to various doctrines[53] whose combined effect is to close off the political debate where it should begin: over the manifold and complex conditions under which both autonomy and non-discrimination can be enhanced in contemporary societies. They seek, rather, to win the argument by blocking further argument, by capturing the meanings of words—notably 'liberty' and 'equality'—in such a way that these questions no longer arise. Egalitarians, by contrast, make ambitious, and doubtless contestable, claims about what such conditions are. But they at least address the questions and, for that reason alone, they can plausibly claim to take both liberty and equality seriously.

[53] I have in mind, in particular, the methodological doctrine—methodological individualism—which proscribes all explanations not couched wholly in terms of facts about individuals; a doctrine of property rights which derives from individuals' ownership of their personal powers the right to indefinitely unequal resources as a result of their use; and a doctrine about the nature of society as a 'spontaneous order' (Hayek), of which the market is allegedly the archetype, unamenable to unified direction or indeed rational planning of any kind.

# 5
# The Use of Ethnocentricity

'The emergence of the individual' is a grand theme that has preoccupied a wide range of thinkers in the West for the last two centuries, ever since Joseph de Maistre spoke in 1820 of 'this deep and frightening division of minds, this infinite fragmentation of all doctrines, political protestantism carried to the most absolute individualism'[1] and Tocqueville, noting that 'individualism' was 'a recent expression to which a new idea has given birth', observed that it was 'of democratic origin and threatens to develop in so far as conditions are equalized'—a 'deliberate and peaceful sentiment which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and friends', abandoning 'the wider society to itself'.[2]

The semantic history of the very term 'individualism' reveals a rich variety of accumulated meanings, following initially divergent national paths[3] but all these usages display a common concern with identifying some distinctive set of traits, principles, or ideas that are, it is usually supposed, constitutive of modernity. These constitutive features of modernity were, of course, variously conceived: by Maistre as the thought of the Enlightenment and revolutionary politics, by Tocqueville as the egalitarian spirit of democracy, by Weber as rational capitalism, by Durkheim as organic solidarity, by Meinecke as Romanticism ('this deepening individualism of uniqueness . . . a new and more living image of the State, and also a new picture of the world'),[4] by Dicey as utilitarian liberalism, by Walt Whitman as the progressive force of modern history, reconciling

This chapter was first published in 1989.

[1] J. de Maistre, 'Extrait d'une conversation', in *Œuvres complètes*, 14 vols. and Index (Lyon and Paris, 1884–7), xiv. p. 286.

[2] A. de Tocqueville *De la démocratie en Amérique* (1835), bk. II, pt. ii, chap. 2, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. J.-P. Mayer (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), i. pp. 104–6.

[3] See my *Individualism* (Oxford: Blackwell, and New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pt. I.

[4] F. Meinecke, *Die Idee der Staatsräson* (1924), in *Werke*. (Munich 1957–62), i. p. 425.

liberty and social justice.[5] 'Individualism', across all this rich diversity of interpretations, distinguished the moderns from the ancients, 'us' from 'them'.

From very early on, of course, historians and social scientists have sought to date 'its' emergence. The dramatic diversity of their accounts reveals all too clearly their disaccord over what it is they have sought to date. For Tocqueville, as we have seen, individualism's origins stem from modern democracy; for Burckhardt it was the Italians of the Renaissance who 'have emerged from the half-conscious life of the race and become themselves individuals';[6] Troeltsch, and following him Louis Dumont, detected its origins in Primitive Christianity; Weber and Tawney in Calvinism; Gierke in Natural Law Theory; von Mises and von Hayek in classical economics; and Michel Foucault in the development since the nineteenth century of 'a closely linked grid of disciplinary coercions' through which 'certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals'.[7] Others (I pick virtually at random) pin its origins on Protagoras and the doctrine of *homo mensura*,[8] on the Epicureans,[9] on Christianity's fusion of the legal and dramatic concepts of a person, making 'every being with a will, qualify as a person, in order to make them all equally qualified to receive divine judgment',[10] on an alleged turning-point between the third and fourth centuries of our era which gave 'to the history of the individual in the west its original traits, its distinctive features', with the rise of the holy man, the man of God, the ascetic, the anchorite, lending a 'ferocious importance' to introspection and self-examination.[11] For yet others the modern 'atomistic' conception of the individual is found in 'those philosophical traditions which come to us from the seventeenth century and which started with the postulation of an extensionless subject, epistemologically a *tabula rasa* and politically a presuppositionless bearer of rights'[12] or in the seventeenth-century roots of 'possessive individualism'.[13] Indeed, I am prepared to bet that there is no historical period on which, or significant thinker on whom, the accolade or accusation of inaugurating the 'modern individual' has not been placed by somebody.

