

**Center on Capitalism and Society  
Columbia University  
Working Paper #100**

**15<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference  
The Age of the Individual: 500 Years Ago Today  
Session 1: Origins of Individualism**

**Response to Christine Helmer,  
Mark C. Taylor, and Susan Lee**

**Alan Mittleman  
Jewish Theological Seminary  
October 31, 2017**

These three papers, rich as they are succinct, cast light on the rise of modern individualism. They locate the origins of individualism in the religious and philosophical culture of the Middle Ages and in the transformation of that culture by the Reformation in its various expressions. They underscore, I think, the importance of the contribution the study of religion makes in the context of the secular academy. A phenomenon as complex as modern individualism cannot be adequately understood without deep immersion in the history of religion.

In addition to the descriptive and analytic tasks that these papers perform, they also take a critical stance. For their quarry, individualism, is not a value-neutral object of inquiry but a value in and of itself. Christine Helmer separates the historical Luther from the heroic fiction created in Wilhelmine Germany. In doing so, she asserts that a key aspect of Luther's legacy, justification by faith, which put the individual in the foreground, was accompanied by vocation, which set service to community as the normative framework. Individuality is "coterminous with the creation of community." Individuality and community were—and should remain—not only contrastive terms, but mutually dependent ones as well. Whatever value individualism has is diminished, if I read her correctly, by severing it from the value of community.

Mark Taylor calls attention to what happens when that severing occurs. He implicates individualism in the production of anxiety, which in its modern formulation spurs a "flight from freedom." Individualism becomes a burden and a terror, an opening onto the abyss in which "there are no rules to choose the rules by which we think and choose." Taylor reminds us not to romanticize individuality but to recognize its proximity to nihilism.

Lee, for her part, does not critique individualism but offers an analytic toolbox, a set of necessary conditions for when the concept of theological individualism applies. In her view, three conditions must be met. 1) A robust version of human agency; humans must be free to choose, especially between good and evil behavior. 2) Humans must be equal (or think themselves equal) in the sight of God. 3) Humans must believe that they live in the presence of God (*coram deo*) such that they strive to live conscientiously and responsibly every waking moment. These conditions do seem necessary for theological or religious individualism but are they sufficient or are more conditions necessary? My sense is that more factors are necessary for full blown individualism to emerge.

I would like to claim that some ancient cultures developed sophisticated concepts of *individuality* that fulfill Lee's criteria. But these sophisticated or thick concepts of ancient individuality did not issue into *individualism*. I would like briefly to examine the distinction. Let me develop the distinction between these two concepts, individuality and individualism, by reference to Greece, Israel, and Rome. Let's begin with Aristotle. In a sense, Aristotle's entire ethical project is about the perfection of individuals. The cultivation of virtue against the background of the contingencies of one's natural disposition is an individualized task. Although seeking the mean between excess and defect is a general rule, its application must be personalized; individuals must decide in their own cases how to train themselves.

But for all of Aristotle's focus on the individual agent as the locus of ethics, the individual is in no way prior to the polis. The polis has priority; only in it can individuals fulfill their essentially political nature. The polis has normative precedence over the individual. It is far from Aristotle to think that the polis is an instrument for safeguarding the *rights* of individuals. The upshot is that individuality plays an important role in Aristotle's ethical and political thought

but individualism, in the sense of the ontic and normative priority of individuals does not. A recent textbook of political theory claims that all political order must justify itself before the primordial claim of anarchy; the claim of individuals, who are normatively prior, to rule themselves. That is not a starting point that Aristotle would have found intelligible.

My second example comes from Jerusalem, not Athens. Individuality grows in importance in different strata and genres of biblical literature. While Exodus stresses collective, intergenerational punishment—" [God] visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations (Exodus 34:7)"—Deuteronomy breaks through to a sharp conception of individual responsibility: "Parents shall not be put to death for children nor children be put to death for parents: a person shall be put to death only for his own crime (Deut 24:16)." This insistence on individual accountability before God is given a critical edge by Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who refute popular attempts to abjure personal responsibility by reliance on the old trope of collective guilt. With individual responsibility comes both equality before God and a heightened emphasis on individual agency. Choice is real, efficacious, and personal. The Bible urges everyone to choose between good and evil; to choose life (Deut 30:19-20).

Add to this a highly personal consciousness of the nearness (or sometimes of the distance and silence) of God (for example, Ps 73:28). The Book of Psalms frequently features devotional poetry in a personal voice. It had been thought in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that wherever the Psalms used "I", "we" was intended. This view drew support from Hegelian ideas about the non-emergence of individuality in the ancient Near East. But contemporary scholarship has debunked this view, affirming that the personal voice of the psalms is genuine. Individual Israelites used the psalms in their private devotions, identifying their own situation with that of the psalmist. That carries into subsequent Judaism; individuals use inherited vehicles of expression to voice their own

emotions, convictions, doubts, and longings. Most synagogues, drawing on a line from the Talmud, have engraved above the Ark a Jewish version of *coram deo*: “Remember before Whom you stand.”

Time does not permit an adequate consideration of a third example: the late Stoic ethics brought to light by Richard Sorabji in his work on the self in the ancient world. These texts show an acute concern for individual selfhood, focusing on personal differences, on “my nature” as against “your nature.” These differences stand out from human nature as such and require ethical reflection and treatment. Taking the self seriously means noticing and valorizing, to an extent, imperfection. The Stoics have thus a richer conception of individuality than Aristotle. The ethical task of late Stoicism is finding one’s personal nature and being true to it. This differs, according to Sorabji, from modern, Romantic views of the self because the Stoics look to Reason to learn how to be true to themselves. They also accept expressing individual nature through taking on inherited roles.

To sum up, Israel, Greece, and Rome had intellectual resources for rich conceptions of individuality expressed in both religious and philosophical idioms. The criteria clarified by Susan Lee can be applied without distortion, I think, to these complex ancient cultures. And yet it is correct to say that although individuality, contra Hegel, emerged and took on genuine value in these cultures, individualism did not. *Individualism is a construal of the value-laden fact of individuality that amplifies its value.* Precisely how that amplification occurred, what its significance is, and how we live with its consequences is what will occupy us for the rest of the day and, I’m sure, for the rest of our lives.