



Self and Society

Communal and Individual Identity

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN INDIVIDUAL? Are people more, or less, individualistic than they used to be? Do some societies encourage individuality more than others? Can a society or a person be too individualistic? Are there different kinds of individuality? These are some of the questions raised in this chapter.

We are not used to thinking of the development of individuality as a historical process. But we have only to recall the stick figures of Paleolithic cave art to realize how little attention Stone Age people paid to individual differences.

In this chapter, we are going to argue that there is a definite connection between a people's attention to individual differences and their encouragement of individuality. We are going to argue that both attention to and encouragement of individuality have increased in historical time. We see this as a result of increasing specialization and technological complexity. People make themselves by making new tools, and they make newer models all the time. This process of "individualization," however, can take many forms. Different cultures have developed different kinds of individuality. And all have come at the cost of social tensions and the loss of other identities.

As you read this, you might consider not only what individuality has meant and how it has developed in different forms, but also to what extent it was worth it.

TRIBE AND INDIVIDUAL

In the broadest terms, human history has seen the replacement of tribes by states. Tribal organization was the most common form of social organization before the rise of cities and states. In the last few thousand years, tribes have become secondary not only to cities and states but also to families, castes, and, in some cases, individuals.

Every civilization balanced the claims of city, state, caste, family, and individual differently. China, we have seen, gave considerable authority to the state and family. India accorded a greater role to caste. Regardless of the particular balance, however, all societies must balance the competing interests of different social groups. The individual is often the weakest of these.

In general, the role of the individual has probably increased with the decline of tribal society. This is because tribal societies were relatively uniform, were able to afford only a modest division of labor, and thus allowed only minor differences in people's lives. J. M. G. Le Goff, a contemporary Native American, explains the difference this way:

The idiosyncratic characteristics that gradually arose in Europe during the Renaissance and became known as *individuality* and *originality* are virtually unknown among Indians and other aboriginal craftsmen, whose work is considered no more rarefied or conceptually discrete than that of the farmer, shaman, hunter, or any other person of the tribe.¹

Tribal religions usually demonstrated the same lack of concern for individuality. "In tribal religions there is no salvation apart from the continuance of the tribe itself because the existence of the individual presupposes the existence of the community," according to Highwater.² Some Native American languages have no word for "I" or "myself," while they have rich vocabularies to designate relationships among tribal members.

There are enormous differences among tribal societies, even Native Americans, and some tribes did encourage personal developments that might be considered individualistic. In eastern North America and among the Plains peoples of the West, for example, it was common for a young boy (and sometimes a girl) to seek a vision of a guardian spirit that would help establish a personal identity.

Typically, the vision of the guardian spirit is individual, sought and obtained in solitude and isolation out in the wilderness—for example, on secluded mountains and hills. Having prepared himself with purifying baths, sacred smoking, nightly vigil, and meditation, the supplicant is visited by the spirit.

This spirit often appears in animal form but in some visions his shape changes from animal to human. The spirit endows his protégé with that supernatural skill which is his special characteristic or one which it pleases him to communicate, perhaps because his client has asked for this particular "medicine."³

The vision quest, found most frequently among hunting tribes, may actually be an older religious practice than the more communal and ceremonial rites of agricultural societies. Some scholars think that totemism (a collective identification of the tribe with a particular animal) might have evolved from the earlier practice of vision quests.⁴ Another possible legacy is the custom among Native Americans to name children with attention to their "personal qualities, heroic exploits, uncommon abilities, unique physical characteristics, visionary experiences, and other designations that point specifically to the singularity of the person being named."⁵ This suggests greater concern for the person's individuality. Highwater suggests, than the European custom of naming a child with a common "George" and a family "Washington." In fact, he says, while Western names are fixed and public, tribal names are often changed by the tribe over a person's life, and they are sometimes private. Examples like these caution against stereotyping and urge careful consideration of what we mean when we use terms like "individuality," but they may not change our generalization. "Regardless of this 'individuality,'" Highwater concludes, "there is nothing in Indian tribal life that even begins to approximate the Western conception of individuality and free will."⁶

Tribal life is public, not private. All of the activities in the village are public and ceremonial. The hunt, the feast, the marriage, the war are all carried out publicly and according to traditions of ancestors. Tribal peoples simply cannot afford the luxury of letting individuals "do their own thing," and thus no one ever dreams of it. Even the housing is usually public. A person who wants to be alone might sit facing the wall. This is the extent of privacy that is possible.

The idea of "the self" or the individual "personality," then, depends on the breakdown of this tribal life. In the last five thousand years, the tribe has been replaced gradually by the family, the caste, the state, and the individual. This has occurred only with the rise of cities, which are really societies of specialists. In other words, only as people have led increasingly specialized lives have they thought of themselves as special, unique individuals.

