THE EVOLUTION OF INDIVIDUALISM THROUGH CHRISTIANITY

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DEDICATION

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how Christianity and the birth of a Christian worldview affected the evolution of individualism in Western culture as a cultural meme. Applying a biological metaphor, the focus is on how mutations in the cultural genome arose from the advent of Christianity within a Eurocentric context. Utilizing a diachronic examination of selected authors and writings, this thesis explores that cultural evolution and shows the progression to the modern individual.

Beginning with Augustine and extending to John Locke, the focus is on writers who are emblematic of a concept that becomes an adaptive trait or cultural meme in the evolutionary process. They include: Augustine exhibiting the inner self, Abelard and Ockham displaying the intentional self, Dante manifesting the responsible self, Pico della Mirandola and the self-made man, Montaigne presenting the subjective self, Luther with the autonomous-self meme, and Locke presenting the natural rights meme. These historical figures did not necessarily invent the concept that was crucial to the adaptation. Rather, due to a confluence of events, timing, and just as in biological evolution, chance, the idea they wrote about reached a critical mass of acceptance and “stuck,” thereby mutating the prevailing social culture from both a historical and linguistic point of view.

Finally, the question of whether individualism has now mutated to the point that there is an exaggerated emphasis on it, to the detriment of shared societal bonds and values, is addressed in the conclusions.
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CHAPTER 1

PROLOGUE: VALUES AND WORLDVIEWS

The contention of this thesis is that Christian thought has made a unique and indispensable contribution in shaping the Western view of the individual, and the values of human freedom and responsibility. To map the evolution of these individualism traits, a framework of a cultural genome will be employed to examine selected authors and writings emblematic of specific memes.¹

Beginning in the late antique era and extending through the Enlightenment era, the memes to be examined include: Augustine exhibiting the inner self, Abelard and Ockham displaying the intentional self, Dante manifesting the responsible self, Pico della Mirandola and the self-made man, Montaigne presenting the subjective self, Luther with the autonomous-self meme, and Locke presenting the natural rights meme. The supposition is not that these historical figures necessarily invented the concepts; but rather, due to a confluence of events, timing, and just as in biological evolution, chance, the idea they wrote about reached a critical mass of acceptance and “stuck,” thereby mutating the prevailing social culture from both a historical and linguistic point of view.²

In some cases, the total œuvre of these authors reveals self-contradictions, but the focus of this thesis will be on that one idea or concept that gained a foothold and

¹ Cultural evolution is a metaphoric description analogous to the biological processes in genetic evolution, which obeys the laws of natural selection using human forms of communication to provide transmission of memes. The word meme is a shortening (modeled on gene) of mimeme (from ancient Greek μιμεμα pronounced mīmēma, “imitated thing”), and was coined by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* as a concept for discussion of evolutionary principles in explaining the dissemination of ideas and cultural phenomena (Dawkins 2006, 192).

² In modern slang that also uses a biological metaphor, we would say their concept “went viral.”
more importantly, just as in natural selection, reproduced, causing a progression towards our modern view of individuality.

**WORLDVIEWS**

One of the pillars of modernity is the privileging of the individual and the self in society. The modern West, perhaps more than any other culture, has made the debate about individuality, individual freedom, and self-identity central to its collective attempts at self-definition. This debate has been crucially shaped by Christianity, which is inseparable from and yet incommensurable with the contribution of Classical Humanism, so that only through an understanding of their historical interaction and adaptations can we understand the modern notion of individuality.

The root of our Eurocentric culture lies in its attempts to define self-identities in relation to shared societal connections, orientations and values, since human beings can only become aware of their individuality within that societal framework. We tend to believe that our decisions are the result of conscious, rational, individual choice, and they are, to an extent, but we are social animals and every decision we make is deeply rooted in a cultural identity and worldview. Our social structure and upbringing provides a construct that encodes our experiences as signs and symbols that mesh with our culture. This social and linguistic web of symbols gives meaning and order to our everyday lives and can be called a worldview (Doran 1995, 1); and this worldview is fundamental to shaping the evolutionary context under study and the forthcoming arguments. Many people are quite unaware that they hold such a worldview and live their lives without any cognizant philosophical framework. But as Charles Taylor says, it is always untrue that they actually do not have a framework they are operating within that structures their lives.
with important qualitative distinctions in relation to which they literally live and die (Taylor 1989, 21).

A basic assertion of this thesis is that while Greek philosophical ideas had a significant influence on early Christianity (particularly the Platonic idea of the immortality of the soul and otherworldliness), the impersonal worldview of the ancient Greco-Roman societies did not display a genuine individualism based on the preeminence of personal values, virtues, or self-expression. To the contrary, the presumption in the ancient culture was that these values could only be realized as part of life within the Greek *polis* or Roman *civitas*—a self-sufficient group of human beings united by a common pursuit of the “good” (Berlin 2013, 299, 319). Based on this presumption, this thesis will show how adaptations in the cultural genome arose from the advent of Christianity, with its focus on the inner person initiating the evolutionary adaptation of individualism.

An essential premise of this argument is that there are two distinct views of the nature of man in the West. The classical Greco-Roman view, also called the heroic worldview, and the Judeo-Christian worldview. These two views are distinctly different

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3 Certainly they displayed unique personality characteristics, as displayed in Homer’s epics and Plato’s dialogues, which set them apart from others in their society; but the self-affirmation of one’s own worth and an awareness of the intrinsic freedom to define their own identity were lacking in ancient society.

4 While the eruption of Christianity triggered a major mutation in the cultural environment that produced a genuinely new conception of the self, the impersonalist worldview, while it became recessive remained active. Starting with the Renaissance, but accelerating in the Enlightenment, it began to reassert a degree of dominance that in turned produced a hybrid of the Medieval Christian conception.

5 Frank Ambrosio uses the metaphors of the hero and the saint to representative memes of the Classical versus Christian worldviews. In the heroic worldview, reality appears as fundamentally shaped by the human struggle, the struggle with forces that are essentially impersonal; the forces of necessity and fate, which are indifferent to human hopes and fears. For the saint, reality is ultimately configured by the bonds of a covenant relationship among persons, human and divine, based on an exchange of promises offered in the mutual hope of lasting and unconditional trust. Saints, by contrast, live for others, accepting
and incommensurable; one views the nature of reality through an impersonal and the other through a personal lens. And while medieval Catholics and Renaissance humanists sought to merge the two worldviews into one, they remain largely incommensurable in their metaphysical assumptions, and as a result Western culture has experienced a continuing clash between two opposing views of human nature, which came to a head during the Enlightenment and has continued into the Postmodern era. While we owe much to the Greco-Roman cultural foundation of Europe and the democratic and republican models it fostered, the ancient world embodied an entirely dissimilar worldview that did not embody individual freedoms and rights in any modern sense of the term.  

The classical philosophical view held that man is unique because of his rational faculties, which could understand the divine vision of cosmic order, thereby permitting a privileged conception of humanity. In the classical view individuality was housed in the particularity of the mortal body, not the soul and consequently was of no metaphysical significance. In the modern impersonal worldview, the divine reason of the cosmos has been supplanted by the supremacy of science and the soul by the conscious mind and epiphenomena of the brain. 

love, from God or fellow humans, and offer their own love in return. This he terms the personalist worldview (Ambrosio 2004, 10, 16).

6 In fact, the Greek system was not what we think of today as democratic, but a republic that was controlled by the aristocratic elite in a society that was intrinsically hierarchical. According to Aristotle, reason and understanding are associated with aristocratic males, and emotional faculties with slaves and women, who had no rights (Morris, 1994, 48).

7 While the generalized term “man” is used here to refer to all of mankind, in fact most human beings were left out of this descriptor in actuality. Women and slaves were not treated, nor thought of, as rational individuals capable of exercising their own freedom. Starting with Aristotle, who was very influential in both the Classical and the Christian medieval eras, women were naturally inferior to men and slaves were the rightful possessions of superior aristocratic owners. In his Politics, Aristotle refers to women as deformed males, and that by nature the male is the ruler and the woman subject (1254b). This view pervaded Western thought up until the modern era.
However, the Christian view is shaped by a faith in the mystery of God that transcends rationality and every human is understood primarily from the standpoint of God, rather than in terms of the uniqueness of his rational faculties (Niebuhr 1996, 6-7,12-13). And while the Christian view also sees the soul as immortal, it trusts in the resurrection of the body of the particular person as well.

The two worldviews espouse different values as well, which shape the meaning of life and how human beings see themselves. The ancient or impersonal worldview is based on necessity and fate, and the culture is shaped by the hero who is required to fulfill the destiny the fates have prescribed in order to maintain cosmic order. The ancient Greek epics and tragedies are emblematic of this. For the Romans, this was adapted into service as a citizen hero, and the greatest honor was serving the state. In this worldview, meaning is found in honor by fulfilling one’s destiny to the greatest degree possible and life is a constant struggle bounded by necessity and fate, both of which are totally indifferent to individual human hopes and fears.

The Christian view however, is shaped by bonds between the community of souls and their faith and trust in a loving God. In the Christian worldview, the highest virtues are faith, hope and love (Ambrosio 2009, 9). The figure of Jesus is representative of both all mankind and any particular man who needs help, even and especially the most poor and afflicted, in marked contrast to the best of the best hero of the Greco-Roman culture. Thus, the early Christian church was one of the first egalitarian organizations in the West. To the Romans however, for whom religion and civic life were intertwined,

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8 The word Christian is not in the New Testament and was not invented until a hundred years after Jesus died by the Romans to designate Jewish followers of Jesus (Cahill 2001, 90).
this was a secret cult that rejected the ancestral gods and represented a wholesale attack on society (Doran 1995, 9). Roman religion was a form of public piety, not a private individual experience, and hence, as Robert Louis Wilken says, we find neither the intense personal experience nor the metaphysical or theological speculation that is taken for granted in Christianity (Wilken 2003, 64).

The Greco-Romans did not think in terms of a private and public sphere as we do today, and religion and government were largely synonymous. Instead they thought in terms of the public sphere and the domestic sphere, where the patriarchal family, which was inherently structurally unequal, was pre- eminent (Siedentop 2014, 18). The pagan religions were outwardly expressed through public worship and sacrifices led by priests who were often state officials. The city was founded upon a religion, which gave the government its authority. The gods were thereby responsible for what happened to a political community, and were accordingly worshipped publicly. For a citizen, no retreating from these obligations of the ancient state was allowed and no one could be indifferent to its interests – res publica was preeminent in life. As an example, offered by Demosthenes, a citizen was defined as a man who had the religion of the city. A stranger by contrast is one who does not enjoy the protection of the local gods (Fustel de Coulanges 1980, 186, 211-213). As a result, patriotism was one of the highest possible virtues for the ancient citizen, since everything depended upon the wellbeing and survival

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9 Christianity was egalitarian in the face of God, but the early church was not socially or organizationally egalitarian and still is not even today. The Christian appeal to the underclasses did provide a greater mixing of social classes in the Church however.

10 Pagan meaning any number of polytheistic religions consisting of a divine realm usually with a pyramidal structure with the great gods at the top and less powerful, but often more immediately relevant gods of towns, villages and families at the bottom (Ehrman 2004, 11). The office of high priest or Pontifex Maximus gradually became more politicized after Augustus when it was subsumed into the Imperial office. The word pontifex or pontiff was later appropriated by the Catholics to refer to the chief bishop or Pope.
of the city or state. The worst form of punishment was exile, not death, since it was a separation from one’s family, state and religion (Siedentop 2014, 25). Exile from the community literally stripped a man of all dignity or *dignitas*.

Broadly speaking religion for the ancients, as for us today, was a way of interpreting the world, as well as providing a sacred and cosmic frame of reference for the ordinary and extraordinary events of life. The gods of the Homeric epics reflected the Greek culture itself – resourceful, self-confident and creative – very different than the single, more remote god of the Hebrew bible. The Olympian gods were often capricious, having the same foibles and character weaknesses as humans and yet possessing supernatural powers, while largely indifferent to man. They were widely known in the Greco-Roman world, although most pagans worshiped local deities. People developed a personal relationship with their local gods and asked *quid pro quo* favors of them in return for ritual worshiping and sacrifice. If they moved to a new city, they would adopt the new city’s god. The idea of a conversion, a conscious and individual decision to adopt a new creed or belief and reject all others, was largely foreign to the ancients (Wilken 2003, 64).  

Religion to the ancients was both elastic and inclusive; it supported the existence of many gods and was generally highly tolerant of differences, unless a cult was deemed socially dangerous (Ehrman 2018, 103).

