

C. THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COMMUNITY

So far, both our defenses and criticisms of the Cartesian model have focused on the individual. We have considered the individual and individual consciousness, asking whether or not it conforms to the Cartesian picture of the self. There is a wholly different alternative, however, which we haven't discussed yet (although Sartre's *No Exit* does touch upon it).

Even within discussions of the individual self, it becomes evident that the individual self is largely, if not entirely, a social product and a self defined by society. We have all had the experience of finding ourselves in company in which we "could not be ourselves" or, even worse, in which we acted according to an identity that was wholly imposed upon us by other people. When going to school, for example, we played the role of "student," ingratiating and oppressed, long before we started to recognize that it is a role, and not a very pleasant one at that. Now we see it as a role that has been formulated solely for the advantage of other people—teachers, administrators, parents—so that we could be forced to "behave." Have you started to wonder how many other aspects of your identity have been similarly imposed upon you, not chosen at all, much less created by you? How much of your behavior has been "programmed" or "conditioned" by parents, society, television, movies, friends, and schoolmates? The suspicion deepens, and soon you start to see a split developing in your thinking about yourself: First, there is your conception of your own identity; second, there is the identity that has been imposed upon you. The two drift apart like boat and dock, and you find yourself falling between.

No wonder, then, that one of the leading psychiatrists of our times, R. D. Laing, has looked at this problem not only as the basis of much of our everyday unhappiness but as the cause of some of our most serious psychological breakdowns as well. Laing describes what he calls "ontological insecurity" as just this split between your awareness of yourself by yourself and the awareness that is imposed upon yourself as an object of other people's attention. Guilt is an example of this split; in excess (as Freud often argued) such emotions tend to be pathological. One definition of guilt is that it is a kind of self-consciousness that is caught between the need for approval and recognition by others and the feeling that you must be "yourself." Thus we tend to get the idea of a "true self" that lies concealed behind the masks that we present in public, even to our closest friends. We get the sense that our real selves are known only to ourselves, but at the same time we do not really exist except with other people.

But this is an extremely negative view of a tension that is in fact central to our whole Western notion of self, the tension between individuality and social self-identity. In most societies, Plato and Aristotle's Greece, for example, a person would always see his or her own identity in terms of the society of which one was a member. The idea of a self that was antagonistic to society would have been completely foreign to them [Consider, for instance, Socrates' speech in the *Crito*, in our Introduction, in which he says, in effect, that he cannot serve his own interests against the

state without betraying himself.) Yet our own idea of self-identity has become so individualistic that the very idea that self-identity is really social-identity flies in the face of that whole Cartesian tradition—and much of Western thinking—that begins with the autonomy of the self and self-consciousness. Nietzsche, for example, goes so far as to suggest that self-consciousness is simply superfluous.

ON THE DISPENSABILITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS,

BY FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

Nietzsche

The "*Genius of the Species*."—The problem of consciousness (or more correctly: of becoming conscious of oneself) meets us only when we begin to perceive in what measure we could dispense with it: and it is at the beginning of this perception that we are now placed by physiology and zoology (which have thus required two centuries to overtake the hint thrown out in advance by Leibniz). For we could in fact think, feel, will and recollect, we could likewise "act" in every sense of the term, and nevertheless nothing of it all need necessarily "come into consciousness" (as one says metaphorically). The whole of life would be possible without its seeing itself as it were in a mirror: as in fact even at present the far greater part of our life still goes on without this mirroring—and even our thinking, feeling, volitional life as well, however painful this statement may sound to an older philosopher. What then is the *purpose* of consciousness generally, when it is in the main *superfluous*? . . . *Consciousness generally has only been developed under the pressure of the necessity for communication*,—that from the first it has been necessary and useful only between man and man (especially between those commanding and those obeying), and has only developed in proportion to its utility. Consciousness is properly only a connecting network between man and man,—it is only as such that it has had to develop; the recluse and wild-beast species of men would not have needed it. The very fact that our actions, thoughts, feelings and motions come within the range of our consciousness—at least a part of them—is the result of a terrible, prolonged "must" ruling man's destiny: as the most endangered animal he *needed* help and protection; he needed his fellows, he was obliged to express his distress, he had to know how to make himself understood—and for all this he needed "consciousness" first of all: he had to "know" himself what he lacked, to "know" how he felt, and to "know" what he thought. For, to repeat it once more, man, like every living creature, thinks unceasingly, but does not know it; the thinking which is becoming *conscious of itself* is only the smallest part thereof, we may say, the most superficial part, the worst part. . . . As is obvious, my idea is that consciousness does not properly belong to the individual existence of man, but rather to the social and gregarious nature in him; that, as follows therefrom, it is only in relation to communal and gregarious utility that it is finely developed; and that consequently each of us, in spite of the best intention of *understanding* himself as individually as possible, and of "knowing himself," will always just call into consciousness the non-individual in him, namely,