METALS AND MEDALS: HEROIC BRONZE AND DEMOCRATIC IRON

Just as stone grinding was the hallmark of the agricultural New Stone Age, the smelting of bronze (from tin and copper) was the hallmark of the Bronze Age that brought our first cities. Metallurgy required an investment in labor and specialization of life that villages could not afford, but it created weapons of war that won

for cities a permanent claim on the fruits of the countryside. Bronze encouraged the tendency of the first cities to create classes and armies, but since the new technology was available only to the few, the Bronze Age army was upper class. The Bronze Age (after 3000 B.C.) has in fact often been called the age of heroic individualism. Aristocratic warfare was largely an individualistic conflict, like a series of duels. Homer, the father of Greek poetry, told in his *Iliad* of the exploits of Bronze Age warriors of ancient Greece. The climax of the story is the slaying of Hector, the Trojan champion, by Achilles, the Greek hero.

And when they were come nigh in onset on one another, to Achilles first spake great Hector of the glancing helm: "No longer, son of Peleus, will I fly thee, as before I thrice ran round the great town of Priam, and endured not to await thy onset. Now my heart biddeth me stand up against thee; I will either slay or be slain. . . ."

Thus saying he drew his sharp sword that by his flank hung great and strong, and gathered himself and swooped like a soaring eagle that daretch to the plain through the dark clouds to seize a tender lamb or crouching hare. So Hector swooped, brandishing his sharp sword. And Achilles made at him, for his heart was filled with wild fierceness, and before his breast he made a covering with his fair graven shield, and tossed his bright four-plated helm, and round it waved fair golden plumes. As a star goeth among stars in the darkness of night, Hesperos, fairest of all stars set in heaven, so flashed there forth a light from the keen spear Achilles poised in his right hand, devising mischief against noble Hector, eyeing his fair flesh to find the fittest place. Now for the rest of him his flesh was covered by the fair bronze armour he stripped from strong Patroklos when he slew him, but there was an opening where the collar bones coming from the shoulders clasp the neck, even at the gullet, where destruction of life cometh quickest; there, as he came on, noble Achilles drave at him with his spear, and right through the tender neck went the point. Yet the bronze-weighted ashen spear clave not the windpipe, so that he might yet speak words of answer to his foe. . . .

Then with faint breath spake unto him Hector of the glancing helm: "I pray thee by thy life and knees and parents, leave me not for dogs of the Achaeans to devour by the ships, but take good store of bronze and gold, gifts that my father and lady mother shall give to thee, and give them home my body back again, that the Trojans and Trojans' wives give me my due of fire after my death."⁷

Bronze Age warrior-heroes like Achilles and Hector are among history's first individuals. They are proud of their individual strength and prowess. They face battle, and possible death, alone; they succeed or fail on the basis of their own powers or their influence with the gods. But they are still very public heroes, and public heroism is a weak basis for popular beliefs in individualism. In Bronze Age society just a few aristocrats could be genuine individuals.



The Chigi Vase depicts the Greek phalanx. Each man's shield covers the next, and the unbroken line charges to a single beat. (Hinner Fotoarchiv)

Iron was more plentiful than bronze. Once its smelting was known after 1200 B.C., the Iron Age spread throughout the world until the development of steel and industry around A.D. 1800. Iron could afford to make common peasants, as well as aristocrats, individuals. Iron tools were efficient enough to free the average farmer to cultivate personality as well as land. Iron plows made farming less work; fewer people were needed to provide society's food. Iron Age societies were more specialized than Bronze Age societies: there were more individual differences in the jobs people performed and the lives they led.

In general, then, the Iron Age extended individuality in two ways: people became more differentiated from one another and more conscious of themselves—their own personalities, thoughts, and feelings. Iron democratized individuality by giving many of the common people a sense of their own identity. But this process took three thousand years.

The short-range effect of iron technology was just the opposite. Initially, iron destroyed the heroic individualism of aristocrats like Hector and Achilles and left nothing in its place. In fact, for almost a thousand years after the introduction of iron, almost all traces of individuality were reduced. The reasons for this lie in the fact that most of the first Iron Age armies were infantry. The common farmer became important as a soldier when armies adopted iron weapons. But he was

important as part of a mass formation, not as an individual. A modern historian describes the Greek version of Iron Age infantry—the phalanx—and he dramatizes how limited Greek individualism actually was:

About 650 B.C. a momentous change in military tactics gave a secure basis to the common farmer's participation in political life. This was the invention of the phalanx—a densely massed infantry formation eight ranks deep whose members were trained to run and charge in unison. A skillful charge delivered by several thousand armored men moving as a single man proved capable of sweeping cavalry or any other kind of opposing force off the field. As this became obvious, every city had to organize and train as big a phalanx as possible from among the citizenry. Anything that interfered with strengthening the phalanx endangered the city. . . .