While in contrast, Christianity was an “interior” religion from the beginning and its personal affirmation of human dignity, based on the belief that God became man to

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11 The mystery cults were the exception here and they competed with the early Christian Church for a while. These mystery cults required initiation and were secret societies usually centered on a patron deity and that deity’s sufferings and victory over death through rebirth. Instead of a religious dogma requiring belief, they offered a myth to be experienced with an altered state of awareness. Some authors claim that Christianity appropriated many of these myths and ideas (especially the connection between an afterlife and redemption) to gain popularity (Freke and Gandy 1999, 19-20).
ensure man’s salvation, was an epochal change in focus towards the individual (Morris 2012, 11). It shaped both the outer man (behavior) and the inner man (soul) and exhibits a clear evolution of self-awareness through a sense of personal participation in the divine. With its basis in forgiveness and redemption, Christianity has an essential moral root that is fundamentally different from the barter basis of sacrifice in paganism. Pagan religions sought the peace of the gods or *pax deorum* and as a result ethics was not one of their features (Ehrman 2004, 11). As Richard Jenkyns says in *The Legacy of Rome*:

> For the spiritually hungry, Roman religion had nothing to give: it lacked moral or theological content…The philosophical schools offered moral systems …but they offered no true theology, and no mystical or sacramental life. The worship of Isis or Mithras offered sacraments and initiations, but no coherent system of belief and no basis for a sustained moral and spiritual growth. (Jenkyns 1992, 8)

Christianity filled that spiritual vacuum and like a sponge absorbed what it needed from the ancient mystery cults and philosophies to form a new religion that spread rapidly thanks to the environmental stability offered by the *Pax Romana*. Indeed, as Bart Ehrman points out in his book *The Triumph of Christianity*, the Christian religion started with a handful of disciples, perhaps twenty men and women around the year 30 A.D., and by the end of the fourth century roughly half of the empire’s sixty million inhabitants professed to be Christians (Ehrman 2018, 105). This is a striking evolutionary success that obviously filled an environmental need caused by the spiritual gap as noted above by Jenkyns.

Consequently, the whole nature of adoration and prayer changed, with the love of God and individual faith becoming the prevailing norm, as well as awe, all of which carried over from the Hebrew tradition. Christianity amalgamated the monolatry of the
Hebrews to the personal aspect of the pagan local deities through the divinity of Jesus Christ. Most importantly, the Christians imported the Judaic notion of a transcendent relationship with God, and this idea of a sacred relationship between the individual and God as being the most important in life, became central to Christianity. It also adopted the Judaic notion of a holy book that contained the wisdom and the moral code of their religion and was deemed the law of God (Brown 2003, 70). Christianity, like Judaism, was also an exclusive faith, rejecting the validity of all other deities, although it had an evangelist drive that Judaism lacked, which was critical to its survival and subsequent flourishing.

Christianity was also substantially influenced by Neoplatonism, adopting the idea of an immortal soul as separate from the body and transforming the idea of an afterlife from the netherworld of the Greeks into the idea of heaven. Indeed, the fourth gospel, which refers to Jesus as the logos, is from the Greek tradition, not Judaic. As W.R. Inge points out, “Neoplatonism and Christianity had so much in common … including: preaching detachment from the world, the method of inwardness and communion with God as the highest good, the same idealism, … the same spiritualism, and the same attitude towards life – a sober mysticism” (Inge 1900, 330). The influence of Neoplatonism is most evident with Augustine, as will be discussed further in Chapter 3, although Origen (c. 185-254), whom John Rist calls the second most powerful mind in

12 The word transcendence has many accumulated meanings. With reference to the religions in the pre-Christian, Axial age it is used more in the sense of the true etymological meaning of the word – a kind of standing back and looking beyond – to a new vision of what lies beyond, as with Abraham’s departure from Ur. Thus, in the ancient Hebrew tradition this refers more to the Transcendent God revealing himself to man, meaning the collective Hebrew people (Schwartz 1975, 3).

13 Classical Rome also influenced Christianity. As Jenkyns says, “it is easier to get a doctrine of purgatory from the Aeneid than from the Bible.” Further, the historic Church eventually became an absolute monarchy based in Rome as the popes assumed the title of the highest Roman priesthood, Pontifex Maximus (Jenkyns 1992, 8-9).
early Christian thought, was also influenced by the Platonists and the philosophy of the Stoics (Rist 1994, 12).

Neoplatonism is predominately spiritual in nature and seen as a “philosophy as a way of life” so it is not surprising that this spiritualism would fit in well with the need to fill the transcendental gap that was missing in the pagan religions (Remes 2008, 9). But as Inge observes, Neoplatonism was a philosophical ideal with little appeal to the masses, whereas Christianity’s focus on resurrection and eternal life became widely popular since as he says, it had greater appeal for the uneducated (Inge 1900, 330).

From Paul forward, Christianity was not the religion of any city, family or race, it was a call to the whole human race as in “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15). This evangelizing concept was so extraordinary and so new in its time that even in the Acts of the Apostles several of the disciples are hesitant to preach Jesus’ message beyond the nation where he had originated, thinking that the God of the Jews would not accept adoration from foreigners (Fustel De Coulanges, 26, 383). This new vision of God was no longer tribal, but simultaneously universal and individual. Christianity was a community of souls whose membership was not defined by ethnicity or civic obligation but by faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This meant not only a promise of everlasting life, but a continuation of one’s identity in that everlasting life. Hence, while previously the continuation of the patriarchal family had been the source of immortality, gradually it was replaced by the individual soul as the focus of immortality (Siedentop 2014, 58).

This new religion was premised on a common humanity that required seeing oneself in the other and other in one’s self, which explains its rapid spread among the
poor, slaves, and women. The Christian religion was a new voluntary association accessible to all, and as it expanded in the second century it sought to codify its orthodoxy and canon of sacred scripture.\textsuperscript{14} It urged early followers to exercise their own free will and make tough choices, even to turn their backs on their community and their own families to heed an inner calling as in this pronouncement from the New Testament, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). It affirmed the human dignity inherent in every human with its principal ethical precept of “do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12), and swept in a new interpretation of justice based on moral equality instead of the natural inequality inherent in the Greek and Roman worldviews.

As a result, it can be classified as a new paradigm that emerged based on the persistent failure of the Judaic or Roman gods to satisfy the needs of the long-suffering Hebrew people or the Roman people. The cultural milieu was in flux, for not only was the urgent need of the Jewish people for a messiah unfulfilled, but the Roman Empire in the time of Jesus had recently undergone a great transition from the Republic to an imperial monarchy. Rising poverty, and a sense of injustice came to a head creating the unstable environmental situation critical to an evolutionary adaptation, until Octavian (Caesar Augustus) seized power, and ushered in the relative peace of the \textit{Pax Romana}. It

\textsuperscript{14} Codifying orthodoxy and canon was something the Greeks never did, except informally through Hesiod or Homer. There was no such thing as right belief or heresy in these religions (McNelis 2015, class notes).
is axiomatic to this thesis that this paradigm shift enabled the eventual development of
the modern Western concept of individualism.¹⁵

By adopting Christianity, former Jews (and Gentiles whom Paul converted) now
preached a personal relationship with their savior so as to change their inner being and
adopted a philosophy based on the moral equality of all humans. To Paul, the Spirit was
the source of man’s knowledge of himself, a power of conscience which paganism never
recognized (Fox 1986, 314). Christianity could alleviate some of the human anxieties
and sense of hopelessness in the temporal realm by offering a belief system that
privileged the subjectivity of the individual soul. Whereas, the Greek philosophers of the
Classical age sought to divorce their philosophic ideas from their religion, Christians
went out of their way to integrate religion and philosophy as a way of life.

Moreover, the expectation of resurrection confirmed the value of the individual as
worthy of life after death as themselves, retaining their own identity, not as part of a
divine mind, world soul, or as a reincarnation. And herein lies the value component that
changes the cultural meme – the recognition of the fundamental worth of each individual
and their freedom.

Witness the example of belief and choice of St. Perpetua, an early Christian
martyred for refusing to perform a rite for the health of the emperors, who wrote her own
text of faith. Despite the entreaties of her noble father and the wailing of her nursing
child, she says, “I am also unable to call myself anything except what I am, a Christian.”
She exercises her freedom of choice in belief and action to the very end, maintaining her

¹⁵ The term paradigm is used here in one of the ways Thomas Kuhn utilized it in The Structure of
Scientific Revolutions, as a sociological representation of an entire constellation of beliefs, values, and
techniques shared by the members of a given community. A paradigm being an accepted model or pattern
that gains its status because it is more successful than other competitors in solving problems that the
community has come to recognize as acute (Kuhn 1986, 19, 144).
dignity and modesty even when being tortured, and guides the sword of the gladiator who executed her. As the text says, she was a woman so strong that she could not have been killed, unless she herself had willed it (stthomas.edu/perpetua). She surrendered her life but never her freedom.

Individual choice, action and the consequences of that action were the path to the divine, not fate or *fortuna*, and these values have helped shape the modern world. Thomas Cahill summed it up as:

> The worldview that underlay the New Testament was so different from that of the Greeks and the Romans as to be almost its opposite. It was a worldview that stressed not excellence of public achievement but the adventure of a personal journey with God, a lifetime journey in which a human being was invited to unite himself to God…It was far more individualized than anything the Greeks had ever come up with and stressed the experience of a call, a personal vocation, a unique destiny for each human being. (Cahill 2003, 258-259)

Examples such as Perpetua’s illustrate why Christianity was an enigma to the Romans. It combined morality, philosophy, religious ritual and belief into one entity, all were part of the religion, while in the ancient classical world, philosophical speculation and moral improvement were regarded as upper-class pursuits that had little to do with *religio* – the cult of the gods (Brown 2003, 70). The Romans did not care what the Christians, or fellow Romans for that matter, believed. One did not speak of “believing in the gods” but of “having gods,” just as a city might have laws or customs (Wilken 2003, 58). Belief was of no consequence, it was maintaining the rituals that mattered for

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16 Fate (or *Fortuna* in Latin) was random, capricious, and often malevolent with little allowance for human freedom, as compared to Providence, which unfolded according to God’s plan. The heroic Greek worldview revolved around three central concepts: the first was *ananke* (necessity); the second, *moira* (fate); and the third, *arete* (heroic excellence) (Ambrosio 2009, 32).
the overall security of the state. That is not to say the Greco-Romans had no sense of personal devotion. As stated before, the ancients prayed to the gods on their own behalf or for the family for divine favors, but it was based on a belief in supernatural intercession against fortune, not redemption.

The Romans might have been happy to let the Christians coexist if they had been willing to take part in the pagan rituals to keep the cities and Empire secure, but the Christians refused to do so because to them the integrity of their interior consciousness really mattered to their personal relationship with God. This concept is central to the faith that is the essence of the Judeo-Christian mindset. It is a conviction we take so much for granted in the modern world we forget the unique aspect of it. It was expressed by Thomas Paine in *The Age of Reason* centuries later, “My own mind is my own church” (Paine 2000, 268).

Further, the Hellenic view of history was cyclical whereas the Judaic view, adopted by Christians, was linear, thus encompassing the notion of progress – progress towards God’s plan. The ancient worldview was dominated by necessity and fate through triumph and tragedy in an endless cycle where human existence was not the primary value or primary meaning of reality as a whole (Ambrosio 2009, 36). Christianity turned that fatalistic view of life on its head with a view that individual salvation in a progressive universe, which was created around human existence and based on individual choice, is the meaning of life. Whereas *fate* was central to Greeks and Romans, *hope* was central to the Christians. Thus, the Christian view was person-centered in a way that the pagan rituals never were in that it was crucial that humans
survive death through resurrection and be held accountable in a final judgment for their individual acts while on earth (Martin & Barresi 2006, 56).

While to Plato the fundamental core of existence was the archetypal realm of ideas revealed by the intellect, the Christian religious reality was based on an intimate experience of God, as facilitated by the Church and its sacraments. For them the fundamental core of existence was the salvation of man, revealed through faith in the incarnation, thereby affirming the sanctity of human life and the individual. At the center of Christianity was an actual historical figure, not a mythical character. God had become an individual human person thereby exalting humanity itself. In the broadest sense, it was redemption vs. necessity, faith vs. fate, as way of grasping the deeper meaning of life.

Of course, none of these generalizations is wholly true and both descriptions of these worldviews are amalgamates, but these core ideas represent the fundamental principles demonstrating the incommensurability of these worldviews. And this change in worldview, which was the revolution of Christianity, was crucial in setting in place the cultural adaptation that took place over the ensuing millennia.