his “averageness”;—that our thought itself is continuously as it were *outvoted* by the character of consciousness—by the imperious “genius of the species” therein—and is translated back into the perspective of the herd. Fundamentally our actions are in comparable manner altogether personal, unique, and absolutely individual—there is no doubt about it; but as soon as we translate them into consciousness, they *do not appear so any longer*. . . . This is the proper phenomenism and perspectivism as I understand it: the nature of *animal consciousness* involves the notion that the world of which we can become conscious is only a superficial and symbolic world, a generalised and vulgarised world;—that everything which becomes conscious *becomes* just thereby shallow, meagre, relatively stupid,—a generalisation, a symbol, a characteristic of the herd; that with the evolving of consciousness there is always combined a great, radical perversion, falsification, superficialisation and generalisation.¹³

Our response to this split between what some philosophers call the “self for it-self” and the “self for others” has been varied. For some, particularly those who have been called existentialists, such as Sartre, whom we read about earlier, the response has been wholesale rebellion, the demand that we break away from “the masses” and our given social identities and create our selves. Nietzsche, for example, attacks what he calls “the herd” in the above passage and urges us to develop ourselves as unique individuals. Indeed, this is the main point of Nietzsche’s entire philosophy and underlies his attack on religion and morality.

A similar attempt at individual rebellion was launched even earlier by Kierkegaard, the Christian philosopher who has often been claimed as the father of existentialism. Like Nietzsche, he deplores what he sarcastically called “the public” and urges an end to collective identity and social roles in favor of renewed respect for the individual.

ON “THE PUBLIC,” BY SØREN KIERKEGAARD

Kierkegaard

In spite of all his exertion the subjective thinker enjoys only a meager reward. The more the collective idea comes to dominate even the ordinary consciousness, the more forbidding seems the transition to becoming a particular existing human being instead of losing oneself in the race, and saying “we,” “our age,” “the nineteenth century.” That it is a little thing merely to be a particular existing human being is not to be denied; but for this very reason it requires considerable resignation not to make light of it. For what does a mere individual count for? Our age knows only too well how little it is, but here also lies the specific im-

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*, trans. Thomas Common, in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Oscar Levy, gen. ed. (1909–11) (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964).

morality of the age. Each age has its own characteristic depravity. Ours is perhaps not pleasure of indulgence or sensuality, but rather a dissolute pantheistic contempt for the individual man. In the midst of all our exultation over the achievements of the age and the nineteenth century, there sounds a note of poorly conceived contempt for the individual man; in the midst of the self-importance of the contemporary generation there is revealed a sense of despair over being human. Everything must attach itself so as to be a part of some movement; men are determined to lose themselves in the totality of things, in world-history, fascinated and deceived by a magic witchery; no one wants to be an individual human being.

In fact, so adamant is Kierkegaard on this issue that he argues that a person who "follows the crowd" and does not choose his or her own identity and live passionately—as an individual cannot even be said to really exist.

ON SELF AND PASSION,
BY **KIERKEGAARD**

It is impossible to exist without passion, unless we understand the word "exist" in the loose sense of a so-called existence. Every Greek thinker was therefore essentially a passionate thinker. I have often reflected how one might bring a man into a state of passion. I have thought in this connection that if I could get him seated on a horse and the horse made to take fright and gallop wildly, or better still, for the sake of bringing the passion out, if I could take a man who wanted to arrive at a certain place as quickly as possible, and hence already had some passion, and could set him astride a horse that can scarcely walk—and yet this is what existence is like if one is to become consciously aware of it. Or if a driver were otherwise not especially inclined toward passion, if someone hitched a team of horses to a wagon for him, one of them a Pegasus and the other a worn-out jade, and told him to drive—I think one might succeed. And it is just this that it means to exist, if one is to become conscious of it. Eternity is the winged horse, infinitely fast, and time is a worn-out jade; the existing individual is the driver. That is to say, he is such a driver when his mode of existence is not an existence loosely so called; for then he is no driver, but a drunken peasant who lies asleep in the wagon and lets the horse take care of themselves. To be sure, he also drives and is a driver; and so there are perhaps many who—also exist.¹⁴