Every young man who could possibly afford to buy the necessary armor and weapons spent long hours with his fellow youths practicing the rhythms and skills needed to fight effectively in the phalanx. Speed, strength, and courage were only part of what was required. In addition every man had to learn to keep time to the beat set up by the war chant, so that the wall of shields would not break when the phalanx charged across the field of battle. Every man's safety depended upon his neighbor keeping his place in the ranks, for each man's shield helped to cover the right side of the man next to him. Conspicuous personal feats of arms were as much out of place in such a situation as cowardice or inability to keep pace with the rhythm of the charge, for anything that broke the line threatened immediate disaster. . . .

Every Greek citizen soldier who endured the long hours of training needed for skillful service in the phalanx and had then undergone the fatigues and dangers of a campaign and known the fierce joys and sudden exertions of battle emerged from such adventures marked for life by a deep sense of solidarity with all those who had shared these experiences with him. This intense sentiment became the basis for a fiercely collective pride in the greatness and glory of the city to whom all equally belonged, and in whose service all might find personal fulfillment and an unusually vivid sense of personal freedom by submitting to a common rhythm and demanding regimen.

It is not therefore surprising that with the introduction of the phalanx the Greeks altered their ideal of personal behavior. In the earlier aristocratic age, admired, feats of individual prowess, such as those celebrated by Homer, and personal display of luxury went hand in hand. The phalanx, however, made close conformity to a norm absolutely mandatory in military matters. This ill-mannered, un-Greek, improper to live luxuriously or, indeed, to differ in any conspicuous way from one's fellows. Competitive self-assertion was instead transferred to the collective concerns of the polis.⁸

SOCRATES AND THE SELF

Whether we are digging through ruins or looking through an art history, when we reach the statues of the ancient Greeks (about twenty-five hundred years ago), for the first time we see a large number of real individuals. The change is startling. Here are people that we feel we know: real individuals with personal feelings, recognizable "personalities." And we see not only kings, gods, and goddesses, but also fishermen, widows, soldiers, drunkards, and ordinary peasant farmers.

Some people have said that the Greeks "invented" the individual. At least their artists, poets, and philosophers celebrated individuality and human personality to a much greater degree than anyone ever had before. Between 450 and 400 B.C., the Greek philosopher Socrates taught the children of Athens, including Plato, that wisdom begins with an understanding of one's own self. Socrates was sharply critical of what most people considered common knowledge. He continually challenged traditional ideas with searching questions, asking how such ideas were known and what they meant. Socrates called himself the "midwife" of knowledge because he would force people by continual questioning to realize that they did not know as much as they thought they knew; and this doubt was at least the beginning of real knowledge, or wisdom. Similarly, Socrates believed that all genuine knowledge was inborn in people, and that it had only to be brought out through questioning. When Socrates urged his students, "know thyself," he was telling them to dig deep into their own minds, where all truths ultimately lay.

The teaching of Socrates was pretty radical medicine for most respectable Athenians. He was telling their children not only to doubt traditional opinions, but also that the truth was "in" them, if only they would try to pull it out. This meant that even the most uneducated slave had as much potential for wisdom as a philosopher or king.

Though classical Athens could produce a philosopher like Socrates who preached that we should follow the "little god" (or conscience) within us, Athenian society was unable to tolerate such individualism. The Athenian respectables brought Socrates to trial on charges of atheism and "corrupting the youth." Socrates' response to his conviction tells us much about the limits to individualism twenty-four hundred years ago. Offered the choice between death and exile, Socrates chose death. For him, living away from his beloved Athens, outside of the reach of Athenian law and custom, was a fate worse than death.

No Greek, including Socrates, could imagine individual freedom outside of society, tradition, or the community. Freedom meant the quality of life that was possible only in political society, especially in the Greek polis (city-state). The community was thought to be the source of all virtue; there could be no morality outside of that community. The Greek word that meant "to take part in community life" was also the word that meant "to live." Human life outside of the community was unthinkable. The philosopher Aristotle, Plato's most famous pupil,

makes this assumption clear when he defines man as the political animal. The difference between human beings and the animals, according to Aristotle, is that humans live in a society.

The Greeks of Aristotle's time (the fourth century B.C.) were so interested in individuality that they invented a new type of literature, which they called "biography." But, because they were much more concerned with the public society, they wrote biographies about public figures: statesmen, lawgivers, generals, and rulers. Individuality, then, was a virtue for some in ancient Athens, but it was a public virtue.