It is not intended within the scope of this thesis to do a more detailed comparison of the two historical periods to substantiate this conclusion but rather it is offered as an assumption going forward in demonstrating how this change in worldview drove the

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17 These positions were in no way wholly monolithic. There are outliers in both views such as Protagoras, who said truth lay in the individual with his maxim “Man is the measure of all things,” and Parmenides, who advocated monism in the early 5th century B.C., as well as Aquinas and his focus on integrating Aristotelian logic with Christianity, but the enduring meme is the one that widely reproduces itself.
cultural memes of individualism that took hold and evolved through the historical figures analyzed in later chapters.\textsuperscript{18}

\textit{VALUES}

We have a tremendous number of disparate and contrasting truth claims pertaining to human values and the meaning of life in our modern Western world. Conflicts between active spirit and passive matter, between individuality and universality, were present in the ancient worldviews and in the modern. However, they are not as easily resolved in the modern given we no longer rely on a resource that the ancient and Christian worldviews did; that is the belief that the world, and the self, is structured so as to fulfill intelligible moral ends. Today it is considered the right of any individual to believe whatever they want as long as they act within the limits of the law. If individualism does in fact have its roots deeply within Christianity can we legitimately now take the priority of the individual’s desires to the extreme and forget the rest of the Christian philosophy and the community of souls? Paul said in Corinthians 3:22\textsuperscript{-}3:23 that “All things are yours but you are Christ’s,” thereby linking Christian morality to the will of God as revealed through Christ. However, it is easy to see how without the religious overlay, this could easily become, “all things are yours” period, said Reinhold Niebuhr, who frequently warned about the predatory self-interest of individuals (Niebuhr 1996, 61).

There has been a deep schism between religion and science in Western culture since the Enlightenment, driving a sense of estrangement of the individual-self living in a

\textsuperscript{18} A serious problem with any historical work is that it deals with a culture so different from our own that we can never fully comprehend and appreciate the subjective world the same way the writers of that period experienced it. That being acknowledged we can however, trace the genic evolution of the traits of individuality as it appears in their writings.
disenchanted impersonal universe. Christianity provided the belief in a transcendent value system and an eternal perspective from which to evaluate history and provide meaning. While in the secularized modern world the value of the human person as a unique individual is primarily based in political rights, which alone cannot relieve our Cartesian anxiety. A modern metanarrative tells a story of constant progress through the rise of science and the steady empowerment of the individual through democratic human rights and liberties; but has the pendulum swung too far one way in the ongoing challenge of how to balance individual freedom and communal responsibility? That is an aspect to be addressed in the conclusions.

All civilized societies have had ideals of justice and order but those have rarely, until relatively recently, been expressed in terms of any sort of natural individual rights. We find Christianity as a source for natural law theory beginning in the 14th century with Ockham’s works on nominalism and subjective natural rights (Tierney 1997, 14). If we fast-forward seven centuries to modern America we find this subjective definition has become law through a 1992 Supreme Court decision citing, “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life” (Gregory 2012, 77). The individual is now the authority over religion versus religion having authority over its followers.

This description of individual rights goes to show that at the root of the individual is the idea of personal identity, identity being defined as the evolving pattern of meaning, values and convictions which a person establishes over a lifetime through choice, action,

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19 Another example is the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights wherein Article 1 states, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood” (www.un.org). Here the link between human freedom and dignity and rights is based on reason and conscience.
commitments and relational engagements (Ambrosio 2013, lecture notes). A Christian identity is based on the value claims of freedom of individual action and ethical responsibility. But what do these terms mean? Values are profound things and necessarily complex because they do two things at once: they join men into societies, and yet they preserve for them a freedom, which makes them single individuals (Bronowski 1972, 55). The tension between these two competing forces, the self vs. the communal, has always been at the root of different worldviews as they evolve.

FREEDOM

This thesis asserts that freedom is fundamental as a source of human dignity. Freedom in this case is defined as the radical freedom to define myself and effect my own self-making, taking responsibility for my own identity, albeit this freedom is always socially and historically situated.\(^\text{20}\) Renaissance writers defined this as a man’s ability to break out of any given moral and philosophical state of being and redefine himself and his identity in relation to the cosmic structure. Fundamental to a worldview developed within the Christian tradition is the idea of freedom to choose a relationship with the divine and others in a shared way of life, hence in this religious context it is both relational and uniquely individual. Viktor Frankl offers the best definition for the purposes of this thesis with his description of inner freedom as:

…everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in

\(^\text{20}\) Freedom as distinguished from liberty is an important concept, which not all philosophers agree on. Isaiah Berlin uses the terms interchangeably but others like Hannah Arendt sharply distinguishes liberty, which is always liberation from something, as compared to freedom, which is the positive achievement of human action (Bernstein 1988, 209). Part of this nuance is due to the permeability of the English language, which appropriated both the liberté of French and the freiheit of German and uses them interchangeably in the common vernacular.
any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.  
(Frankl 1984, 75)

Even though Frankl was Jewish, his definition of freedom is a modern concept evolving from a Christian worldview. It echoes Paul’s letter to the Romans (2:12) in the sense of choosing one’s own way, “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” Both religions regard bearing suffering as a genuine inner achievement and a spiritual freedom, as exemplified by Frankl and Perpetua.

We saw that in the heroic worldview the needs of the state and the collective were preeminent. In the personal worldview, the Western view of natural or human rights and respect for autonomous human life is a modern meme, and our modern liberalism is based upon it. Gradually, these notions of autonomy in our moral truth claims expanded to the idea that we must respect individual differences and give people the liberty to develop their personality in their own way, no matter how different from our own (Taylor 1989, 12). Perhaps the clearest definition of individual liberty and the first strictly individualistic text to emerge in the Western world was offered by John Stuart Mill in On Liberty written in 1859. In his essay, Mill asserts:

…the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others (Mill 2008, 14).\(^\text{21}\)

\(^{21}\) Note the qualifier of a civilized community. Not atypically for his era, Mill was strongly biased against other cultures and races, nevertheless his description of individual rights is sweeping for its time.
Society holds together by the respect man gives to man (Bronowski 1972, 44), whether it is based on a tribal or cosmic order, or on shared egalitarianism and a mutual regard for the other. As we exist in an ever more congested world, we value the individual more and more, perhaps to an extreme. Today we live in a hyper-plural society, and truth claims and religious views can be anything one wants.22

The modern self is devoted to its own “radical remaking” and finding its dignity and independence in the absence of any reliance on a cosmic order or source of values outside itself (Seigel 2005, 51, 92). In other words, the divine logos no longer presents a rationale that presupposes an existential character for the entire creation, but shifts to dynamic concepts that accordingly are “free” of any preexistent model or archetype. It is not enough to call this freedom “existential” (where the human becomes what he wants) or “moral” (where the human person himself chooses what he wants), since it is a higher freedom in which the old model of a hierarchical nature is replaced by a discourse about the human person qua human person. This freedom gives man his dignity, defined as having a sense of ourselves as commanding attitudinal respect (Taylor 1989,15). And this definition is one of the components that will be a marker of evolutionary adaptation in the ensuing chapters examining meme mutations.

RESPONSIBILITY

The second pillar of this value claim is responsibility. The development of personal identity in terms that put individuals’ responsibilities for who they are at the center of their sense of self is embodied in the literature from Augustine to Dante to

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22 Hyper Pluralism is a theory of government and politics contending that special interest groups are so strong that government is weakened.
Locke. From a modern perspective, Viktor Frankl again has the perfect caution in this regard:

Freedom is not the last word. Freedom is only part of the story and half of the truth. Freedom is but the negative aspect of the whole phenomenon whose positive aspect is responsibleness. In fact, freedom is in danger of degenerating into mere arbitrariness unless it is lived in terms of responsibleness. (Frankl 2006, 134)

Responsibility as a value has a Christian evolution as well. Christianity taught that only part of a person belonged to state or society in opposition to the impersonal, heroic worldview. He was bound in his earthly temporal body to submit as a subject to the state, but his soul was free and bound only to a moral God. This paradigmatic shift in thinking meant half of a person’s actions were guided by the moral law, not the state, and he alone was responsible for following that higher moral code. Roman stoicism had laid the groundwork for this idea with its liberty of conscience but it was the effort of a few elites, not a universal moral code made for the common good of humanity (Fustel De Coulanges 26, 386). And with respect to suffering, stoical philosophy sought only to endure it, while Christians sought to give meaning to it. Humility, which became one of the distinguishing Christian virtues, was anathema to the Greco-Roman heroic culture.

The Christian focus on personal responsibility for sin also encouraged an awareness of one’s inner thoughts and conscience in a new way which fostered the meme of personal autonomy. As Frankl said, nothing can be undone but Christianity (and Dante as we will be see in Chapter 5) says it can be forgiven by taking responsibility. The overarching code of moral universalism inherent in the Christian faith brought with it a new sense of the sanctity of human life and responsibility to one’s fellow humans. This new humbleness meant truth was found in prayer and revelation and with it came a
recognition that we cannot always control outcomes, but we can control our actions and in an existential sense we are still responsible for what we do and even what we don’t do and/or can’t control. More important we have a responsibility towards the other.

While these value concepts seem to be taken for granted in the modern West, this thesis contends that their development was as a result of the Christian worldview slowly evolving through cultural memes (which will be identified in Chapter 2), and enabled by the radical concepts first introduced in Christianity to produce the human freedom that allows first person self-interpretations. Through this worldview, the individual becomes responsible, not the tribe, not the fates. And the result of the development of this radical cultural meme underpins our modern notion of identity, overthrowing the ancient views in which all identity and validation came from belonging to a larger entity.

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23 In biological evolution, change can either be smooth and slow, or the result of a great and sudden change. For Darwin only one causal force produces evolutionary change: the unconscious struggle among individual organisms to promote their own personal reproductive success. Richard Dawkins narrows the focus even further—to genes struggling for reproductive success within passive organisms under the control of genes. But Stephen Jay Gould maintained that this interpretation fails to take into account historical random events, such as mass extinctions caused by a giant meteor hitting earth, which had a monumental impact on the evolutionary development of the species that survived (Gould 1997, nybooks.com).
CHAPTER 2

DEFINING TERMS AND INDICATORS

The purpose of this chapter is to define the terms and indicators that will be used throughout as identifiers of an evolving individualism. The goal is to have a clear understanding of how the terms developed, and how they are employed to describe the various types of selves in our modern parlance so as to enable a retrospective review of their evolution. After discussion of the terms and definitions, and the various debates surrounding them, a list of five characteristic indicators of modern individualism will be offered to guide the analysis of the subsequent chapters.

TERMS

Individualism is a problematic term because in our modern parlance it has become a political rather than a philosophical or spiritual, metaphysical concept. By contrast, in Christianity the focus of individualism has been on concept of the soul as the self. In the modern West, the favored form of respecting the dignity of the individual is in terms of rights or legal privileges, which are seen as the possession of the agent to whom it is attributed (Taylor 1989, 11). This is the most prevalent definition, but modern notions of individualism also include personal freedoms, such as freedom from majoritarian values and cultural norms, freedom from governmental interference and controls etc. These are mediated through social interactions and social media, as well as laws, which form the basis of our enforcement of individual rights and freedoms.

Human individuality, in the larger sense though, is the product of both spirit as well as nature as Reinhold Niebuhr eloquently says (Niebuhr 1996, 55). A person is at once an individual and a human being, both uniquely different than anyone else and
significantly the same as everyone else in the human race. As Schopenhauer put it, an individual human being is a manifestation of the idea of humanity, but refracted through an idea of one’s own identity (Solomon 1988, 80). In other words, we are part of humanity but responsible for our own unique identity. Certainly, it must also be recognized that the environment a person is raised in, both linguistically and culturally, as well as their philosophical and spiritual worldview, profoundly shapes their notion of self. Hence, while acknowledging some ambiguity, the term individualism is so embedded in our cultural milieu it is the term that will be the basis of this thesis as we examine its evolution.

The methodology employed is to identify indicators of meme adaptation using the cultural evolution metaphoric description of a process, analogous to genic evolution in biology, but which obeys the laws of natural selection using human forms of communication to provide transmission of memes.\(^1\) Recognizing that the method of analysis will necessarily use more modern terms, the basis of observations will be to distinguish the markers or specific indicators of what we term modern individualism, such as freedom, rationality and responsibility and how these indicators appear in historical writings leading to a specific meme development in that generation.\(^2\) How various modern philosophers and historians define these terms, and the framework for how they will be applied will also be addressed in this chapter.

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\(^1\) There is an important distinction that must be acknowledged in using this metaphor. Darwin was clear that the appearance of purpose or teleology in biological evolution was an illusion, while the transmission of ideas does have a necessary human intentionality and purpose, through the mind of the transmitter (Searle 1997, 105).

\(^2\) Memes are like viruses in this sense, since they replicate better than their competitors. Our brains can actually be hijacked by infectious ideas that in some cases subordinate our genetic interest to other interests as in the example of ideas to die for, such as religion, ideology, country etc. (Dennett 2002, TED.com).
The memes that are identified within the subsequent chapters were selected based upon modern value concepts of what being an individual means, and the rationale will be identified in this chapter as well. Lastly, it is important to recognize, that as much as individualism is valued in modern society, sometimes to an extreme as will be addressed in the final chapter, it is a term that is not always used in the same sense as taking responsibility for one’s own identity as used herein.