[5] See Whitman, *Democratic Vistas* (1871), in *Complete Prose Works*, (Philadelphia: 1891), ii. p. 67.

[6] J. Burckhardt, *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (London: Phaidon, 1955), p. 279.

[7] M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings*, ed. C. Gordon (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), pp. 106, 98.

[8] See Arthur Danto, Postscript: 'Philosophical Individualism in Chinese and Western Thought', in D. Munro (ed.), *Individualism and Holism: Studies in Confucian and Taoist Values* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Michigan Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 385–90.

[9] A. D. Lindsay, 'Individualism', *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 15 vols. (New York, 1930–5), vii. p. 676.

[10] Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, 'A Literary Postscript: Characters, Persons, Selves, Individuals', *The Identities of Persons* (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 1976), pp. 309–10.

[11] J.-P. Vernant, 'L'Individu dans la cité', in *Sur l'individu* (contributions by Paul Veyne, *et al.*) (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1987).



All these suggestions are, of course, 'presentist' and 'ethnocentric': the question is always 'where do *we* come from?' They seek the 'origins' of our present constitutive characteristics in alien contexts, and thereby court several dangers, or supposed dangers: that in seeking pre-reflections of ourselves we misinterpret the world from within of those we study, asking anachronistic questions, seeing illusory continuities between ourselves and our supposed forebears, and illusory contrasts between both 'us' and '*them*'—the supposed embodiments of 'the Other' the 'world we have lost', societies of 'the holistic type'. Furthermore, these suggestions all stem, of course, from what Weber called 'value-relevant' perspectives: every conception of 'us' in pursuit of 'our' origins is itself a partisan view among us of what makes 'us' distinctive and worthy of scientific investigation. Does this not further distort the investigation of where 'we' come from?

Here, perhaps, modern, comparative ethnology can help. Modern ethnology has 'sought to discern the notion of a person as a category that is culturally defined and therefore of a varying constitution by reason of the "ethnies" it encompasses'.[14] The suggestion here is that there is, indeed, a (constant) 'category' whose (variable) cultural forms can be studied comparatively, while the dangers cited above can be avoided. But is there, and can they?

It is indeed true that social anthropology and ethnology have taken warmly to this theme, ever since Marcel Mauss's remarkable essay on 'The Category of the Person', first delivered at a largely unnoticed

[12] C. Taylor, 'Atomism', in his *Philosophical Papers*, ii. *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), p. 210.

[13] See C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

[14] *Singularités: Les Voies d'émergence individuelle, Textes pour Eric de Dampierre* (Paris: Plon, 1989).

lecture in 1938,[15] which in turn inspired Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* and his subsequent studies of the development of Western individualism.[16] Mauss's essay and Dumont's work reveal, rather interestingly, a certain continuity with the earlier pre-ethnological discussions, while taking a step or two beyond them. A consideration of their work raises the question: how much further should, or can, the ethnologist go?

Mauss's theme was 'the way in which one of the categories of the human mind,

> the notion of the person, the notion of the self, originated and slowly developed over many centuries and through numerous vicissitudes, so that even today it is still an imprecise, delicate and fragile one requiring further elaboration.