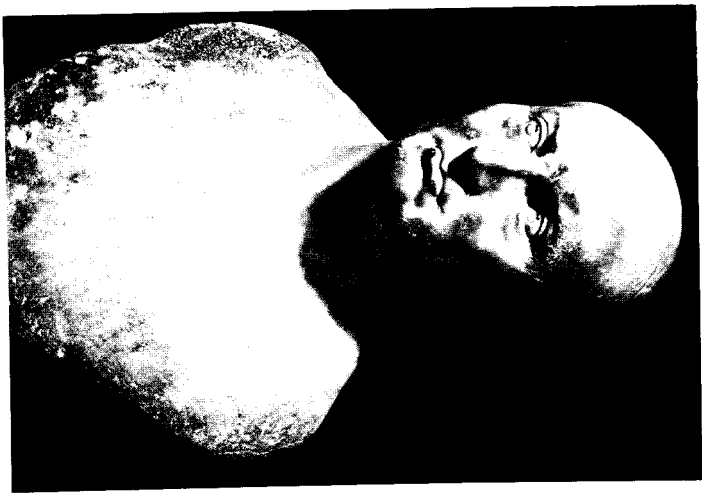
Some of the other Greek city-states never developed any individualistic culture at all. The Spartans, for instance, built a police state that depended on spies and the total militarization of the ruling aristocracy. Spartan law, according to the Greek historian Plutarch, "made the citizens accustomed to have neither the will nor the ability to lead a private life; but, like the bees, always to be organic parts of their community, to cling together around the leader, and, in an ecstasy of enthusiasm and selfless ambition, to belong wholly to their country."⁹

When the Spartans conquered their neighbors, they made them slaves of the Spartan state. The Spartans could control this subject population, which outnumbered them twenty to one, only by turning their own society into an armed camp, and making every citizen a professional soldier. Spartan law required all male citizens between the ages of twenty and thirty to live and eat in army barracks. From the age of seven, Spartan boys were educated for strict military discipline and an absolute devotion to the state. They were removed from family life and taught by the state to steal, spy on the slaves, and accept strenuous exercise, miserable food, and brutal beatings.

THE ROMAN SELF POSSESSED: TRIMALCHIO

The Romans allowed slightly more individuality and privacy than the Greeks. The Roman (Latin) word for private, *privatus* (from which our English word comes), meant a lack or absence of the advantages of public life. The Romans felt that the private citizen "deprived" himself of the values of society. Privacy was an error; people who were deprived could not lead a full life. But the Greeks had been much more critical of the private life than the Romans were. The Greek word for privacy had been *idiotēs*, which meant unskilled or uneducated or even "idiotic." The Greeks believed that the private person not only deprived himself of society but became an idiot, since all knowledge and intelligence came from society. The private Roman lacked something; the private Greek lacked everything.

There were individuals in ancient Rome who were much more self-centered and selfish than any Greek would have allowed himself to become. The Roman writer Petronius described this kind of socially irresponsible individual in his book *The Satyricon*. He satirized a type of Roman self-made man, called Trimalchio, who



The bust or portrait, which captured individual facial expressions, became, like the biography, an important art in Roman culture. Clearly, individuality was of greater interest to these Romans than it had been before. (top left and bottom: Musei Vaticani; top right: Alinari, EPA)

was born a foreign slave but rose to become a millionaire through his own shrewdness and ambition. Petronius has Trimalchio describe his rise from rags to riches:

Friends, make yourselves comfortable. Once I used to be like you, but I rose to the top by my ability. Guts are what make the man; the rest is garbage. I buy well. . . . It's through my business sense that I shot up. Why, when I came here from Asia I stood no taller than that candlestick there. . . . For fourteen years I was my master's pet. . . . So he made me joint heir with the emperor to everything he had, and I came out of it with a senator's fortune. But we never have enough, and I wanted to try my hand at business. To cut short, I had five ships built. Then I stocked them with wine—worth its weight in gold at the time—and shipped them off to Rome. I might as well have told them to go sink themselves since that's what they did. Yup, all five of them wrecked. No kidding. In one day the sea swallowed down a cool million. Was I licked? Hell, no. That loss just whetted my appetite as though nothing had happened at all. So I built some more ships, bigger and better and a damn sight luckier. No one could say I didn't have guts. But big ships make a man feel big himself. I shipped a cargo of wine, bacon, beans, perfume, and slaves. And then Fortune came through nicely in the nick of time. . . . On that one voyage alone, I cleared about five hundred thousand. Right away I bought up all my old master's property. I built a house. I went into slave-trading and cattle-buying. Everything I touched just grew and grew like a honeycomb. Once I was worth more than all the people in my home town put together, I picked up my winnings and pulled out. I retired from trade and started lending money to ex-slaves. . . .