**GENEALOGY**

It is crucial to recognize the genealogy of the terms in this thesis, which covers a broad span of time. How did we evolve from person to self to individual? The term person comes from the ancient Greek (πρόσωπον or *prosopon*) and was translated into Latin as *persona* wherein it entered modern European languages. It originally had a different meaning, essentially referring to the mask that actors in Greek theater wore. This is significant in that a person was seen as the embodiment of the societal and familial obligations and background surrounding one’s existence, or the “face” one wore on the outside. Gradually the term evolved in the Latin to mean character, referring to the many different roles one person could play in a drama or in life.³

In the modern colloquialism, we use persona to describe the social self we put on display in our daily societal interactions. Likewise, the meaning of dignity and self-esteem shifted from the honor ethic of the classical worldview and was transposed inward. Instead of winning fame in the public arena, our dignity can be based on our sense of worth in our own eyes (Taylor 1989, 152), although this is culturally mediated and many societies outside the West still operate on an honor ethic or a shame based

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³ For instance, Cicero in his *On Duties (De Officiis)*, makes reference to four *personae* roles. They are the universal, the individual, the accidental or situational, and the self-chosen.
society. Similarly, the term subject, or subjective self, comes from the Latin *subjectum*, meaning that which is underneath as an underpinning or girder. It was only in the seventeenth century that the term subject became associated with conscious humans (Siegel 2007, 14). The genealogy is especially illuminating here, signaling the idea that the real self, the subjective self, as the underpinning of the individual.

Likewise, the terms selfhood, inwardness, interiority, subjectivity, and autonomy are often used to describe the writers under analysis in this thesis, even though these words were not used in the same way in the vernacular of their respective eras. Nevertheless, the idea of self-knowledge, on which we base our modern notions of identity and individuality, was a theme in the medieval and early modern eras, particularly in the religious context and thus we have a genetic conceptual framework to trace its development.

The term individualism is a 19th century expression, so it must be acknowledged from the outset this is a term the people we are discussing would not have recognized *per se*. The term has a rich semantic history, originating from a Latin word *individuus*, which means ‘indi-visible.’ The first uses of the term grew out of the thought of the Enlightenment and more specifically, the general European reaction to the French Revolution. These early ideas of individualism in social and political theory went to an extreme and included the ideas of the maximum welfare and freedom of the individual, with society existing only for the sake of its members (Realo et. al. 2002, 164).

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4 The term “individualism” first appeared as a term of opprobrium in the French in the 1820’s by the theocrat and anti-revolutionary Joseph de Maistre. He condemned the diversity of religious and political opinions that supplanted the relative uniformity of pre-revolutionary France as “absolute individualism” and “infinite fragmentation” (Smith 2015, 14).
Going back earlier, the word individualism existed, but did not have the same meaning in the twelfth century as it does today. The nearest equivalents were *individuum*, and *singularis*, which were terms used in logic and philosophy, such as the relation of an individual object with the general or universal class to which it belonged (Morris 1987, 64).  

_INDIVIDUALISM_  

Modern America is arguably one of the most individualistic cultures ever. America is also one of the most religiously observant of the developed countries in the world (Putnam 2000, 65). True to the Lockean heritage of our founding documents, we put great reliance in human capacity and individual virtue. As Benjamin Franklin put it, “only a virtuous people are capable of freedom” (Murray 2013, 133).

In that regard, the focus in this thesis will be on the shifting historical and societal contexts as individualism slowly evolves, starting with the still partially pagan world of Augustine in the Roman Empire, and ending with contemporary modern America. In particular, it will look at how the concept of individuality transformed from a religious concept focused on the soul, to one of political rights, focused on the autonomous conscious mind. Thus, one of the memes under discussion in a later chapter will be natural rights, which first appeared in the late middle ages with William of Ockham and was reified by John Locke in the 17th century.

One way to frame the question is to ask; under what conditions could one attribute an absolute, unconditional, and inviolable dignity to the existence of a human being, as

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This will be discussed more fully in Chapter 4 with the philosophy of nominalism and the intentional-self meme.
Christianity does, and how then did it evolve? For instance, there is a stunning difference between Augustine’s suppression of the will in *The Confessions* saying:

…when a man tries to make a decision, he has one soul which is torn between conflicting wills” and “But you, O Lord, are good. You are merciful … And all that you asked of me was to deny my own will and accept yours (Augustine 1961, 181);

and John Stuart Mill’s elevation of the individual will in *On Liberty* saying:

The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it. Each is the proper guardian of his own health, whether bodily, or mental and spiritual. (Mill 2008, 17)

And like all cultural evolutionary changes it required time, over fourteen centuries in the example above.6

Indeed, according to Colin Morris, it was generally accepted until about the year 1100 that man was nothing more than something that had been created to make up for the number of fallen angels. This quaint *mythos* had an important underlying point – man’s purpose was not in being human and realizing his own true self in his mortal life but in becoming something else (Morris 1987, 31). How did we evolve from an era where a person’s life was dictated by the group they were born into, in which case their standards would be whatever those of their class dictated? For a man, his calling would be whatever his birth and his father appointed for him. (And for girls, they were nothing more than property to be married off to whomever their family dictated and subsequently to be under the virtual control of one’s husband.)

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6 This example also indicates how the meaning of freedom has evolved from the religious freedom of choice to say ‘yes’ to God as Augustine did, or to choose one’s beliefs over one’s temporal life, as St. Perpetua did, to the conditioned freedom Mill refers to, which is societal based. In this latter sense, one is never free alone, whereas the uniqueness of the Christian freedom was its individuality. As Erich Fromm said, freedom’s meaning changes according to the degree of man’s awareness and conception of himself as an independent and separate being (Fromm 1994, 23).
How did we progress from this point in roughly the year 1100 to the idealized, fiercely independent, rational self-interest philosophy of Ayn Rand’s fictional character Dagny Taggart in *Atlas Shrugged*?\(^7\)

It is evident though that the terms have varied meanings according to different observers and in different eras. The French aristocratic political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville described individualism in terms of a kind of moderate selfishness that disposed humans to be concerned only with their own small circle of family and friends. Observing the workings of the American democratic tradition for his book *Democracy in America* (written between 1835–40), Tocqueville saw individualism in a more negative light. He carefully differentiated it from ego, which he defined as love of self, but instead characterized it as:

\[\ldots\text{a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with his little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself. (Tocqueville 2006, 506)}\]

In his view, individualism would over time degenerate into pure egoism, because it ignores the civic virtues on which society depends (Smith 2016, 8). Tocqueville compared this aspect of democracy and individualism to an aristocratic society where everyone in society has a station and an obligation to protect or help those above or below him, resulting in people always being closely involved in something outside themselves. He also saw however, the importance of religion in American society commenting, “For the Americans the ideas of Christianity and liberty are so completely

\(^7\) The rapacious individualism in *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead* made them number one and two respectively on the Modern Library’s Reader’s List of American’s favorite books. Up until 2013, *Atlas Shrugged* was second only to the Bible in the rankings of the most widely read books in America, with over 29 million copies sold.
mingled that is almost impossible to get them to conceive of one without the other” (Tocqueville 2006, 293).

It all comes around to worldviews again - Cicero thought one’s foremost duty was to the state, the American focus was, and still is, on the individual’s rights and liberty. It is the constant tension between the individual as paramount and what Louis Dumont refers to as holism, where the society as a whole is paramount. And when the notion of a “right” is attached not to a natural or social order, but rather to a particular human being, they become an individual in the modern sense of the word (Dumont 1986, 25, 65).

Yet, it can be taken to an extreme as exemplified in Ayn Rand’s objectivism philosophy, which always favored the individual genius over the collective mediocrity. In The Virtue of Selfishness she states:

> Individualism regards man—every man—as an independent, sovereign entity who possesses an inalienable right to his own life, a right derived from his nature as a rational being. Individualism holds that a civilized society, or any form of association, cooperation or peaceful coexistence among men, can be achieved only on the basis of the recognition of individual rights—and that a group, as such, has no rights other than the individual rights of its members. (Rand 1964, 150)

This is the extreme though, and as Yuval Levin points out, the goal of the modern liberal society is to ensure that as many as possible of our binding obligations are individually chosen, and that our lives are, to the extent possible, our own to shape, while recognizing there will necessarily have to be some limitations to the reach of individual autonomy to protect the realm overall. Thus, the paradox of modern liberalism: expanded government for the sake of freedom (Levin 2014, firstthnings.com).

The terms individualism and individuality are often used interchangeably. Some scholars make a note of distinguishing between the two, with individualism being the
conception of the appropriate relationship between an individual and society, and individuality as more of a personality concept, the form of self that an individual may seek. Theoretically, at one end you could have a primitive tribal society with little differentiation between members and the tribe, and at the other end a highly differentiated society with each member as a significantly different part of the whole (Weintraub 1982, xvii). The premise here is that while the polar extremes here are likely never the case, there has been a gradual evolution over centuries of both individuality and individualism and both are highly affected by the changing linguistic, historical and societal contexts. It is the supposition herein that the individuality of seeking to exercise one’s freedom to form one’s own identity necessarily affects the relationship between the individual and society. Indeed, as that freedom has evolved and grown through individual rights that balance has been altered significantly. It is the continuation of competing worldviews, which we seek to hold in tandem, now manifested as individual liberty versus responsibility to the community and the promotion of the common good.

Medievalist Colin Morris defined individualism as the psychological experience that gives us a clear distinction between my being and that of other people. Medieval and early modern persons struggled with a sense of self (and slowly separated it from soul) as a thing to be objectively studied. Further, Morris echoes Immanuel Kant when he asserts that this experience is grounded in a belief in the value of human beings in and of themselves (Morris 1987, 3). Kant had confidence in humanity as being composed of morally autonomous individual agents, because he reasoned, “the moral law commands that we ought now to be better men, it follows inevitably that we must be able to be better men” (Kant 2008, 46). This concept of morality was both individualistic – be a law unto
yourself – but also universal and communitarian, with everyone having a duty to further the good of others. He illustrates a delicate balance between holism and individualism.

Kant’s famous dictum, which Morris highlights in his book, “The principle of humanity and of every rational nature generally as an end in itself is the supreme limiting condition of every man’s freedom of action” (Kant 1993, 39), is the essence of not only the Enlightenment but of the Christian tradition. Humans are ends in themselves and cannot be used as means, thereby imbuing the individual with inherent dignity, a key marker of modern individualism. Morris also maintains that humanism is different but closely related to individualism, as it implies a respect for the dignity of man, which naturally assumes a respect for individual men (Morris 1987, 3).

Morris’s position has been criticized for putting all his attention on the process of individualization without analyzing the influence of the society of which those individuals under study formed a part. Indeed, the abstract individual – otherwise known as human nature – is the foundation of social and political philosophy. We cannot generalize without it, we can only refer to particular human beings (Smith 2016, 5). As Aaron Gurevich, who wrote The Origins of European Individualism, correctly points out – it is impossible to separate any individual from their societal, linguistic and historical context, so strong is the unconscious influence. Humans can only become aware of their individuality within a societal framework. Gurevich agrees with Charles Taylor when he points to two parallel processes at work in constituting individuality, one being the self-affirmation of the individual or becoming aware of one’s own worth, and secondly the

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8 Renaissance humanism was elitist however, and hence it had respect only for some individual men, and a few women, who were well educated and generally very wealthy as well.
awareness of what sets one apart from others within that societal framework (Gurevich 1995, 7, 14).

Louis Dumont would disagree and maintains that the individual as value was conceived apart from the given social and political organizations. He characterizes an outworldly individual and an inworldly individual and argues that our familiar concept of individualism could never have developed from traditional holism (Dumont 1986, 51).

The pivotal argument in this thesis however, is that it was the self-affirmation of the individual as being worthy of salvation and the Christian societal framework of that organizing construct, “do unto others” that was a pivotal driver in the evolving memes of individualism.

THE MODERN CONCEPTION

In tracing the beginnings of the evolution of the individual it is important to do a retrospective look back from the modern conception. Our understanding of the modern individual is one in which the “subjective” or the internal side of one’s identity is that of an active and willful agent, a largely autonomous and self-conscious person endowed with the ability to make important choices as he navigates the external world (Martin 2004, 15).

This modern conception of the self as the bearer of the dignity of human personhood is based on the Enlightenment emphasis on the individual as the operative agent of his own responsible freedom; and the figure most often credited with

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9 An extreme individual is self-sufficient and concerned only with himself, and is thus outworldly, whereas those in a social world are inworldly (Dumont 1986, 26).

10 The problem with solely defining individuality as an active and willful agent is that it ignores the contingent and unpredictable circumstances that make up a large part of our individuality and the historical, linguistic and societal context that is fundamental to our conscious framework.
‘discovering’ the conscious self is René Descartes with his “cogito ergo sum” argument written in 1637. As the next chapter will show however, he was presaged by Augustine over 1200 years before who wrote, “… if he doubts he thinks” in Book X of his thesis *On the Trinity* (Augustine 2012, 351).