And in this century, borrowing from both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, the German existentialist Martin Heidegger has argued against collective social identity in

¹⁴Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941).

terms of what he (also ironically) calls *das Man*, an extremely useful German expression that roughly translates as “they” in “*they* say that garlic cures colds.” Who are “they”? No one at all, Heidegger says, just an anonymous no one. In dense philosophical prose, he presents the following argument:¹⁵

“DASEIN” AND THE “THEY,”

BY MARTIN HEIDEGGER

Dasein, as everyday Being-with-one-another, stands in *subjection* to Others. It itself *is* not; its Being has been taken away by the Others. Dasein’s everyday possibilities of Being are for the Others to dispose of as they please. These Others, moreover, are not *definite* Others. On the contrary, any Other can represent them. What is decisive is just that inconspicuous domination by Others which has already been taken over unawares from Dasein as Being-with. One belongs to the Others oneself and enhances their power. “The Others” whom one thus designates in order to cover up the fact of one’s belonging to them essentially oneself, are those who proximally and for the most part “*are there*” in everyday Being-with-one-another. The “who” is not this one, not that one, not oneself, not some people, and not the sum of them all. The “who” is the neuter, the “*they*” [*das Man*]. . . .

Everyone is the other, and no one is himself. The “*they*,” which supplies the answer to the question of the “who” of everyday Dasein, is the “*nobody*” to whom every Dasein has already surrendered itself in Being-among-one-other.

Against this “surrender,” Heidegger urges us to “take hold of ourselves” as individuals and find our “authentic” selves.

The Self of everyday Dasein is the *they-self*, which we distinguish from the *authentic Self*—that is, from the Self which has been taken hold of in its own way.¹⁶

This individualist movement is not unique to existentialism; it is in the mainstream of Western thinking, from ancient Socrates through Reformation Christianity to contemporary capitalism. Socrates’ rebellion was, in a very important way, an existential rebellion. He stood up for his principles against the opinions of the age. Luther’s Reformation was, among other things, very much a reassertion of the individual (individual conscience, individual actions) against the all-embracing spirit of the Catholic Church. Today, virtually every American would agree that every

¹⁵For “Dasein,” read “individual human being”; for “Being-with,” read “being around other people.”

¹⁶Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. MacQuarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

individual deserves at least some individual rights and respect. But individualism has always had its doubters. Individualism arises largely as a reaction against the awareness of how socially conditioned we really are. As an instrument of personal growth and as a defense against excessive socialization, individualism is extremely valuable. But when individualism becomes so powerful that personal interests eclipse the interests of everyone else and individual values begin to destroy the community, then it may be time to bring the limits of individualism into question as well. Furthermore, an excessive emphasis on individuality may lead us to forget that there are other human ways of living that are not individualistic at all. There are limits to the degree to which we can challenge the values and customs of our upbringing. Some rebellion is required for growth and change of the society as well as of the individual. But too much rebellion can be self-destructive as well as destructive to the community. For our self-identities, no matter how hard we try to think of ourselves as total individuals, are inextricably tied to the communities and values in which we were raised.

The American sociologist David Reisman looks again at individualism in the light of these considerations and defends it as follows:

**ON INDIVIDUALISM,
BY DAVID REISMAN**

Social science has helped us become more aware of the extent to which individuals, great and little, are the creatures of their cultural conditioning; and so we neither blame the little nor exalt the great. But the same wisdom has sometimes led us to the fallacy that, since all men have their being in culture and as the result of the culture, they owe a debt to that culture which even a lifetime of altruism could not repay. (One might as well argue, and in fact many societies in effect do, that since we are born of parents, we must feel guilt whenever we transcend their limitations!) Sometimes the point is pushed to the virtual denial of individuality: since we arise in society, it is assumed with a ferocious determinism that we can never transcend it. All such concepts are useful correctives of an earlier solipsism. But if they are extended to hold that conformity with society is not only a necessity but also a duty, they destroy that margin of freedom which gives life its savor and its endless possibility for advance.¹⁷