I built this house. As you know, it used to be a shack; now it's a shrine. It has four dining rooms, twenty bedrooms, two marble porticoes, an upstairs dining room, the master bedroom where I sleep, a fine porter's lodge, and guestrooms enough for all my guests. . . . Take my word for it: money makes the man. No money and you're nobody. But big money, big man. That's how it was with yours truly: from mouse to millionaire.¹⁰

There had never been any Trimalchios in ancient Greece. No Greek would have been so materialistic, and no Greek would have ranted this way about how "I" did this and "I" did that. No character in Greek fiction thinks so much of himself as Trimalchio does. The Romans tolerated brash, egotistical individuals like Trimalchio because they lived in a different world than the Greeks. Roman society was much more fluid and dynamic than Greek society had been. Rome was also much more money-conscious and business-oriented. An aggressive Roman could easily rise from "mouse to millionaire" because Roman society was always changing so rapidly. Also, Roman society offered the ambitious individual more opportunity to "make it" on his own because it was a much larger society than the Greek city-state. The Romans ruled a vast empire that presented innumerable opportunities for exploitation and personal fame as a businessman, soldier, or government

official. There was more room in which the aggressive Roman could maneuver. He not only had the whole Mediterranean world at his disposal, but he also could take advantage of the wide gap that separated him from government. While the Greek had always felt the influence of the city-state, the Roman had only to obey the laws of a distant emperor.

The kind of aggressive, selfish individualism that Trimalchio practiced and preached seems very modern to us. This is because ancient Rome was beginning to develop the expansive, materialistic mentality and the money-oriented, business society that has formed much of our own way of life. But the early development of this business society was cut short in ancient Rome, and it has been revived to reach its fullest possibilities only in the last few hundred years. Of all the ancient peoples, the Romans probably came closest to developing modern business's aggressive individualism. But ancient Rome never fully became a business civilization, and Trimalchio was never more than a writer's exaggeration.

THE CHRISTIAN SOUL CONFESSED: AUGUSTINE

Another kind of individual was created by ancient Rome, one very different from the kind of individual that Trimalchio represents. Rome gave us the spiritualistic individual as well as the materialistic. There are some hints of the individual in spirit, feeling, and thought in ancient Greece. Socrates suggests such an idea of the self when he speaks of his conscience, or the "little god" inside him. But it was not really until the Roman Empire that large numbers of people took such an ideal seriously.

There are many types of this spiritual individuality in the Roman Empire. The philosophers of the Roman Empire (Stoics and Epicureans) taught their students to achieve "inner calm," "self-control," and a "mind at peace," and sometimes they argued (as Socrates had) that there was a spark of the divine in everyone. At the same time, many less-educated Romans turned from the formal, official state religious ceremonies to new religions that promised personal experience and an individual life after death. The most successful of these new religions of personal salvation was, of course, Christianity. Its appeal (like that of many religions and philosophies of the empire) was that it offered personal security in a confusing and increasingly impersonal world.

Christianity grew out of the Old Testament religion of the ancient Jews—but with at least one important difference. The ancient Jews had hoped for a social salvation for the whole tribe. They dreamed of the day when they, the "chosen people," would return to "the promised land," their ancestral home. Some Jews, like Jesus, had (at least by the time of Roman occupation) begun to think that their salvation might be personal, not social, and that the future kingdom might be "not of this world." The followers of Jesus traveled throughout the Roman Empire and taught that every individual was born with his own divine "soul," and that he was

personally responsible to God for the care of that soul. These Christians insisted that a person might live after dying, but that such a future life depended on what the individual did himself, not on what others did for him.

The idea that God was interested in the behavior and beliefs of every individual must have been very appealing to those who felt lost in the bigness of the empire. But the immense responsibility to God that this idea implied must have been an awesome burden to those Romans who took it seriously. As a result, the Christians were usually very introspective. They asked questions about themselves, their faith, and their behavior that most ordinary people had never cared to raise. They sought to know themselves in order to know God. They examined all of their past experiences in their search for personal experiences of the divine.

Self-knowledge was the goal of Augustine, the church father, when he wrote his *Confessions* around A.D. 400. This spiritual autobiography was an extreme example of the typical Christian attempt to arrive at a detailed understanding of the inner life, especially sin. Probably no one before Augustine had tried to understand himself so fully.