In other words, he treated 'the person' (1) as a 'fundamental category' in the Durkheimian manner—one of those 'notions distinguished from all other knowledge by their universality and necessity'; (2) as like an 'anatomical structure' which takes different 'forms in various times and places', taking on 'flesh and blood, substance and form' in modern times; and (3) as a historical product, the end of an evolutionary story, when the notion becomes 'clear and precise', becoming identified with 'self-knowledge and the psychological consciousness', formulated 'only for us, among us', involving

[15] Mauss, 'Une catégorie de l'esprit humain: La Notion de Personne, celle de "moi"', first pub. in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 68 (1938) and repr. in id., *Sociologie et anthropologie* (Paris: 1950) Sir Edmund Leach, who was present at the lecture, has remarked to me that at the time it was paid little attention. It has been translated into English by W. D. Halls, in M. Carrithers, S. Collins, and S. Lukes (eds., *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), together with various essays that discuss and develop its theme and arguments.

[16] L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (Paris: 1966); *Homo Aequalis* Paris: Gallimard, 1977); and *Essais sur l'individualisme: Une perspective anthropologique sur l'idéologie moderne* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1983), published in a later version in English as *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective* (Chicago, Ill.: Chicago Univ. Press, 1986). Among many anthropological/ethnological works on this theme, one may cite K. Burridge, *Someone No One: An Essay on Individualists* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979); S. Collins, *Selfless Persons; Imagery and Thought in Theravada Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982); M. Dieterlen (ed.), *Le Notion de personne en Afrique Noire* (Paris: Univ. de Nanterre, 1973); M. Leenhardt, *Do Kano: Person and Myth in the Melanesian World* Chicago, Ill.: Chicago Univ. Press, 1979); I. Meyerson (ed.), *Problèmes de la personne* (Paris: 1973); and A. Ostor, L. Frazzetti, and S. Barnett, *Concepts of a Person: Kinship, Casts and Marriage in India* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982).



'the sacred character of the human person'. Recall his masterly summing up of his argument:

> From a simple masquerade to the mask, from a 'role' (*personnage*) to a 'person' (*personne*), to a name, to an individual; from the latter to a being possessing metaphysical and moral value; from a moral consciousness to a sacred being; from the latter to a fundamental form of thought and action—the course is accomplished.

Dumont, by contrast, sees 'the idea of the individual as a value' as being 'as idiosyncratic as it is fundamental' and argues that 'modern individualism, when seen against the background of the other great civilizations that the world has known, is an exceptional phenomenon'.[17] Employing 'the comparative anthropological view of modernity', placing 'individualistic ideology into a hierarchical perspective', he uses Indian holism and hierarchy as the baseline from which to interpret 'this unique development that we call "modern"'.[18] In the former,

> society imposes upon every person a tight interdependence which substitutes constraining relationships for the individual as we know him, but, on the other hand, there is the institution of world-renunciation which allows for the full independence of the man who chooses it.[19]

Generalizing from the Indian case, Dumont argues that Western individualism first appeared in the form of 'the individual outside the world' opposed to society. The Hellenistic world was, it seems, 'permeated' with this 'outworldly' conception (among the educated) and the early Christians ('nearer to the Indian renouncer than ourselves') built on it through their relation to the other world and their devaluation of this.[20] The this-worldly individuals of modern individualism are the ultimate culmination of the progressive contamination and penetration of the entire social world by Christianity's other-worldly values.

Both Mauss and Dumont take the idea of the 'cultural definition' of the person or self or individual seriously. They both pursue the Durkheimian thought that even so fundamental a 'category' is socially or culturally determined. As ethnologists they are also sensitive to the stress on difference and the role of comparison to

[17] Dumont, *Essays on Individualism*, p. 23.
[18] Id., *Homo Aequalis*, p. 16.
[19] Id., *Essays on Individualism*, p. 25.
[20] Ibid. chap. 1.

make the self-evident puzzling, and vice versa. Each confronts modern views of the individual or person with apparently dramatic contrast-cases. On the other hand, each does so within a grand evolutionary story (however 'idiosyncratic' and exceptional) that culminates in 'our' conception of the individual. And each assumes this last to be a 'fundamental' unitary whole to which earlier stages of development teleologically tend, and with which other, holistic conceptions contrast. Just like the earlier, pre-ethnological discussions of 'individualism', we are still in search of 'our' pre-reflections, and a contrasting 'holistic' mirror-image of ourselves in earlier times or other cultures.