Descartes however, introduced a novel aspect of this concept. He put forward the idea of using doubt as a method of inquiry, the insistence that every belief should be considered false until proven true and in this way gaining reliable knowledge of the world dependent on the certainty of one’s own consciousness of his self-existence. Further, his treatment of the mind as a distinctive realm highlighted the first-person standpoint, emphasizing experience and knowledge from one’s own point of view (Solomon 1988, 5). Some scholars assert this is the start of a shift from philosophical reality to a psychologically based one, and from a relational self to a reflective conscious self. The start of this evolution is evident much earlier however, being evident as far back as the twelfth century with Abelard, Heloise and Bernard of Clairvaux, which is why the intentional self is identified as one of the characteristic memes of individuality discussed in Chapter Four. Perhaps not as crisp and widely circulated, the desire for self-expression through a psychological perspective was indeed evident much earlier than Descartes as will be shown in the subsequent chapters.11

This type of individuality declared freedom from authority, particularly religious authority and staked a claim to live and think by its own independent powers (Seigel 2005, 55), ushering in the anti-clerical milieu of the Enlightenment. It also can be seen earlier with Luther, which is why the autonomous-self is identified as a key meme.

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11 The key thought is that while these concepts may have emerged earlier, the environment and the mode of transmission were not sufficient for it to become a cultural meme and reproduce widely.
TYPES OF SELF

There are many types of selves in the philosophical discussions of what makes an individual. The word is used in all sorts of historically conditioned aspects but generally will be used here to define selves as beings of the requisite depth and complexity to have an identity that they take responsibility for defining, or attempting to define.

Modern selfhood is most often distinguished by the outward characteristics one displays (gender, age, occupation, sexual orientation, etc.) as we categorize human beings into various groups. But the selfhood under examination herein refers to an abstract mode of individual self-sufficiency and dispassionate engagement, capable of objectifying the surrounding world and one’s own emotions and compulsions, as well as its relationships with other selves. According to Jerrold Seigel, the modern being has the self-possession and objective distance to use reason in all aspects of life, thereby negating the human inherence in some higher (or lower and demonic) mode of being. This definition betrays a bias towards a strictly rational and analytical basis of selfhood however, that eschews the mystical and spiritual dimensions so important to many of the figures under discussion and central to the Christian worldview, which is a central premise of this thesis.

Seigel defines three dimensions as the basis of thinking about selfhood in the West, which he calls the bodily or the material, the relational, and the reflective dimensions, which are useful for framing the discussion (Seigel 2007, 5). He defines the first as the physical aspect of our corporeal existence, or that material existence of

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12 In this regard, the tripartite nature of the self has not changed since Plato’s Phaedrus wherein he conceived of the soul as, the rational (seeks knowledge), the spirited (seeks glory and honor) and the appetitive (bodily desires). The main difference is, true to his worldview, Plato highlights honor and leaves out the relational dimension that Christianity highlights (Plato 2009, 499). Christianity of course highlights this tripartite notion in the mystery of the Trinity, also three dimensions of one being.
individuals that has troubled philosophers and saints from Socrates to Augustine and set in motion the whole dualistic sense of self we have in the West which characterizes bodily desires and functions as ‘sinful’, and something to be suppressed.

The second sense of self he describes is the relational, arising from our social and cultural connections and interactions. As we shall see in the anthropological point of view, there can be no such thing as a pure individual. We are all part of a collective self with shared orientations, values, and languages that shape our internal thoughts both consciously and unconsciously. For the relational self, the interactions with others and with God are the primary means of expressing personal identity. This relationalism will be most manifest in Dante, for whom personal identity is rooted in one’s own freedom as well as inextricably tied to the freedom of others (dante.georgetown.edu). This sense of self is characterized by the decisions one makes in relation to other individuals and to the life situations one encounters requiring a reaction and a response. It is a gross misconception to think that my concept of myself alone can define my identity independent of everything and everyone else. Louis Dumont described it as an outworldly self, an individual who lives outside the world, such as monastics, and in the largest sense Christianity seeks to make man an individual in relation to God, thus in essence an outworldly individual (Dumont 1986, 26). In reality however, we are all connected to one another in the vast web of human interaction. Perhaps John Donne expressed it best with his poem, No Man is an Island published in 1624.

The third self, the reflective self, is an active agent of its own realization of both its own relational consciousness and its relationship to the phenomenal world around it.

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13 This is not to say man is strictly conditioned by behaviorism or instinctivism. Indeed, intentionality is a key indicator of individualism.
This self establishes order among its attitudes and beliefs and accordingly directs its actions with a purpose (Seigel 2007, 6). This is the rational self of Descartes who boiled identity down to the single dimension of recognizing one’s own self-consciousness as a way of affirming one’s actuality.

Of course, we embody all three of these dimensions in our individual identities to a lesser or greater degree. And thinkers from Plato to Nietzsche have sought to categorize them in a hierarchal fashion with the bodily inevitably being the weakest, and the reflective or rational being the highest. As will become evident in the analysis of the chapters to follow, the idea of individuality achieves a preeminent position through the Christian context as it incorporates the relational and the rational from the medieval era onward.

Siegel maintains that the self’s freedom or autonomy is centered in the reflective self. He maintains that freedom of self-determination must be in the reflective self, because it requires distance from every determinate form of existence (Siegel 2007, 10). However, that seems unrealistic in accounting for the vicissitudes of life situations that one has no control over except one’s attitude in how to face them, particularly suffering as Frankl so aptly pointed out as quoted in Chapter 1. Further, this view seems at odds with the idea of Christian freedom, which sees freedom as not only the abstract ability to choose, but as a directional movement in the form of love in relationship to another person, the Thou to one’s I.

Taylor introduces the term radical reflexivity, which means the adoption of a first-person standpoint and recognition of the difference in the way I experience my activity, thoughts and feelings and the way everyone else does. In other words, the world I know
is a result of my being aware of my awareness and this brings a kind of presence to oneself, which is inseparable from one’s being the agent of experience (Taylor 1989, 130-131). Augustine is the first example of this type of first person awareness or inwardness to be studied in this essay. By analyzing his own inwardness as an object of study to be conveyed to us (and God) in his autobiographical Confessions, he created a new meme as discussed in Chapter Three.

From an anthropological point of view, the idea of a person as an individuated self is not a primordial idea but a historically developed one based on the fact that earlier human communities had a socio-centric concept of the person intrinsically linked to clan membership (Morris 1994, 3-4). The notion of the self has assumed various different forms at various places and times suggesting a cultural relativism component that cannot be ignored. The societal element and the individual human personality cannot be isolated constructs; and in fact, they depend on one another for their own development. It is also important to note, as Erich Fromm points out, that human nature itself is not static and is also the product of historical evolution, though it has certain inherent mechanisms and laws, which he deems it psychology’s role to discover (Fromm 1969, 13).

The individual then must dynamically adapt or as Taylor says, “…being a self is inseparable from existing in a space of moral issues, to do with identity and how one ought to be. It is being able to find one’s standpoint in this space, being able to occupy, to be a perspective in it” (Taylor 1989, 112). Consequently, a self becomes an identity not only through realizing one’s responsibility for taking a stand on moral issues but always with reference to one’s defining community or society and relationships as well as
environmental factors. The reflective and relational selves are intrinsically tied, as language is enabled by rational self and then used by the relational self to connect with other selves.

Agreeing that social existence is a necessary condition of the development of the self and the two are co-existent and have evolved in a symbiotic relationship, Brian Morris then takes these assumptions and formulates three different variations of the term person: one as a generic human being who is a conscious, social being with language and moral agency; second, as a cultural category articulated in the representations of a specific community; and finally, as a psychological concept, the self as an abstraction created by each human being’s inner consciousness (Morris 1994, 7-12).

This latter concept suggests that selfhood is more of an internal organizing process that evolves as we become self-aware and reflective through exploring ourselves, and the world around us. It is how we internalize other people’s feelings and judgments about our feelings and conduct. And through this abstraction, we create two versions of ourselves: the examiner, and the judger. The “I” that is the subject of actions becomes the object for another subject. Thus, the subject of self-consciousness is formed in part by the internalization of other’s judgments about us (Seigel 2005, 148). This is similar to the concept espoused by American philosopher and psychologist William James, who formulated a theory of the “I” and the “Me” which he put forward in his landmark Principles of Psychology (1890). In James’ model, the judging thought or the “I” fuses one’s stream of consciousness into a whole, into a person, and in looking back at

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14 Just as in biological evolution, a sudden change in environment or a societal crisis is often the impetus for a cultural mutation.

15 It is also how we come to appreciate and believe in the existence of other minds, which means the other is existent in a substantive way – they become a thou and not an it.
memories and perceiving them with "warmth and intimacy" makes them into a “me.” He deems the nucleus of the “me” to be the bodily existence felt to be present at the time, along with whatever past remembered feelings resemble this present feeling, all of which are deemed to part of that same “me” (James 1952, 259).

The interaction with others, internalizing their judgments and recognizing that others are also subjects just as we are, expands our own subjectivity. Hence, this conscious self is not only where thinking happens, but also where the appreciating happens. As the currently popular philosopher Daniel Dennett says, it is the ultimate arbitrator of why anything matters to us (Dennett 1991, 31).

The problem in analyzing the self is that it does not follow the rules that generally hold true for most objects of study, most notably it cannot be studied outside of what it means for us, or independent of interpretations offered by its subjects, and also it cannot be described without reference to its surroundings and historical context (Taylor 1989, 33-34). The economic situation of the different historical eras obviously also plays a role in the development of individuality as well. As Fromm points out, significant changes in the psychological atmosphere accompanied the economic development of increasing capitalism in the late medieval era (Fromm 1969, 58). Objectivity is necessarily limited by historical situations and the dynamics of the culture in which it occurs. As Thomas Kuhn said in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, “What a man sees depends both upon what he looks at and also upon what his previous visual-conceptual experience has taught him to see” (Kuhn 1970, 93). John Jeffries Martin expresses the conundrum well when he states:

…the self has no physical location, it is not our ‘core’; rather it is discerned most clearly as a relation between those dimensions of
experience that people describe as *internal* (conscious or unconscious thoughts, feelings, beliefs, emotions, desires) and those they describe as *external* (speaking or writing, hating or loving, praying or blaspheming, laughing or crying,). And in positing such a topography of experience, the body invariably plays a fundamental role, for it is the outer covering of the body – its skin – that serves as a privileged frontier between these two distinct spheres of experience. (Martin 2004, 14)

Kuhn’s challenge of the putative objective nature of scientific knowledge critiqued it as an all too human enterprise, colored by society and culture, and innately biased by the individuals carrying out the investigation, is especially apropos here. Both science and cultural genomes deal with matters that are ambiguous, and insufficient knowledge exists to resolve all the questions where a choice must be made. Both employ the type of reasoning Aristotle called *phronesis*, reasoning conducted by applying general principles to a particular situation that requires deliberation and a subjective choice to be made by a self. Modern science has taken the path that the best way to study the self is by studying consciousness and the biological processes of the brain. But first, we will look at the Christian origins of the self.

**THE CHRISTIAN SELF**

Christianity is based on the dualism argument and one of its essential features is measuring the subjective depth of the human spirit according to its capacity for self-transcendence; self-consciousness being a degree of that transcendence in which the self makes itself its own concern. That rational capacity of surveying the world and

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16 Examples include using MRI’s and EEG’s to look at brain activity and make assertions about free will based on response times from neuron firings to a subject reporting they felt a desire to do something such as Sam Harris has done in his latest book entitled *Free Will* (Harris 2012, 8).

17 In dualism, “mind” is contrasted with “body,” in what is the classic mind-body problem, which seeks to answer the ontological question: what are mental states and what are physical states? This leads to further questions, such as, what is consciousness and what is the self, and how are they related to the physical body and the mental aspects of the mind. The classical roots originate in Plato’s *Phaedo* and his theory of eternal forms. Plato believed our physical bodies, which are ephemeral, were imperfect copies the
forming abstract concepts by standing outside both itself and the world provides both self-conscious awareness but also a feeling of an essential homelessness of the spirit that is the basis of all religion according to Reinhold Niebuhr. He offers a succinct definition of the self in this regard with his thesis that, “individual selfhood is expressed in the self’s capacity for self-transcendence and its rational capacity for conceptual and analytic procedures” (Niebuhr 1996, xxv, 14).

Perhaps one of the best and most succinct ways to characterize man’s unique nature was offered in the 19th century by Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) who said; “Man thinks – that is he converses with himself” (Feuerbach 1989, 2). With these words from *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach sets the basis of an argument that language is the medium of transcendence. Man alone among the species has the capacity to have an inner and an outer life, and the capacity to think in terms of *I* and *Thou*. Feuerbach saw an ability to exercise empathy for the other as leading to self-consciousness through the process of relating to another self. So, self-consciousness leads to self-affirmation and self-love as we become our own concern. As Seigel says, “that is why sympathy possesses so much power to mold our character: it is a kind of expansion of self-love to others” (Seigel 2015, 133). And that passionate self becomes the core of an individual with an ability to construct its own social being by internalizing features it sees in others and making them elements of one’s own personal identity. Granted Feuerbach is eternal forms. These forms make the world intelligible, because they perform the role of universals. These concepts of a separate physical body and immortal soul, which also came from Plato, were adopted by Christianity and held as the dominant philosophical and theological position through Descartes. (Robinson 2017, plato.stanford.edu/dualism). Indeed, Roman Catholic catechism teaches that the soul is a living being without a body, having reason and free will.
expressing an optimistic view of man’s self-consciousness, which also displays a dark side that demonizes others.