I wish to bring back to mind my past foulness and the carnal corruptions of my soul. This is not because I love them, but that I may love you, my God. Out of love for your love I do this. In the bitterness of my remembrance, I tread again my most evil ways, so that you may grow sweet to me. . . .¹¹

He confessed his private thoughts (the "sickness of the soul") as well as his acts. In one instance, he asked God's forgiveness for pretending to be as sexually experienced as his companions when he was sixteen.

I was ashamed to be remiss in vice in the midst of my comrades. For I heard them boast of their disgraceful acts, and glory in them all the more, the more debased they were.

There was pleasure in doing this, not only for the pleasure of the act, but also for the praise it brought. . . . So they wouldn't make fun of me, I made myself more depraved than I was.¹²

Augustine searched his memory to recall everything, even the most minor acts—such as stealing pears from a neighbor's tree.

I willed to commit theft, and I did so, not because I was driven to it by any need, unless it was a need of justice and goodness. For I stole a thing of which I had plenty of my own and of much better quality. Nor did I wish to enjoy that thing which I desired to gain by theft, but rather to enjoy the actual theft and the sin of theft.

In a garden nearby to our vineyard there was a pear tree, loaded with fruit that was desirable neither in appearance nor in taste. Late one night . . . we had kept up our street games, and a group of very bad youths set out to shake

down and rob this tree. We took great loads of fruit from it, not for our own eating, but rather to throw it to the pigs; even if we did eat a little of it, we did this to do what pleased us because it was forbidden.¹³

A man in his mid-forties, a bishop in the Roman Catholic church, forced himself to remember a typical sixteen-year-old's prank. Why? The Christians felt that they were as responsible for childhood sins as they were for sins committed the day before. They believed that the individual would be judged as a total person, for everything he or she had been in the past as well as in the present. Most religions before Christianity saw human sins as particular mistakes or errors that could be "corrected" by the appropriate sacrifice. The Christians, however, believed that sin was a sign of a corrupt personality that had to be converted to Christ before sinning would cease.

Certainly, not everyone in ancient Rome was as intensely self-conscious or individualistic as Augustine or Trimalchio. Probably no more than 10 percent of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire were Christians before Christianity became the state religion (during Augustine's lifetime). As soon as Christianity was established as the official religion of the empire, many people became Christians for political reasons, not necessarily because they were seeking individual salvation.

Nevertheless, there were many Romans who were much more aware of their own individuality than any group of people ever had been before. Roman society was probably more specialized than any previous society. This means that there actually were more individual differences among Romans than previously: there was a greater variety of jobs, living conditions, life-styles, and ways of thinking. Thus, in a real sense, there was a greater degree of individuality in Rome than there had been in Greece or before.

THE SELF IN INDIA

There is a Buddhist story about the meeting of the Greek king Milinda, or Menander, who ruled in northwestern India in the middle of the second century B.C., with the Buddhist monk Nāgasena. The story highlights the difference between Greek and Indian ideas of individuality. According to the story:

King Menander went up to the venerable Nāgasena, greeted him respectfully, and sat down. Nāgasena replied to the greeting, and the King was pleased at heart. Then King Menander asked: "How is your reverence known, and what is your name?"

"I'm known as Nāgasena, your Majesty, that's what my fellow monks call me. But though my parents may have given me such a name . . . it's only a generally understood term, a practical designation. There is no question of a permanent individual implied in the use of the word."

"Listen, you five hundred Greeks and eighty thousand monks!" said King

Menander. "This Nāgasena has just declared that there's no permanent individuality implied in his name!" Then, turning to Nāgasena, "If, Reverend Nāgasena, there is no permanent individuality, who gives you monks your robes and food, lodging and medicines? And who makes use of them? Who lives a life of righteousness, meditates, and reaches Nirvana? Who destroys living beings, steals, fornicates, tells lies, or drinks spirits? . . . If what you say is true there's neither merit nor demerit, and no fruit or result of good and evil deeds. If someone were to kill you there would be no question of murder. And there would be no masters or teachers in the [Buddhist] Order and no ordinations. If your fellow monks call you Nāgasena, what then is Nāgasena?"¹⁴

King Menander, according to the story, then asked Nāgasena if his nails, his teeth, his skin, or his entire body were Nāgasena, to which the monk said no. Then Menander asked if his body, sensations, perceptions, ideas, and consciousness (the five parts of individuality according to the Buddha) constituted Nāgasena, and the monk still said no.