1. Voices of Protest

In contemporary times, the question of how individuals are defined by or in society is a deeply political issue. It is tied to questions of how we categorize our society ethnically, sexually, and racially. In our pluralist American society, we tend to believe that individual freedoms play more of a role in defining us within society than

¹⁷David Reisman, *Individualism Reconsidered* (New York: Doubleday, 1954).

do, say, our family lineage or professional organizations. We are particularly sensitive, then, to racial or sexual stereotyping and to strict enforcement of social roles, because we feel that our identities are thereby taken out of our own control and our individuality is overlooked. This concern is similar to the concern that dualists have about materialism. We worry that if we “are” just our bodies—or similarly if we “are” just what our society makes us—then we are not the free, rational creatures we would like to be.

In the passage that follows, the Black Nationalist leader Malcolm X argues the extent to which African-Americans’ self-identities are defined for them by American society in which whites are a majority.

ON BEING “AFRICAN,”

BY **MALCOLM X**

Right now, in this country, if you and I, 22 million African-Americans—that’s what we are—Africans who are in America. You’re nothing but Africans. Nothing but Africans. In fact, you’d get farther calling yourself African instead of Negro. Africans don’t catch hell. You’re the only one catching hell. They don’t have to pass civil-rights bills for Africans. An African can go anywhere he wants right now. All you’ve got to do is tie your head up. That’s right, go anywhere you want. Just stop being a Negro. Change your name to Hoogagagooba. That’ll show you how silly the white man is. You’re dealing with a silly man. A friend of mine who’s very dark put a turban on his head and went into a restaurant in Atlanta before they called themselves desegregated. He went into a white restaurant, he sat down, they served him, and he said, “What would happen if a Negro came in here?” And there he’s sitting, black as night, but because he had his head wrapped up the waitress looked back at him and says, “Why, there wouldn’t no nigger dare come in here.”¹⁸

Malcolm X explains the moral of the story in another famous speech:

FROM “AT THE AUDOBON,”

BY **MALCOLM X**

You’ll be surprised how fast, how easy it is for someone to steal your and my mind. You don’t think so? We never like to think in terms of being dumb enough to let someone put something over on us in a very deceitful and tricky way. But you and I are living in a very deceitful and tricky society, in a very deceitful and tricky country, which has a very deceitful and tricky government. *All* of them in

¹⁸Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” rpt. in *Malcolm X Speaks*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

it aren't tricky and deceitful, but *most* of them are. And any time you have a government in which *most* of them are deceitful and tricky, you have to be on guard at all times. You have to know how they work this deceit and how they work these tricks. Otherwise you'll find yourself in a bind.

One of the best ways to safeguard yourself from being deceived is always to form the habit of looking at things for yourself, listening to things for yourself, thinking for yourself, before you try and come to any judgment. Never base your impression of someone on what someone else has said. Or upon what someone else has written. Or upon what you read about someone that somebody else wrote. Never base your judgment on things like that. Especially in this kind of country and in this kind of society which has mastered the art of very deceitfully painting people whom they don't like in an image that they know you won't like. So you end up hating your friends and loving their enemies.¹⁹

Obviously, social roles have been binding to the "free individuality" of other groups, too, like women. Many contemporary feminists have analyzed how sex roles, perhaps more than anything else, falsely define us and undermine our individuality. In a now-famous article, Sherri Ortner considers the way society identifies women.

**"IS FEMALE TO MALE AS
NATURE IS TO CULTURE?"**

BY **SHERRI ORTNER**²⁰

Much of the creativity of anthropology derives from the tension between two sets of demands: that we explain human universals, and that we explain cultural particulars. By this canon, woman provides us with one of the more challenging problems to be dealt with. The secondary status of woman in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact. Yet within that universal fact, the specific cultural conceptions and symbolizations of woman are extraordinarily diverse and even mutually contradictory. Further, the actual treatment of women and their relative power and contribution vary enormously from culture to culture, and over different periods in the history of particular cultural traditions. Both of these points—the universal fact and the cultural variation—constitute problems to be explained.