Even though Feuerbach was an atheist, his self-consciousness argument can embody the central element of the Christian religion – that God is revealed in the world through the incarnation, in other words he becomes the ‘other’ in the most profound way possible.\(^{18}\) And this creates a moral equivalency among humans – joining humans through loving will in a voluntary association guided by equal belief.

Christianity sees the inner self as unique and not reducible to the biological processes governing the body. Modern neuroscience however, tends to discount any notion of a soul and in some cases the self itself. But most modern Western individuals hold both views, though incommensurable at the fundamental level, in tandem. We believe in science but still cherish the spiritual and remain Cartesian in our thinking that the minds or souls of human beings are entirely different from their body.

Why do we continue to not only believe, but also want to believe there is something more than the corporeal self, which makes us unique individuals?\(^{19}\) In our system for conceptualizing our inner lives, there is always a subject that is the focus of reason and that metaphorically has an existence independent of the body. Even though this contradicts modern cognitive science, as will be discussed in the next section, it means we have evolved with a view of our inner self that is inconsistent and incompatible with what scientific study has learned about the mind operating mostly on an unconscious

\(^{18}\) Although Feuerbach’s intent was to show the opposite – that man created God in his image as an outward projection of a human's inward nature.

\(^{19}\) Ernest Becker, who wrote The Denial of Death, would say this unique aspect of ourselves is because we live what he terms “a vital lie” in denying death. Humans are the only creatures that understand our own mortality and our inherent fear of death has shaped both our psyche and religions (Becker 1997, Chap. 2).
level (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 268). An argument could be made that this is the strong legacy of Christianity.

**THE MATERIAL CONCEPTION OF SELF**

Just as cultural evolution has shaped our notion of what individuality means so has the scientific revolution altered our notion of what constitutes a self. Contrary to the Christian-self presented above, the pendulum has swung hard to a biological argument as we have become more adept at studying ourselves at a cellular and neuronic level; but does this capture the notion of a “self” and an “individual”?

Certainly, consciousness is a pivotal element of the discussion on individualism because it is instrumental to who we are. One cannot be a reflexive or relational self without being conscious, and the things of which I am conscious and the ways in which I am conscious of them determine *what it is like to be me* (Hofstadter and Dennett 2000, 9). But as David Chalmers says, consciousness is not all there is to the mind. Modern science mostly studies the behavioral aspect and neglects the phenomenal concept of mind, or the subjective way it feels to be who we are (Chalmers 1996, 11). Defining what we mean by consciousness in objective terms is a difficult task though. The neurophysiologist E.R. John defined consciousness as:

…a process in which information about multiple individual modalities of sensation and perception is combined into a unified multidimensional representation of the state of the systems and its environment, and integrated with information about memories and the needs of the organism, generating emotional reactions and programs of behavior to adjust the organism to its environment. (Hofstadter and Dennett 2000, 11)

Dennett argues there is no way to study the subjective self with objective science however, and dismisses the notion of a “self” altogether. He argues there is an entirely new round of neuronal firings taking place every microsecond in your brain, so in
actuality, yourself is constantly redrawn and you are not the same person you were a few seconds ago; as Dennett likes to say, “there’s nobody home” (Fromm 2006, 162).

Consequently, he dismisses any providential or other explanation of life and/or freedom of moral agency enabled by our consciousness.

In Dennett’s view, as he says in his TED talk on *The Illusion of Consciousness*, consciousness really is just a bag of tricks. He states:

> It is made up of approximately 100 trillion little cellular robots. That's what we're made of. No other ingredients at all. We're just made of cells, about 100 trillion of them. Not a single one of those cells is conscious; not a single one of those cells knows who you are, or cares. Somehow, we have to explain how, when you put together teams, armies, battalions of hundreds of millions of little robotic unconscious cells … the result is this. (Dennett 2003)

But that cannot explain the subjective self and is one of the major criticisms of *Consciousness Explained*. Although others join Dennett in the materialist and determinist camp such as Francis Crick, who in *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul*, characterizes the individual as:

> “You,” your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. (Crick 1995, 3)

In other words, according to Crick, human agency and will is a mechanistic natural function arising strictly from matter, or an illusion. Yet, it remains a process science still cannot explain. The leap from a biological process to the ethereal inner self-awareness and consciousness is seemingly unique to human beings. As John Searle says, “how is it possible for physical, objective, quantitatively describable neuron firings to cause qualitative, private, subjective experiences?” (Searle 1998, 28).
As David Chalmers points out, the biological view does not solve the really hard problem of experience. Experience may arise from the physical, but it is not entailed by the physical (Fromm 2006,166). Yes, we are a mass of 100 trillion cells all spinning away within, but there is a something it is like, or a way it is to be a conscious organism – a *qualia* if you will – and there is presently no way to scientifically measure that *qualia* nor explain the characteristic memes of individuality we see manifested through the memes of inwardness, intentionality, responsibility, autonomy, subjectivity and the concepts of individual rights.

What the strictly empirical view misses is that objectivity and subjectivity are both ephemeral to some degree because the way we consciously understand the world is necessarily through our cultural conceptual systems and our interactions, which are based on choices shaped by our environment and historical situations. There is no neutral conceptual system. As Lakoff and Johnson point out, the problem with what we call scientific realism is that it takes two intertwined and inseparable dimensions of experience – the awareness of the experiencing organism and the stable entities and structures it encounters – and deals with them as separate and distinct entities called subjects and objects (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 93). Modern theories of the conscious mind have upended long-standing beliefs and convictions not only about the self, but also values and convictions as well. Individual identity since the Enlightenment has become a construct based on conscious experience as the eternal soul has evolved into the fallible mind (Makari 2015, 119).

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20 It is a misnomer in biological and cultural evolution to assume that the competitive aspect of natural selection necessarily implies progress. Darwin was clear that this is not always the case, evolution can be sloppy and uneven in both realms (Dennett 1995, 299).
The preceding views are presented as the contrarian argument, the presupposition of this thesis being that no general biological model of the conscious individual can contain the specificity of the inner self. We can dissect the brain but we will find no self there, and the notion that there is something more than neuronal firings to our ‘selfness’ refuses to go away. The hard-core determinists dismiss this as intuition that science will eventually put out of its misery, but this would leave us with the mechanistic argument that our minds, and thus our very being, is nothing more than millions of computers working in parallel devoid of any innate freedom or morality. And yet we still cannot replicate the human mind after years of working on artificial intelligence.

Making identity a question of strictly biological processes only leads to an impasse since science cannot explain the transition from objective brain matter to the subjective consciousness. However, if we reject the strictly materialist and biological view must we accept the dualism argument with its long history, and assume there are two metaphysically different types of phenomena in the universe, mental and physical or spiritual and material?

Modern embodiment theory offers a tangential view as an alternative to dualism. Beginning with the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) and American psychologist John Dewey (1859-1952), the idea of a dualistic nature of mind/soul and body was supplanted by the concept of the embodied mind. In this model, the mind and body are not separate metaphysical entities, rather experience is embodied, not ethereal. In their view, objects and subjects are not independent entities but arise from the background and experience on which we impose on concepts; that experience is at once bodily, social, intellectual, and emotional (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 97).
David Chalmers proffers the phenomenal concept of the mind, characterized by the way it feels as opposed to what it does. He contends that almost everything can be reductively explained but consciousness may be an exception. (Chalmers 1996, xv). This presents a much more encompassing portrait of the self, rather than the deterministic reduction to merely neuron firings or the anachronistic dualist concept of an encapsulated immortal soul within a mortal body. The premise herein is that man is accessible to himself in two ways: as an object of inquiry, and as a subjective existence endowed with a freedom that is inaccessible to objective inquiry. In one case man is conceived of as a material self (a study of scientific inquiry as previously outlined), in the other as the subjective participatory self, which man is, and of which he becomes aware when he achieves authentic selfhood. As Karl Jaspers said, each one of us constitutes an irreplaceable human form, and we perceive a noble life task in the cultivation of our individuality, our ineffable-self (Jaspers 2015, 63). It is the evolution of this latter formulation that will be explored in this thesis.

**ANALYTICAL METHOD**

Through a diachronic examination of selected authors and writings, this thesis will explore the cultural evolution and progression from the concept of a person, to the Christian self (or soul), to the modern individual by examining the truth claims in the writings that became building blocks of the cultural memes of individualism.

Beginning with Augustine in the late antique era and extending through the beginning of the Enlightenment and John Locke, the focus will be on writers who are emblematic of a concept that becomes an adaptive trait or a cultural meme as part of the evolutionary process. This includes: Augustine exhibiting the inner self, Peter Abelard
and William of Ockham displaying the intentional self, Dante Alighieri manifesting the
responsible self, Pico della Mirandola and the self-made man, Michel de Montaigne
presenting the subjective self, Martin Luther with the autonomous self-meme, and John
Locke presenting the natural rights meme. This is not say that these historical figures
necessarily invented the concept that was crucial to the adaptation, rather due to a
confluence of events, timing, and just as in biological evolution, chance, the idea they
wrote about reached a critical mass of acceptance and “stuck,” thereby mutating the
prevailing culture from a historical, cultural and linguistic point of view in terms of the
societal web in which it was embedded.

Given all of the preceding discussion, the question is how did the historical meme
developers under analysis display these characteristics previously discussed as
constituting a self or an individual? The following indicators will be used to identify the
various meme developments in the succeeding chapters:

1. First person standpoint – Beings of the requisite depth and complexity to display a
   consciousness of one’s self in relation to other beings and the phenomenal world
   around it.

2. Rationality – Exhibiting self-reflectiveness, self-sufficiency and the ability to
   abstract two versions of one’s self, the examiner and the judger, so as to internalize
   other’s judgments of ourselves into our own consciousness.

3. Dignity – Self-affirmation of the individual. Being aware of one’s own worth as
   well as a belief in the value and dignity of human beings in and of themselves, as
   ends and not as means.

4. Transcendence – The display of critical, reflective questioning of the actual and a
   new vision of what lies beyond. Being capable of disengagement and objectifying
   the surrounding world as well as one’s own emotions and compulsions to see other
   possibilities.

5. Responsibility - accepting personal identity as rooted in human freedom. Accepting
   autonomy, intentionality, and individual moral agency as inherent human traits –
accepting responsibility for selfhood extending to all actions that are recognizably one’s own.

These indicators, based on the previous discussion, will be used to trace the cultural evolutionary development of individualism in the subsequent chapters as shown in Table One below.

Of course, not all the authors will display all these traits, or display them to the same degree. But these indicators will show the evolving individualism as well as examining the specific meme that each subject will be accredited with developing.
CHAPTER 3

AUGUSTINE AND THE INNER-SELF MEME

The intent of this chapter is to show the development of the inner self meme, as manifested in the thinking of Augustine of Hippo (354-430) and how his writings, widely circulated in the Middle Ages and later, directly influenced and promulgated the developing sense of personal inwardness that was a crucial step in the evolution of Western individualism. As limned in Chapter Two, the study of the mind concerns how we think and what thoughts really are. The study of the self concerns the inner life of the individual and the subjective experience, reason, and will that is the essence of who we are essentially and uniquely (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 268).

PLATONIC LEGACY

There is a profound difference between the Classical Greek and Roman and the Christian worldviews as discussed in Chapter One. Hence it may seem counterintuitive to state that the Neoplatonist philosophers led the man who most profoundly shaped the early Christian church to his insights. What the early Christians had successfully done was to merge a moral philosophy based on individual belief, with ritualized mystical sacramental ceremonies and subsequently codified it in an orthodox canon. Belief is the key word, since knowing one’s beliefs implies an application of introspection and inwardness that is characteristic of Christianity. Platonism affected the Christian concept of God, as exemplified through the early Church fathers such as Origen of Alexandria.
(185-254) and Augustine, who was a bridge between the two worldviews as well as between the ancient and medieval worlds. ¹

The Neoplatonist Plotinus (c.204-270 A.D.) had postulated that souls had fallen from their divine origin and man’s spiritual quest should be a return to the original divine state of the soul through turning inward. This idea meshed to a degree with Christian doctrine regarding man’s banishment from paradise. The insight Plotinus offered about the incorporeal, yet intelligible, nature of God was fundamental to Augustine’s thinking (Cary 2000, 40). He drew a sharp distinction based on this, between the higher, immutable and spiritual world of God and the lower material world of man. Augustine also was obviously swayed by Plato’s view of the body as being a ‘prison’ for the soul and was also deeply influenced by Plato’s dialogues, particularly *Timaeus*, and its depiction of the created world as exhibiting a meaningful order.² The Platonic intelligible ideas become the thoughts of God in his model and not surprisingly, he thought Plato could have easily adopted the Christian faith. In fact, Augustine initially believed that Plato was influenced by the preaching of Jeremiah, but later abandoned this hypothesis on chronological calculations that Plato was born about 100 years too late (Augustine 2000, 257).³ Augustine struggles mightily with all these concepts and then

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¹ In Augustine’s time, Neoplatonism could be considered more spiritual than Christianity in the sense that it was focused on the soul and its relation to the eternal or the “other worldly,” whereas the Christian Gospel proclaims the resurrection of the dead (Cary 2000, X).