When asked to explain himself, Nāgasena pointed out that his name, just like the word for King Menander's chariot, was a practical term for something that was more than the sum of its parts; further, it was always changing. "When a man is born, . . . he neither remains the same nor becomes another," Nāgasena remarked. It is "through the continuity of the body [that] all stages of life are included in a pragmatic unity."¹⁵

REINCARNATION AND ATMAN

The problem with the Greek idea of individuality, from the Indian standpoint, was that it was too fixed, too permanent. For Nāgasena, Western individuality was like a prison: it was limited to one body and one life. The Indian idea of the individual was much broader than that. It spanned not only the changes from childhood through the stages of adulthood, but also the changes from one body to the next. The great Indian poem the *Bhagavad Gita* (from the epic *Mahabharata*) shows the way in which the Indian idea of reincarnation leads to a different notion of the individual. In it, Lord Krishna explains to the young Arjuna, about to engage in battle against people he knows well, that their lives continue after death.

*Arjuna, when a man knows the self
to be indestructible, enduring, unborn,
unchanging, how does he kill
or cause anyone to kill?*

*As a man discards
worn-out clothes
to put on new ones,
so the embodied self*

*discards
its worn-out bodies
to take on new ones.
Weapons do not cut it,
fire does not burn it,
waters do not wet it,
wind does not wither it.*¹⁶

The indestructible self in Indian thought was called the *atman*, often translated as "soul." Unlike the Christian "soul," however, the *atman* was not associated with a particular personality. The *atman* was the essence of the individual, which continued from one reincarnation to the next. The *atman* changed in each life, becoming purer or more polluted, gaining good or bad *karma* from the experiences of the world, but these changes were moral rather than physical. Christians usually imagined the dead in heaven or hell having the same physical appearance as they did in life. Indians did not imagine that a reincarnated person would look the way he or she did in a previous life. Rather, they believed that the moral effects, the *karma*, of a previous life would be evident. In general, one's good *karma* from a previous life would improve one in the current life, just as good deeds in this life improved one.

Thus, Indian culture taught the improvement of self rather than the improvement of the world. The Indian self was to be engaged not in a struggle with the world, but in a struggle to overcome its own bad actions (bad *karma*). In general, this was a struggle to detach the *atman* from the daily involvements and "static" of the world, seen as *maya*, or illusion, in order to reunite it with the larger divinity, *Brahman*, which was the universe. To make *atman* into *Brahman*, self into universal divinity, was the goal of Indian culture. "Who sees all beings in his own self, and his own self in all beings, loses all fear," the Isa Upanishad counseled. That is why Indian religious thinkers sought to relinquish the ties that bind the self to the world. "When all ties that bind the heart are unloosened, then a mortal becomes immortal," the Katha Upanishad declared.

Always dwelling within all beings is the Atman, the Purusha, the Self, a little flame in the heart. Let one with steadiness withdraw him from the body even as an inner stem is withdrawn from its sheath. Know this pure immortal light; know in truth this pure immortal light.¹⁷

ATMAN VERSUS EGO

The difference between Western and Indian ideas of individuality stem from different ideas of the self. Both materialist and spiritualist ideas of the self in Greco-Roman culture, both Augustine and Trinitarianism, envisioned a "self" that

was separate from God. "In the beginning, this universe was nothing but the Self in the form of man," the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad declared around 700 B.C., a few hundred years before the Hebrews declared, "In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth." According to one tradition, God and the Self were one. According to the other, God created each self. The individual in the Judeo-Christian tradition was imperfect and had to work: obey, pray, worship, be saved. The Christian soul was "immortal," but Augustine and other Christians had to shape, cultivate, and improve that soul. It would not become perfect without religious effort, certainly not by being relinquished.

In some ways, Indian thought was psychologically more subtle than Western thought. While both the Greco-Roman and the Judeo-Christian traditions concentrated on the actions of an objective self, Indian thought explored the levels of self and self-consciousness. We might say that Indian culture concentrated on the psychology of consciousness rather than on the self. "Develop the state of mind of consciousness . . . for thus the pride of selfhood will grow less," the Buddha is thought to have said.¹⁸ A man should breathe his last breath in "full consciousness, and not unconsciously." From the Indian standpoint, the active self interferes with consciousness. To be fully conscious, according to this view, one must conquer the self.

There is a tendency to assume that since Indians cultivated the deeper "dreamless self" instead of the superficial worldly self, they did not *do* anything. In fact, they did quite a lot. The cultivation of techniques of yoga and meditation (as many people have learned since) often made material accomplishments effortless. The habit of listening to the "real" self rather than the superficial self enhanced the ability to distinguish the important from the trivial. A peaceful consciousness could be far more effective than a preoccupied ego. By "relinquishing attachment," the *Bhagavad Gita* taught, "men of discipline perform action . . . for the purification of the self."