My interest in the problem is of course more than academic: I wish to see genuine change come about, the emergence of a social and cultural order in which as much of the range of human potential is open to women as is open to men. The universality of female subordination, the fact that it exists within every

¹⁹Malcolm X, "At the Audobon," *Malcolm X Speaks*.

²⁰From Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" reprinted in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, edited by Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974).

type of social and economic arrangement and in societies of every degree of complexity, indicates to me that we are up against something very profound, very stubborn, something we cannot rout out simply by rearranging a few tasks and roles in the social system, or even by reordering the whole economic structure. In this paper I try to expose the underlying logic of cultural thinking that assumes the inferiority of women; I try to show the highly persuasive nature of the logic, for if it were not so persuasive, people would not keep subscribing to it. But I also try to show the social and cultural sources of that logic, to indicate wherein lies the potential for change.

THE UNIVERSALITY OF FEMALE SUBORDINATION

What do I mean when I say that everywhere, in every known culture, women are considered in some degree inferior to men? First of all, I must stress that I am talking about *cultural* evaluations; I am saying that each culture, in its own way and on its own terms, makes this evaluation. But what would constitute evidence that a particular culture considers women inferior?

Three types of data would suffice: (1) elements of cultural ideology and informants' statements that *explicitly* devalue women, according them, their roles, their tasks, their products, and their social milieux less prestige than are accorded men and the male correlates; (2) symbolic devices, such as the attribution of defilement, which may be interpreted as *implicitly* making a statement of interior valuation; and (3) social-structural arrangements that exclude women from participation in or contact with some realm in which the highest powers of the society are felt to reside. These three types of data may all of course be inter-related in any particular system, though they need not necessarily be. Further, any one of them will usually be sufficient to make the point of female inferiority in a given culture. Certainly, female exclusion from the most sacred rite or the highest political council is sufficient evidence. Certainly, explicit cultural ideology devaluing women (and their tasks, roles, products, etc.) is sufficient evidence. Symbolic indicators such as defilement are usually sufficient, although in a few cases in which, say, men and women are equally polluting to one another, a further indicator is required—and is, as far as my investigations have ascertained, always available.

On any or all of these counts, then, I would flatly assert that we find women subordinated to men in every known society.



NATURE AND CULTURE

How are we to explain the universal devaluation of women? We could of course rest the case on biological determinism. There is something genetically inherent in the male of the species, so the biological determinists would argue, that makes them the naturally dominant sex; that "something" is lacking in females, and as a result women are not only naturally subordinate but in general quite

satisfied with their position, since it affords them protection and the opportunity to maximize maternal pleasures, which to them are the most satisfying experiences of life. Without going into a detailed refutation of this position, I think it fair to say that it has failed to be established to the satisfaction of almost anyone in academic anthropology. This is to say, not that biological facts are irrelevant, or that men and women are not different, but that these facts and differences only take on significance of superior/inferior within the framework of culturally defined value systems.

If we are unwilling to rest the case on genetic determinism, it seems to me that we have only one way to proceed. We must attempt to interpret female subordination in light of other universals, factors built into the structure of the most generalized situation in which all human beings, in whatever culture, find themselves. For example, every human being has a physical body and a sense of nonphysical mind, is part of a society of other individuals and an inheritor of a cultural tradition, and must engage in some relationship, however mediated, with "nature," or the nonhuman realm, in order to survive. Every human being is born (to a mother) and ultimately dies, all are assumed to have an interest in personal survival, and society/culture has its own interest in (or at least momentum toward) continuity and survival, which transcends the lives and deaths of particular individuals. And so forth. It is in the realm of such universals of the human condition that we must seek an explanation for the universal fact of female devaluation.

I translate the problem, in other words, into the following simple question. What could there be in the generalized structure and conditions of existence, common to every culture, that would lead every culture to place a lower value upon women? Specifically, my thesis is that woman is being identified with—or, if you will, seems to be a symbol of—something that every culture devalues, something that every culture defines as being of a lower order of existence than itself. Now it seems that there is only one thing that would fit that description, and that is "nature" in the most generalized sense. Every culture, or, generically, "culture," is engaged in the process of generating and sustaining systems of meaningful forms (symbols, artifacts, etc.) by means of which humanity transcends the givens of natural existence, bends them to its purposes, controls them in its interest. We may thus broadly equate culture with the notion of human consciousness, or with the products of human consciousness (i.e., systems of thought and technology), by means of which humanity attempts to assert control over nature.