Dumont suggests that Mauss's claims in his 1938 lecture, when read closely, were 'after all modest', but he maintains nevertheless that

> in a broad sense, 'the social history of the categories of the human mind' is still the order of the day for us, only it seems infinitely more complex, more multiplex and arduous to us than it did to the Durkheimian enthusiasts at the beginning of the century.[21]

But why *the* social history? Perhaps, as Michael Carrithers has argued, we should abandon the idea of a 'grand procession through history'. At least, as he suggests, we should start to discriminate between *different* histories with 'their own development, their own logic and their own relative autonomy'—for example between what he calls the *personne* tradition, centring on social and legal history and on the person as the locus of relations of kinship, clan membership, citizenship, and so on; and the *moi* tradition, concerned, rather, with the individual's relation to the natural and spiritual cosmos and his face to face relations with other moral agents. From the vantage-point of this distinction, for instance, Roman law is a crucial stage of the former, and Buddhism a decisive step in the latter. Perhaps, as Carrithers suggests, we should forsake the search for overall stories and look rather for 'distinct episodes moving toward no very clear conclusion'.[22]

But at this point a deeper question arises. How far can this topic be relativized? How far can the ethnological approach go beyond Mauss and Dumont in rejecting presentism and ethnocentricity

[21] Dumont, *Essays on Individualism*, p. 4.

[22] Carrithers, 'An Alternative Social History of the Self', in Carrithers, Collins, and Lukes, *The Category of the Person*, pp. 190–216.



without abandoning the coherence of the *explanandum*? Are we, in exploring this theme, condemned to one or another kind of narcissism—to seeking and finding prereflections or reverse mirror-images of ourselves?

We can, of course, divide the topic up. We can explore particular manifestations of, say, the valuing of exemplary or unique individuals, such as heroes, or the cultivation of a sphere of privacy, or the importance accorded to individual moral autonomy, or the concern with subjectivity, and the inner life, with what Foucault calls *le souci de soi*, or the individualization of responsibility or punishment, or the expression of role distance in, say, humour and drama, and through the 'perception of individual eccentricities, the deliberate or accidental flouting of convention, slips of the tongue should reveal private reservations, clever calculations of private advantage, as selfish obsessions',[23] or the emancipation of individuals from an inferior or marginal status, or the development of lyric poetry or of autobiography or of biography or of confessions, and so on. But what licenses us to see all these as parts or elements of a single topic—'the emergence of the individual'—if not some underlying presumption of a unitary *ensemble* from which they appear united?

We could, as Jean-Pierre Vernant does in his argument against Dumont's thesis with respect to archaic and classical Greece,[24] distinguish between the 'individual' (*l'individu*), the 'subject' (*le sujet*), and the 'self' (*le moi*). Vernant's argument is that in the highly this-worldly and egalitarian religions and social world of the Greeks, several developments can be discerned. The *individual*, seen as distinct from his role and social attachments, was valued in the archaic period in the form of a hero, exemplifying ordinary socially valued virtues to an extraordinary degree, and in the form of the magician, acting in periods of crisis to regulate public affairs. The development of the individual's private sphere can be seen in Athens in relationships between relatives and friends, notably in the *symposion*, widespread since the sixth century, where friends and courtesans would celebrate Dionysos, Aphrodite, and Eros, and in the appearance, from the last quarter of the fifth century of more familiar family tombs, on which the epitaphs for the first time celebrate 'personal sentiments of affection, of regret, of esteem between

[23] G. Lienhardt, 'Self: Public, Private. Some African Representations', ibid., p. 144.

