores the necessity of self-actualisation. Jean-Paul Sartre (1956) asserts that existence precedes essence, meaning that individuals are not born with predetermined purposes; rather, they must create meaning through conscious choice and action. In this framework, self-actualisation becomes a moral and existential imperative: failing to actively engage in self-creation constitutes "bad faith," a denial of freedom and authenticity. Similarly, Søren Kierkegaard (1985) emphasises the individual's responsibility to cultivate selfhood in relation to authentic faith, choice, and ethical commitment, suggesting that personal development is inseparable from existential purpose.

The necessity of self-actualisation is further reinforced by the pressures of contemporary society. Zygmunt Bauman (2000) describes modern life as characterised by fluidity, uncertainty, and impermanence, which destabilise identity and social roles. In such an environment, the individual cannot rely on inherited or socially imposed identities to define purpose; rather, self-actualisation provides a framework for navigating ambiguity, fostering resilience, and achieving coherence in one's life. Likewise, Anthony Giddens (1991) highlights the reflexive nature of the modern self, which requires continuous self-evaluation, adjustment, and engagement with personal values. Self-actualisation, therefore, is a structured response to the demands of living authentically within a dynamic and often disorienting social landscape. Moreover, self-actualisation is both an individual and social imperative. Authentic individuals who achieve self-actualisation are better equipped to engage meaningfully with others, contribute to communal well-being, and resist dehumanizing pressures such as consumerism, conformity, and performative social norms (Baudrillard, 1998; Turkle, 2011). In this sense, self-actualisation is not a purely personal pursuit but a relational and ethical project, linking individual authenticity to broader social responsibility. Self-actualisation, thus, constitutes an existential necessity in contemporary society. It enables individuals to navigate identity crises, resist external pressures, and cultivate a coherent, meaningful existence. Through the deliberate pursuit of personal growth, authenticity, and ethical engagement, self-actualisation becomes both a personal and societal imperative, offering a pathway to fulfillment, resilience, and purposeful living in the face of modernity's challenges.

Conclusion

The contemporary individual navigates a complex and often paradoxical social landscape characterized by unprecedented freedom alongside instability, identity fragmentation, and pressures from social conformity, mass culture, and digital technologies. As discussed throughout this article, these structural and cultural forces contribute to alienation, loss of meaning, and existential uncertainty, challenging the individual's capacity to achieve authenticity and fulfillment. In response to these pressures, self-actualization emerges not merely as an aspirational goal but as an existential imperative necessary for both personal and social well-being.

Self-actualization, as theorized by Abraham Maslow (1943), represents the realization of one's full potential through creativity, autonomy, ethical engagement, and meaningful goal-setting. Philosophical perspectives, particularly those of existentialist thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre (1956) and Søren Kierkegaard (1985), underscore the moral and existential necessity of self-actualization, emphasizing individual responsibility in constructing a coherent and authentic life. In a society marked by fluidity and constant change (Bauman, 2000), reflexive identity formation (Giddens, 1991), and the pervasive influence of mass and digital culture (Baudrillard, 1998; Turkle, 2011), self-actualization serves as both a compass and a stabilizing force.

Importantly, self-actualization extends beyond personal fulfillment to social engagement. Authentic individuals who actively pursue self-actualization are better positioned to contribute meaningfully to their communities, resist dehumanizing cultural pressures, and foster ethical and relational connections. By integrating critical reflection, deliberate choice, and a commitment to personal values, individuals can navigate contemporary challenges while cultivating a sense of purpose and coherence.

In conclusion, the imperative of self-actualization in contemporary society is twofold: it is a response to existential challenges posed by alienation, identity crises, and societal pressures, and it is a pathway toward authentic and meaningful living. As individuals confront the uncertainties and demands of modern life, the pursuit of self-actualization becomes a necessary endeavor, enabling both personal flourishing and socially responsible engagement. The capacity of individuals to realize this imperative will determine not only the quality of personal existence but also the potential for a more reflective, ethical, and humane society.

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