Returning now to the issue of women, their pan-cultural second-class status could be accounted for, quite simply, by postulating that women are being identified or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to men, who are identified with culture. Since it is always culture's project to subsume and transcend nature, if women were considered part of nature, then culture would find it "natural" to subordinate, not to say oppress, them. Yet although this argument can be shown to have considerable force, it seems to oversimplify the case. The

formulation I would like to defend and elaborate on in the following section, then, is that women are seen “merely” as being *closer* to nature than men. That is, culture (still equated relatively unambiguously with men) recognizes that women are active participants in its special processes, but at the same time sees them as being more rooted in, or having more direct affinity with, nature.

The revision may seem minor or even trivial, but I think it is a more accurate rendering of cultural assumptions. Further, the argument cast in these terms has several analytic advantages over the simpler formulation; I shall discuss these later. It might simply be stressed here that the revised argument would still account for the pan-cultural devaluation of women, for even if women are not equated with nature, they are nonetheless seen as representing a lower order of being, as being less transcendental of nature than men are.



In short, the postulate that woman is viewed as closer to nature than man has several implications for further analysis, and can be interpreted in several different ways. If it is viewed simply as a *middle* position on a scale from culture down to nature, then it is still seen as lower than culture and thus accounts for the pan-cultural assumption that woman is lower than man in the order of things. If it is read as a *mediating* element in the culture-nature relationship, then it may account in part for the cultural tendency not merely to devalue woman but to circumscribe and restrict her functions, since culture must maintain control over its (pragmatic and symbolic) mechanisms for the conversion of nature into culture. And if it is read as an *ambiguous* status between culture and nature, it may help account for the fact that, in specific cultural ideologies and symbolizations, woman can occasionally be aligned with culture, and in any event is often assigned polarized and contradictory meanings within a single symbolic system. Middle status, mediating functions, ambiguous meaning—all are different readings, for different contextual purposes, of woman’s being seen as intermediate between nature and culture.

But how would a society *without* clear social and sexual roles function? Is it even possible that we could interact with each other as entirely free individuals? Some feminists, like Ann Ferguson, believe so. She believes, however, that in order to achieve such an ideal, we must all embrace an “androgynous” sexuality.

ON ANDROGYNY, BY ANN FERGUSON

There is good evidence that human babies are bisexual, and only *learn* a specific male or female identity by imitating and identifying with adult models. This evidence comes from the discovery that all human beings possess both male and female hormones (androgen and estrogen respectively), and also from concepts first developed at length by Freud. Freud argued that heterosexual identity is not

achieved until the third stage of the child's sexual development. Sex identity is developed through the resolution of the Oedipus complex, in which the child has to give up a primary attachment to the mother and learn either to identify with, or love, the father. But Shulamith Firestone suggests that this process is not an inevitable one, as Freud presents it to be. Rather, it is due to the power dynamics of the patriarchal nuclear family. Note that, on this analysis, if the sexual division of labor were destroyed, the mechanism that trains boys and girls to develop heterosexual sexual identities would also be destroyed. If fathers and mothers played equal nurturant roles in child-rearing and had equal social, economic, and political power outside the home, there would be no reason for the boy to have to reject his emotional side in order to gain the power associated with the male role. Neither would the girl have to assume a female role in rejecting her assertive, independent side in order to attain power indirectly through manipulation of males. As a sexual identity, bisexuality would then be the norm rather than the exception. . . .

I believe that only androgynous people can attain the full human potential possible given our present level of material and social resources (and this only if society is radically restructured). Only such people can have ideal love relationships; and without such relationships, I maintain that none can develop to the fullest potential. . . . Furthermore, recent studies have shown that the human brain has two distinct functions: one associated with analytic, logical, sequential thinking (the left brain), and the other associated with holistic, metaphorical, intuitive thought (the right brain). Only a person capable of tapping both these sides of him/herself will have developed to full potential. We might call this characteristic of the human brain "psychic bisexuality," since it has been shown that women in fact have developed skills which allow them to tap the abilities of the right side of the brain more than men, who on the contrary excel in the analytic, logical thought characteristic of the left side. The point is that men and women have the potential for using both these functions, and yet our socialization at present tends to cut off from one or the other of these parts of ourselves.²¹