[24] Vernant, 'L'Individu dans la cité'.

husband and wife, parents and children'. The individual's emergence in social institutions is shown, Vernant argues, in the appearance of the individual testament in the third century, formulated in writing and respecting the individual's wishes in respect of the disposal of all he possesses. The *subject*—marked by the expression of the first-person singular in discourse—Vernant finds in the growth of Greek lyric poetry where the author publicly expresses his own sensibility and the sense of 'time lived subjectively by the individual'. As for the *self*, Vernant's case is that this barely existed for ancient and classical Greece as a delimited and unified field for introspection: such a concern for the inner life had to await the early centuries of the Christian era.

But here too there seems to be some implicit teleology. What, after all, unites all these various developments if it is not their assumed interconnection within our own world view?

The problem becomes even more acute when we study cultures that are more remote from and less historically connected with our own, and in particular to the extent that our individualistic assumptions about morality and moral psychology, and many other matters, fail to mesh with indigenous conceptual structures. Does 'the emergence of the individual' offer a promising means of access to these? Only, I suggest, if it functions as a theoretical starting-point, rather than an interpretive category. In other words, while our questions may, perhaps must, be presentist and ethnocentric, we should allow maximum scope for indigenous concepts to structure our answers.

Consider the interpretation of the Confucius of the *Analects*. According to Herbert Fingarette, Confucius

> does not elaborate the language of choice and responsibility as these are intimately intertwined with the idea of the ontologically ultimate power of the individual to select from genuine alternatives to create his own spiritual destiny, and with the related ideas of spiritual guilt, and repentance and retribution for such guilt.

The absence of this complex of concepts, Fingarette suggests,

> warrants the inference in connection with such an insightful philosopher of human nature and morality, that the concepts in question and their related imagery, were not rejected by Confucius but rather were simply not present in his thinking at all.

Fingarette's conclusion is that for Confucius,



> Man is not an ultimately autonomous being who has an inner and decisive power, intrinsic to him, a power to select among real alternatives and thereby to shape a life for himself. Instead he is born as 'raw material' who must be civilised by education and thus become a truly human man.[25]

To this Irene Bloom responds, not by doubting the cogency of Fingarette's observations concerning the absence of a developed imagery of choice in the *Analects*, but rather by suggesting that 'choice is not only and necessarily to be viewed as part of the complex of ideas which involves moral responsibility, guilt, retributive punishment and repentance', as it was, for instance, in Augustine. Obviously, she writes,

> all human beings make choices of varying degrees of moral and practical significance all the time, with some degree of self-consciousness. What is variable among individuals, living in the presence of a variety of religious and philosphical traditions and in the context of different cultures, is the way choices are perceived: which situations are viewed as morally problematic, which options present themselves for serious consideration, what immediate or ultimate criteria are adduced—or simply felt—as applicable to any given instance, what degree of emotional intensity or anguish is invested in the choice.

Her suggestion is that, because of other differences of a metaphysical and philosophical character, individual choice has a significantly different meaning in Confucian thought:

> With the example of Augustine in mind, one is prompted to speculate that the greater the degree of conflict perceived within the individual—for example, as between mind and body, reason and desires, a purer a baser self—or the greater the distance between the individual and infinite, the greater the drama that is likely to attend the problem of choice.

Perhaps, in the Confucian setting, 'these conflicts are minimal and the distances less than formidable'. In short, where Fingarette *uses* the Western structure of thought about the autonomous individual to interpret Confucian thought, Bloom *starts* from that structure but goes on to develop a hypothesis about an alternative conceptual configuration that is otherwise structured. If she is right, Confucian thinking about individual choice is revealed as neither a prefiguration nor a mirror-image of our own.[26]

[25] H. Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular and Sacred* (New York: 1972), pp. 18, 34–5.

[26] Bloom, 'On the Matter of Mind: The Methaphysical Basis of the Expanded Self', in Munro, *Individualism and Holism* pp. 293–330.

I cite this last example to make a general point: that an ethnocentric question—'Under what conditions did the individual emerge'—can yield a rich variety of compelling and rigorous indigenous answers.

# PART II