² Most scholars think Plotinus is the only great philosopher Augustine ever studied in depth and then mostly through the writings of Porphyry. He only knew of Plato’s *Timaeus* through a translation by Cicero and his reports on the *Phaedo* and *Meno* (Cary 2000, 33). He read these while becoming more fluent with the Gospels and Scripture and managed to meld them together rather seamlessly from our long perspective.

³ It was Clement of Alexandria who purportedly said, “What, after all, is Plato but Moses speaking Attic Greek?” however, some sources also attribute this to Augustine based on Book VIII.11, where he theorizes Plato knew the words Moses had heard from the angel when he asked who was commanding him to go and deliver the Hebrew people out of Egypt (Augustine 2000, 257).
finally takes the inward turn espoused by Plotinus, which is essentially the whole of the
*Confessions*.

Augustine, even though he was pre-medieval, is an early individualist in the sense
that he portrays a psychological experience that gives us a clear distinction between his
being, and that of other people. It is not accidental that his era, closing out the ancient
period, would be opportune for an evolutionary cultural change. The Roman world he
lived in was undergoing momentous changes not only due to the pressures of the
migratory peoples from the East and the North, but also concurrently Christianity was
becoming more widespread.\(^4\) Thus, Augustine straddled two worldviews both literally
(one parent was Christian and one was pagan) and figuratively. In an age of multiple
crises (economic depression, political turmoil, Gothic incursions, and plague) firm
assumptions about man and the world were called into question, and the ensuing cultural
turmoil forced individuals to face the need to account for the meaning of their existence
(Weintraub 1982, 18). It was in this complex interplay of external change and internal
self-reflection that Augustine’s *Confessions* is written between 397 – 400 A.D. as one of
the first autobiographies.\(^5\) He creates an entire new genre of writing that deeply
examines the inner self and what it means to be human. In other words, he probes the
inner self until he discovers his personal subjectivity. The *Confessions* was a complete

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\(^4\) The edict of Milan legislated religious toleration in the Roman Empire in 313 A.D. Nicene
Christianity became the official state religion in 380 A. D. with the Edict of Thessalonica, in which
Emperor Theodosius I declared the worship of Christ to be responsible for the safety of the Roman Empire
(Brown 2003, 74).

\(^5\) Recall that two key factors for evolutionary change are mutation and natural selection.
Environmental factors help determine the spread of a trait or meme caused by a cultural mutation. Natural
selection determines which memes will be inherited in a population, and is how cultures evolve and adapt
to changing environmental conditions over time. Rapid or profound cultural change, as exhibited during
Augustine’s time, would likely cause new memes to be more successful in reproducing than they had been
in the past.
departure from the classical self-expression of the heroic struggle against fate, and
illuminates Augustine’s introspection and the development of his beliefs (Morris 1987, 79).6 It is a completely new genre signaling a real change in individual perception. As John S. Dunne says:

   The story of his life has an archetypal quality about it because it is told as a story of experience, of the running of a gamut of experience, rather than as a tale of unique deeds and achievements. When life is conceived to be a story of deeds as it was in the time of Paul and earlier, its generalization tends to take the form of law, …But [this] is conceived to be a story of experience. (Dunne 1977, 46)

Augustine’s story is the essence of existentialism over 1500 years before the term would be coined. We are privy to his intense search for individual meaning through God as exemplified by, “…this God is deeper than my most inmost being” (Brown 2000, 162).

As a consequence, Augustine’s knowledge of God is strictly from a first-person standpoint, a unique individual perspective based on his first-person experience of spiritual and intellectual exploration which has caused him to become aware of his dependence on something beyond one’s own self. Unlike Aquinas, who later sought to emulate Aristotelian logic with exhaustive proofs of the existence of God, Augustine’s proof is in his own sensing and reflecting – his experience. He feels his dependence on something more and seeks to find it within himself through his own introspection. Augustine believes God exists but he wants to know God exists, which means he must first establish that anything can be known with certitude, though he ultimately turns to faith. Hence his skeptic proof of his own existence as mentioned in the previous chapter, “…if he doubts he thinks,” sets the stage for him to understand with certitude his own

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6 It is surmised that the Homeric Greeks saw themselves as beings swept up into public and shareable moods and situations rather than in terms of their inner experiences and beliefs (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, 60).
existence, for anyone who seeks to prove God’s existence must first grasp his own existence.

Presaging Descartes, he reasons he knows he himself exists, thus he can know with certitude God’s existence (Gilson 1960, 13, 18). His search for the Christian God is pivotal in his turning towards finding his inner self. Further, Augustine recognized the significance of the incarnation through Jesus Christ in validating the value of the individual person as he explains:

He is the Mediator between God and men, Jesus Christ, who is a man and he appeared on earth between men, who are sinful and mortal, and God, who is immortal and just. Like men he was mortal: like God, he was just. (Augustine 1961, 251)

Knowledge was thus uniquely personal and individual for Augustine, as evidenced in his explanation of the doctrine of the Incarnation, wherein Christ is both fully God and fully man. As Wilcox points out, one consequence of this conviction is the affirmation that nothing in the universe is more real than the individual human person (Wilcox 1975, 234).

Plato’s allegory of the cave from The Republic transforms into a vision of the Christian soul reaching for the illumination of God and salvation and of Jesus coming into the world of darkness to save men’s souls. While retaining some of the Platonic notion of cosmic order, particularly immortal souls, Augustine’s views the soul as individual, not part of a World Soul. Augustine’s God is personal, and loving his creations he becomes personally involved with them was willing to be incarnated as man

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7 In Augustine’s era Jesus was depicted as a Teacher and was thought of as the Wisdom or Word of God. The Christ of the popular imagination in the fourth century was not a suffering savior and there were no crucifixes until later eras (Brown 2000, 31).

8 Though heavily influenced by the ancients, in his heart Augustine was not a Neoplatonist. He believed God had created the universe out of nothing; a view Plotinus explicitly rejected.
to redeem his lost souls. This marks the clear line of departure from Augustine’s Neoplatonic philosophical inspiration to the incarnation, which is the core of Christian thought (Rist 1994, 3).

The doctrine of incarnation resolved one problem Augustine had with Neoplatonism, namely how could the human soul, which is housed in a body subject to time, change and mortality, be in contact with the divine spiritual source (Colish 1998, 29). It was because of Christ’s incarnation that the inner self could be in sustained contact with God. For Augustine, going from Plato to Christ was the natural step or as Nietzsche later characterized Christianity, “Platonism for the multitude.” There was a pivotal difference though; Augustine adopted Plotinus’ inward turn but not his concept of the soul into the Divine mind. He kept the soul separate and crucially individual.

AN INNER SPACE

The real power of Augustine’s story however, lays in his skill as a religious psychologist as William Barrett calls him in *Irrational Man*. He gives us a revelation of subjective experience that not even the greatest Hellenic literature can match, because this interiorization comes from Christianity. Where Plato and Aristotle asked, “What is man? Augustine asks, “Who am I?” (Barrett 1958, 95) He tells the story of his own life and very personal struggles in living it to answer the question. As this chapter will show, that pivotal turn of Augustine’s created a new meme of inwardness that was an essential step in the evolutionary path of individualism.
Augustine was emulating Plotinus’ inward turn, which he adopted to conceive of a personal inner space of the individual. As Philip Cary says in his book *Augustine’s Invention of the Inner Self*:

…As we go from Plotinus to Augustine to Locke, we find the inner world shrinking – from a divine cosmos containing all that is ultimately real and lovely (in Plotinus), to the place of an individual soul that can gaze upon all that is true and lovely above (in Augustine), to a closed little room where one only gets to watch movies, as it were, about the real world (in Locke). (Cary 2000, 5)

This may be an exaggeration of Locke’s *tabula rasa* idea but we will deal with that in Chapter Nine. Like Plato, Augustine also saw the different aspects of the self as if at war with each other or as he says, “…my inner self was a house divided against itself” (Augustine 1961, 170). Pivotally, Augustine took Plato’s focus on oppositions: spirit/matter, higher/lower, eternal/temporal, immutable/changing and described it as, inner versus outer, with the inner being the soul. As he says in Book XI of *On the Trinity*:

No one doubts that, as the inner man is endued with understanding, so is the outer with bodily sense … but though our outer man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. (Augustine 2012, 357)

And in Book XII of *On the Trinity*:

Come now, and let us see where lies, as it were, the boundary line between the outer and inner man …so the mind, which is a spiritual substance, must be raised upright to those things, which are most elevated in spiritual things… (Augustine 2012, 381)

While the language of inwardness does date back to the Greek philosophers, their concept does not suggest that the soul is a private inner world or that the soul can turn to look within itself. On the contrary, for classical philosophers the soul was perceptive like the eye in that it looked away from itself, surveying the world around it. Thus,
Augustine’s concept of inner space is an innovation, building on Platonic elements. While Paul had contrasted the inner and outer being when he said, “One is not a Jew outwardly. True circumcision is not outward, in the flesh. Rather one is a Jew inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart, in the spirit … “(Romans 2:28-29), Augustine followed that lead and took an inward turn in order to find God and himself.  

The most unique idea that distinguishes Augustine’s depiction from Platonist inwardness is that his inner space is actually individual and personal. Augustine departs from Plotinus’ model in which the soul is like a sphere revolving around the source of all light at the center of the universe and turning inward to see it. Discrete souls are each points of light on the revolving sphere, which can either look outward upon the darkness or turn around towards the inside to behold the realm of light. This inner realm is the Platonic "intelligible world," which has now become an inner world, although unlike Augustine's inner space it is common to all, and not an individual domain. For Augustine, the focus was less on the visual metaphor of Plotinus’ light, and more on hearing, as in the very beginning of Confessions when he tells God, “my heart has ears ready to listen to you,” or in the pivotal moment of his conversion when he heard a voice telling him to “take it and read, take it and read” (Augustine 1961, 24,177). Hearing the word, the logos is his leitmotif. Philip Cary envisions a visual metaphor of the Augustinian space would be more of an inner palace, with great courtyards open to the

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9 Conversion, or the Latin conversio, is based on verbs that mean to turn one’s attention, in other words to turn one’s attention to find what is divine or the true meaning of life.

10 Philip Cary calls it “private” but Augustine shared his thoughts with all his readers so privacy does not seem to have been his intent. Privacy as we understand it in the modern era is also a concept that evolved hand in hand with individualism and with the emergence of a middle class in society, whose members inclined towards intellectual pursuits and were at greater liberty than the nobility or peasantry to use living space as they pleased.
sun. Seeing the light here means both entering within and looking upward, thereby combining Plotinus's inward turn with Plato's ascent to vision. The result is that what you find when you turn inward but not upward, is your own private inner space (Cary 2000, 5). Charles Taylor characterizes it as:

Augustine’s turn to the self was a turn to radical reflexivity, and that is what made the language of inwardness irresistible. The inner light is the one which shines in our presence to ourselves; it is the one inseparable from our being creatures with a first-person standpoint…It is hardly an exaggeration to say that it was Augustine who introduced the inwardness of radical reflexivity and bequeathed it to the Western tradition of thought. (Taylor 1989, 131)

While the discussion of the inner man is not nearly as prominent in Augustine’s writings as reference to the inner eye of the soul, he does introduce a novel concept of the inner self as a personal inner space or inner world, a whole dimension of being that is our very own, and extensive enough that we can in some sense turn into it and look within it (Cary 2000, 49). You can sense him grappling with the idea of the mind as a space in this passage from *Confessions*:

… I was so completely unable even to see clearly into my own mind, that I thought that whatever had no dimensions in space must be absolutely nothing at all. If it did not, or could not, have qualities related to space, such as density, sparseness, or bulk, I though it must be nothing. For my mind ranged in imagination over shapes and forms such as are familiar to the eye, and I did not realize that the power of thought, by which I formed these images, was itself something quite different from them. And yet it could not form them unless it were itself something, and something great enough to do so. (Augustine 1961, 134)

One can hear the strains of the postmodern debate between Searle and Dennett as discussed in Chapter Two in the quote above. Are the mind and the self simply illusions?