2. *"Beyond Individualism"*

As we can see from the examples above, the argument for individualism is often stated as a form of mutual conflict (as in the existentialists and Reisman), which many philosophers would not accept. Why need there be a conflict? Kant, for example, while very much the champion of individual autonomy, insisted that the only individuality worth defending was the ability of the individual to participate in universal morality. The same argument is to be found in the writings of Socrates, Plato,

²¹ Ann Ferguson, "Androgyny as a Progressive Ideal for Human Development," rpt. in *Feminism and Philosophy*, ed. Mary Vetterling-Braggin, Frederick A. Elliston, and Jane English (Lanham, MD: Littlefield, Adams, 1977).

and Aristotle. In more recent times, this argument has found a large following among thinkers who have seen the disastrous results of overly individual thinking (what Reisman refers to as “solipsism”). The German philosopher Hegel, for example, writing in the midst of the great international movements of the early nineteenth century, argued the following:

“SPIRIT” AND THE INDIVIDUAL,
BY **GEORG HEGEL**

At a time when the universal nature of spiritual life has become so very much emphasized and strengthened, and the mere individual aspect has become, as it should be, correspondingly a matter of indifference, when, too, that universal aspect holds, by the entire range of its substance, the full measure of the wealth it has built up, and lays claim to it all, the share in the total work of mind that falls to the activity of any particular individual can only be very small. Because this is so, the individual must all the more forget himself, as in fact the very nature of science implies and requires that he should; and he must, moreover, become and do what he can. But all the less must be demanded of him, just as he can expect the less from himself, and may ask the less for himself.²²

Elsewhere, in a famous passage, he argues that individuals in history are significant only insofar as they contribute to movements far greater than themselves:

In contemplating history as the slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states, and the virtue of individuals have been sacrificed, a question necessarily arises: To what principle, to what final purpose, have these monstrous sacrifices been offered?

. . . human agents have before them limited aims, special interests. But they are also intelligent, thinking beings. Their purposes are interwoven with general and essential considerations of law, the good, duty, etc. For mere desire, volition in its raw and savage form, falls outside the scene and sphere of world history. These general considerations, which at the same time form norms for directing purposes and actions, have a definite content. For such empty abstractions as “good for its own sake” have no place in living actuality.

. . . Each individual has his position; he knows, on the whole, what a lawful and honorable course of conduct is. To assert in ordinary private relations that it is difficult to choose the right and good, and to regard it as mark of an exalted morality to find difficulties and raise scruples on that score indicates an evil and perverse will. It indicates a will that seeks to evade obvious duties or, at least, a

²²G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. N. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

petty will that gives its mind too little to do. The mind, then, in idle reflection, busies itself with itself and indulges in moral smugness.

... each individual is also the child of a people at a definite stage of its development. One cannot skip over the spirit of his people any more than one can skip over the earth. The earth is the center of gravity; a body imagined as leaving this center can only be imagined as exploding into the air. So it is with an individual. But only through his own effort can he be in harmony with his substance; he must bring the will demanded by his people to his own consciousness, to articulation. The individual does not invent his own content; he is what he is by acting out the universal as his own content.

In the course of history two factors are important. One is the preservation of a people, a state, or the well-ordered spheres of life. This is the activity of individuals participating in the common effort and helping to bring about its particular manifestations. It is the preservation of ethical life. The other important factor, however, is the decline of a state. The existence of a national spirit is broken when it has used up and exhausted itself. World history, the World Spirit, continues on its course. . . .

This universal is an essential phase in the development of the creating Idea, of truth striving and urging toward itself. The historical men, *world-historical individuals*, are those [who grasp just such a higher universal, make it their own purpose, and realize this purpose in accordance with the higher law of the spirit].²³

In the midst of the international upheavals led by Napoleon, you can appreciate the appropriateness of such a brutal philosophy. "The slaughter-bench of history" is not a pleasant concept! The idea that each of us is virtually insignificant in our tiny place in history also hurts our grander conceptions of ourselves. But Hegel argues that no other view of ourselves is defensible. Even the greatest among us is nothing more than an expression of the "universal," the monumental forces of society and humankind as a whole (these are what Hegel refers to as "spirit" and "the Creating Idea" and elsewhere as "the cunning of Reason").