*Men who master the worldly world
have equanimity—
they exist in the infinite spirit,
in its flawless equilibrium.¹⁹*

FOR FURTHER READING

We have chosen to discuss Native American society as our example of tribal society, and have found some of the following quite useful: Jamake Highwater's *The Primal Mind*, Ake Hultkrantz's *The Religions of the American Indians*, Dorothy Lee's *Freedom and Culture*, and Paul Radin's *Primitive Man as Philosopher*.

On the "heroic" individuality of the Bronze Age, the student is invited to read Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (many editions) firsthand. M. I. Finley's *The World of Odysseus* is an

excellent companion. William H. McNeill's *Rise of the West and A World History* offer suggestive interpretations of the meaning of Bronze Age and Iron Age warfare for individuality in ancient Greece and worldwide.

The story of classical Greece as a golden age of individuality is told in almost every text and history of the age. Those students who would like to explore the subject are alerted to Werner Jaeger's difficult but rewarding *Paideia*, E. R. Dodds's *The Greeks and the Irrational*, M. I. Finley's *The Ancient Greeks: An Introduction to Their Life and Thought*, and Bruno Snell's *The Discovery of the Mind*. But no understanding of Greek individuality is possible without some sampling of the individuals of the classical age. There are enough editions of Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus, Thucydides, Euripides, Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Aristophanes (to name only a few) to please any tastes.

We have entered the Roman world of individuality through Petronius' *Satyricon* and Augustine's *Confessions* (many editions); both are worth reading in full. For an understanding of the classical Roman individual, the student might also read Cicero, Caesar, Tacitus, Suetonius, Livy, Horace, Juvenal, or Ovid (among so many others). Many secondary sources have already been mentioned, but perhaps Jérôme Carcopino's *Daily Life in Ancient Rome* stands out. For Roman Christianity, the letters of Paul or Jerome say as much as Augustine. Harold Mattingly's *Christianity in the Roman Empire* and A. D. Nock's *Conversion* add (in different ways) to our understanding of the Christian stress on the individual.

Among the general histories of India, the most useful for this topic are A. L. Basham's *The Wonder That Was India* and Romila Thapar's *A History of India*. Joseph Campbell's *The Masks of God: Oriental Mythology* is full of interesting discussions of myth and literature. The *Masks of God: Oriental Mythology* is full of interesting discussions of myth and literature. Students should be encouraged to read some of the classics discussed here as well. The *Bhagavad Gita* is available in an excellent translation by Barbara Stoler Miller. The *Upanishads* are available in a number of good editions. A demanding, but highly rewarding, study by a specialist on Indian culture that touches on this topic is Richard Lammoy's *The Speaking Tree*. Sudhir Kakar's *The Inner World: A Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Society in India* is a study of individuality in modern India by an Indian psychologist.

NOTES

1. Jamake Highwater, *The Primal Mind: Vision and Reality in Indian America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 56.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 171-172.
3. Ake Hultkrantz, *The Religions of the American Indians*, trans. Monica Setterwall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 77.
4. Hultkrantz, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
5. Highwater, *op. cit.*, p. 173.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 179-180.
7. Homer, *Iliad*, bk. XXII, trans. Andrew Lang, Walter Leaf, and Ernest Myers (New York: Grolier, 1969), pp. 337-340.
8. William H. McNeill, *A World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 90-91.
9. *Lycurgus*, 25, trans. Werner Jaeger in *Paideia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 83-84. For a complete translation of *Lycurgus*, see one of the many editions of *Plutarch's Lives*. The problem of conveying Spartan public identity can be seen in

the ambiguity of classical translation of John and William Langhorne (1819): Lysurgus "taught his citizens to think nothing more disagreeable than to live by, or for, themselves. Like bees, they acted with one impulse for the public good. . . ." (New York: Mentor Books, 1950), p. 31.

10. Petronius, *The Satyricon*, trans. William Arrowsmith (New York: New American Library, 1959), pp. 81-83.
11. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. John K. Ryan (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960), bk. 2, ch. 1, p. 65.
12. *Ibid.*, bk. 2, ch. 3, p. 68.
13. *Ibid.*, bk. 2, ch. 4, pp. 69-70.
14. *Sources of Indian Tradition*, vol. 1, ed. William Theodore de Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), pp. 103-104.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Barbara Stoler Miller (New York: Bantam, 1986), II: 21-23.
17. "The Katha Upanishad," in *The Upanishads*, trans. Juan Mascaro (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1965), p. 66.
18. de Bary, *op. cit.*, p. 109.
19. *Bhagavad Gita*, V: 19.

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WE ARE USED TO TH
a city as an area with so m
overcrowding, congestion,
everything: too many peop
weight of numbers seems to

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density that defines a city a
problem than simple size or
does not by itself make a city
of people. Modern cities li
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distinction—that of *function*

The classical world distin
and this may be a useful dist