But however appropriate in times of international warfare, Hegel's conception is bound to raise hackles among the individualists in peacetime. Consider Kierkegaard's ironic retort to Hegel's philosophy:

A RETORT,
BY **KIERKEGAARD**

Hence perhaps the many attempts to continue clinging to Hegel, even by men who have reached an insight into the questionable character of his philosophy.

²³G. W. F. Hegel, *Reason in History*, trans. Robert S. Hartman (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953).

It is a fear that if they were to become particular existing human beings, they would vanish tracelessly, so that not even the daily press would be able to discover them, still less critical journals, to say nothing at all of speculative philosophers immersed in world-history. As particular human beings they fear that they will be doomed to a more isolated and forgotten existence than that of a man in the country; for if a man lets go of Hegel he will not even be in a position to have a letter addressed to him.²⁴

Karl Marx was a student of Hegel's philosophy. In his "early writings" of 1844, he too argues for a view of self as essentially social, a part of a community, a "species-being":

ON THE SOCIAL SELF,
BY **KARL MARX**

It follows from the character of this relationship [the human family] how far *man* has become, and has understood himself as, a *species-being*, a *human being*. . . .

Activity and mind are social in their content as well as in their *origin*; they are *social* activity and social mind. . . .

It is above all necessary to avoid postulating "society" once again as an abstraction confronting the individual. The individual *is* the *social being*. The manifestation of his life—even when it does not appear directly in the form of a communal manifestation, accomplished in association with other men—is, therefore, a manifestation, and affirmation of *social life*. Individual human life and species-life are not different things, even though the mode of existence of individual life is necessarily either a more *specific* or a more *general* mode of species-life, or that of species-life a *specific* or more *general* mode of individual life.

In his *species-consciousness* man confirms his real *social life*, and reproduces his real existence in thought; while conversely, species-life confirms itself in species-consciousness and exists for itself in its universality as a thinking being. Though man is a unique individual—and it is just his particularity which makes him an individual, a really *individual* communal being—he is equally the *whole*, the ideal whole, the subjective existence of society as thought and experienced. He exists in reality as the representation and the real mind of social existence, and as the sum of human manifestations of life.²⁵

²⁴ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

²⁵ Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. T. Bottomore (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963).

In the twentieth century, under the mixed influences of existentialism, especially as espoused by the German Martin Heidegger, and of German Idealism, especially Hegel and Marx, a new philosophical school became very popular. It is called "Deconstruction," a name coined by its founder, the Frenchman Jacques Derrida. Deconstruction is the attempt to offer a social analysis and criticism which recognizes its own identification with the culture it criticizes. To "deconstruct" a theory or a belief or a tradition, then, is neither to destroy it nor to rebuild it, but rather to "reread" it, and thereby change it, see into it, add to it, *make* it our own, perhaps more plural, more disperse, action. In his early work, Derrida argues that the school of deconstruction itself—of rereading, criticizing, and dispersing our cultural institutions and the philosophers who come from them—is itself an epitomal product of our cultural institutions. His claim is that the "unified self" is just a product of Western culture, and that it is now dying at the hands of its own creator. If there is "self," he suggests, "it must be *plural*."²⁶

Some contemporary political thinkers—especially feminist and African-American philosophers—have found deconstruction attractive. Some of the contemporary philosophical debate about individual freedoms has evolved into criticisms and defenses of the "Western philosophy" Derrida describes. If only "Western philosophy" were so univocally definable, then perhaps all its mistakes and cruelties could be identified and avoided. As we've seen, however, and as Derrida admits, these very modern criticism form an integral part of the complex, culturally interwoven philosophical debate around the world.

It is important to emphasize that none of these philosophers actually denies the individual, or individual respect, or individual rights. They are, however, insisting that an individual derives his or her rights only insofar as he or she is a member of a community. This does not mean that a person cannot be eccentric, like the weirdo artist or the spaced-out rock musician, but it does mean that even their eccentricity, as well as their talents, must be viewed as social contributions. What they are denying, in other words, is what has sometimes been called "vulgar individualism," that form of self-identity that denies all social relevance and social obligations.

D. ONE SELF? ANY SELF? QUESTIONING THE CONCEPT OF PERSONAL "ESSENCE"

So far, we have talked as if self-identity is something singular, a unified set of ideals and characteristics according to which one identifies himself or herself. But need we think of the "self" in this way?

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, "The Ends of Man," trans. Alan Bass in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).