Augustine however, does not necessarily view privacy as positive, unlike most cultures in the modern West. In his view, this privacy is not natural or good but results from our estrangement from the one eternal Truth and Wisdom that is common to all. The inner-self is private only because it is sinful, fallen away from God.
Augustine knows they are not as he describes the subjective way it feels to be who we are as Chalmers said (Chalmers 1996, 11). And in defining the inner self, the personal space within, Augustine turns to look there and finds not only himself, but God there, after all his searching. As he stated in *Confessions*:

> I have learnt to love you late! You were within me, and I was in the world outside myself. I searched for you outside myself, and disfigured as I was, I fell upon the lovely things of your creation. You were with me, but I was not with you. (Augustine 1961, 231)

Hence, as Cary says, “Western inwardness can be traced back to the Platonist inward turn, represented by Plotinus, which is adopted and modified by Augustine to produce the concept of private inner space, which later undergoes modifications of its own in Locke and others” (Cary 2000, 5). Clearly Augustine displays modern self-reflectiveness or the ability to question and judge, and the capability of objectifying the surrounding world as well as one’s own emotions and compulsions in the passages above and throughout *Confessions*. As Karl Weintraub says:

> The *Confessions* was constructed out of the elements that still remain at the heart of autobiographic writing: self-questioning, by asking the context of one’s life to surrender the secrets about the self; self-discovery, by perceiving the order in the disparate elements of life; self-evaluation, by tracing the meaning as a continuous pattern. The *Confessions* artfully present self-conscious interpretation of a life and a being from the vantage point of a meaningful center. (Weintraub 1982, 26)

Thus, *Confessions* itself documents a remarkable cultural evolution in action through a Christian conversion.

*INNER DIALOGUE*

Before Augustine formulated the concept of the inner space, he dramatized it through his *Soliloquies*. In fact, Augustine devised the term *soliloquium*, which is
comprised of the adjective *solus* (alone) and the verb *loqui* (to speak) to describe his inner conversations with himself, hence the modern term soliloquy. A soliloquy makes the individual paramount by placing them in the position of a person, engaged in Socratic dialogue with one’s own self, while poising questions and answers for achieving self-knowledge (Stock 2010, 64,118). Thus, Augustine replaces Socrates’ dialogues with his minions with dialogues with his own inner self and with God. He does all this in the vein of achieving not only intimacy with himself, but most importantly with God. In the Soliloquies, he presents his soul with its concerns and aspirations as if it were of concern to God, a notion that would never be the case with the One at the center of Plotinus’ universe, nor with the Hebrew God who was tied to his people through a tribal covenant.

In his *Soliloquies*, Augustine articulates a dialogue he has with a partner he calls “Reason”, questioning just what reason is. By giving his dialogue partner the name “Reason” it becomes clear that this is no fleshly or mortal being with a temporal or earthly origin, for he seeks answers to questions he is not sure how to ask. Take this example from the *Soliloquies* Book 1, where Reason asks, “What then do you wish to know?” and Augustine answered:

I desire to know God and the soul… I do not know what manner of demonstration would satisfy me, for I do not think I know anything as I desire to know God … if I knew anything similar to God I would doubtless love it but I love nothing but God and the soul, and I know neither. (Augustine 1953, 27)

Hence, Augustine is seeking both God and himself in himself as he says in *Confessions*:

I beg you my God, to reveal me to my own eyes…” and “But where was I when I looked for you? You were there before my eyes, but I had

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12 This is another meme development that can be credited to Augustine as soliloquies are embedded in Western literature as a means of conveying what is in a character’s innermost thoughts, i.e. Shakespeare’s Hamlet or Henry V.
deserted even my own self. I could not find myself, much less find you.
(Augustine 1961, 247, 92)

Ultimately, he finds both, but he demonstrates how the soul can be self-conscious and still completely fail to know itself. None of this would sound unfamiliar to modern ears accustomed to a proliferation of every manner of psychoanalysis, psycho-therapy and self-help books imaginable, but to ancient ears, Augustine was radical in his definition of individual inner personal space and introspection of that space. The Confessions is in a sense, one long therapy book of self-examination and autobiography making it truly modern in its introspective approach, and the inner self meme it generated has been successfully replicated over the centuries.\(^\text{13}\)

**THE TRIPARTITE INNER SELF**

Augustine loved to discuss things in terms of a triad. He incorporated Plato’s tripartite self into his thinking, but redefined it as existence or memory, knowledge or reason, and will.\(^\text{14}\) This constant focus on the different aspects of man as being divided into three parts should be expected as Augustine was starting with the image of a triune God, and since man is made in God’s image, he should ostensibly show traces of that triad nature in every sense.

Augustine’s vision was that not only was man made in God’s image, but he contained within his inner self a sort of “little trinity” of memory or existence, reason, and will, that was the vehicle of self-knowledge and the way to God (Morris 1987, 76).

\(^\text{13}\) Autobiographical writing being a way to convey self-questioning, self-discovery, and self-evaluation, in a self-conscious interpretation of one’s life, while also characterizing the social and cultural world around oneself, from a relative vantage point of time (Weintraub 1982, 26, 29).

\(^\text{14}\) Augustine uses different variations of these three terms in different works but his focus is the same. Note how it echoes somewhat Jerold Seigel’s three types of self from Chapter 2 which were: the bodily or the material, the relational, and the reflective dimensions (Seigel 2007, 5).
With this insight, man exercises his freedom to choose by accepting personal responsibility for his existence and salvation, as expressed in *Confessions*:

> The three things are existence, knowledge, and will, for I can say that I am, I know, and I will. I am a being, which knows and wills; I know both that I am and that I will; and I will both to be and to know. In these three – being, knowledge, and will – there is one inseparable life, one life, one mind, one essence… (Augustine 1961, 318)

Taking existence first, as previously stated in Chapter Two, Augustine presaged Descartes with his *cogito* argument, albeit in a different vein. Whereas Descartes focused on the fact that I exist is necessarily true because the process of thinking necessitates existence, Augustine focused on showing that the doubter cannot be mistaken in thinking he exists for as he says in *City of God*, “For if I am deceived, I am. For he who is not, cannot be deceived; and if I am deceived, by this same token, I am. And since I am if I am deceived, how am I deceived in believing that I am? For it is certain that I am if I am deceived. Since, therefore, I, the person deceived, should be, even if I were deceived, certainly I am not deceived in this knowledge that I am” (Augustine 2000, 370).

As Charles Taylor observes, Augustine makes a proto-Cartesian move when he shows his interlocutor that he cannot doubt his own existence since you cannot be deceived if you do not exist. He displays a certainty of self-presence, that is, he is certain of his existence contingent on the fact that the knower and the known are the same. He was the first to make the first-person standpoint foundational to the search for truth (Taylor 1989, 133).

Augustine’s introspective self does not always come up with clear answers in *Confessions* but often just more questions. John Rist captures it well in his book *Ancient Thought Baptized* when he says:
Augustine is often said to the first ‘modern’ man and the claim to modernity is frequently tied to his emphasis on introspection…however… the uses to which Augustine puts the cogito argument are different from those of Descartes…Self-knowledge for him means knowing that one exists, but unlike the view of Descartes, it does not mean having a clear idea of what we are. Augustine demonstrates that we are, and that we think, but behind that we are quite mysterious, even to ourselves. (Rist 1994, 88)

Augustine says as much himself in On the Trinity:

…the mind seeks to know itself, and is excited thereto by studious zeal. It loves, therefore; but what does it love? Is it itself? But how can this be when it does not yet know itself, and no one can love what he does not know? (Augustine 2012, 341)

In this manner Augustine shifts the focus away from knowing something through perception and reason, to knowing oneself through introspection, and thereby creates a new enduring meme in Western culture. As Peter Brown says in his biography of Augustine:

The Confessions are a manifesto of the inner world… [it represents] an autobiography in which the author has imposed a drastic, fully conscious choice of what is significant. The Confessions are quite succinctly, the story of Augustine’s ‘heart’, or of his ‘feelings’ – his affectus. (Brown 2000, 162-163)

This autobiographical discussion of feelings and emotions is thoroughly modern and was a groundbreaking evolutionary transition in the late ancient world. Augustine’s subjective, passionate embrace of Christianity was a harbinger of the Kierkegaard to come 1,400 years later. Like Kierkegaard, he believes finding oneself amounts to finding

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15 In the later books of The Trinity, cognitio refers to the reflecting’s subject’s ability to acquire knowledge about himself as well as to interior examination by which this knowledge is obtained, thus showing an overtly psychological framework in Augustine’s thinking (Stock 2010, 113).

16 The importance of ‘experience’ in Augustine (in contrast to the place of ‘argument’ in late-medieval theology) is noted in the work of another Augustine scholar, William O’Brien, who has argued that Augustine’s conversion narrative is artfully constructed in such a way as to portray Augustine’s own experience of the birth of Christ in him (when the Word was made flesh in him) as distinct from an intellectual grasp of the meaning of the theological doctrine of the Incarnation (O’Brien 1978, 56).
the self, at the center of which is God. Augustine emphasized the importance of the inner, individual human being perhaps more than any other philosopher in the span between himself and Kierkegaard (Solomon 1988, 90). The whole invention of the autobiography was in itself a method that successfully transmitted this new meme of the inner self so it could reproduce widely.

The inner world for Augustine is not a realm of silence but one of dialogue; he talks to himself, in fact he upbraids himself frequently, and he talks to God. This form of prayer is not a request for something, or a prayer of gratitude, but a dialogue with God as if he were a long-lost friend who can help you work through problems; it is uniquely different than the pagan, Jewish predecessors or early Christian predecessors and helps validate the worth of the individual, another key evolutionary transition marker. Much of Augustine’s inner dialogue with himself regards the will. He cannot understand how his inner self can be at odds with his will. In fact, his whole process of converting is a testament to this. He wants to believe as he relates in the *Confessions Book VIII*, but he cannot will himself do it; he cannot break the old habits of a lifetime, even as he listens to the story of two recent converts who turned from a life serving the Emperor to one of serving God. He stated:

I had pretended to myself that the reason why, day after day, I staved off the decision to renounce worldly ambition and follow you alone was that I could see no certain goal towards which I might steer my own course. But the time had now come when I stood naked before my own eyes, while my conscience upbraided me…My inner self was a house divided against itself. (Augustine 1961, 169-170)

What Augustine realizes and passes on to posterity is how a person can imprison himself in the past and how the inertia of habit can propagate the same mindset into the future. He converses with himself, turning over in his mind whether he can do without
the habits to which he has grown accustomed, most notably sex. However, unlike most modern self-help books, which would implore the reader to harness their internal will to change unwanted behavior, Augustine emphasized that he could not do it alone; he needed the grace of God.\footnote{Grace is defined in the Catholic Church as "a supernatural help of God for good works granted in consideration of the merits of Christ" (Catholic Encyclopedia; www.newadvent.org). Protestants almost universally believe that grace is given by God, based on the faith of the believer. Grace, for Augustine, is the freedom of God to act without any external necessity with love and favor for humans beyond man’s understanding or control. Grace is inward, but not in our power – in us, but other than us (Cary 2000,114).} He stated:

But you O Lord, are good. You are merciful. You saw how deep I was sunk in death, and it was your power that drained dry the well of corruption in the depths of my heart. And all that you asked of me was to deny my own will and accept yours. (Augustine 1961, 281)

Interestingly though, despite the fact that God has asked him to deny his own will as he sees it, Augustine did not believe, at least in his earlier works, that grace undermined free will. What did impair free will in his mind was sin, making grace an ally of human freedom in combatting sin (Cary 2008, iix).

It is this introspective therapy of self-examination that is thoroughly modern. In fact, many addiction therapy programs emphasize a twelve-step program that adjures abusers to admit that they cannot control themselves and ask God to remove their shortcomings of character. How apropos are Augustine’s words today from Confessions, “My soul was a burden, bruised and bleeding. It was tired of the man who carried it, but I found no place to set it down to rest” (Augustine 1961, 78).

Just as in the modern world, Augustine grapples with what is it that makes up the mind as he recognizes this is what makes each of us uniquely ourselves. He delineates a different variation of his triad regarding this in On Free Choice of the Will:

…there are these three things: Existence, Life and Understanding. A stone exists, and an animal is alive, but I do not think a stone is alive or
an animal understands… And we hold that the most valuable of these three is the one that human beings have in addition to the other two, that is, understanding: for whatever understands must also exist and be alive. (Augustine 1993, 33-34)

Augustine’s real focus is on the nature of knowledge and again he partitions it into three parts: memory, reason and will. He recognizes that it is all part of one soul and one substance even though we cannot be sure what that substance is. He struggled with this in On The Trinity where he stated:

For I remember that I have memory and understanding, and will; and I understand that I understand, and will, and remember; and I will that I will, and remember; and understand; and I remember together my whole memory, and understanding, and will…The former are three faculties, in each of which is the whole mind or spirit. The memory is the whole mind as remembering; the understanding is the whole mind as cognizing; and the will is the whole mind as determining. The one essence of the mind is in each of these three modes… (Augustine 2012, 354-355)

Here Augustine is clearly displaying recognition of the capacity for self-transcendence, in which the self makes itself its own object, which is one of the indicators of modern individualism as defined in Chapter Two. The human memory is particularly important to Augustine as a symbol of man’s capacity to transcend time and finally himself. As he says in The Trinity, “…these things I do in the vast court of my memory …There also I meet with myself and recall myself and when and where and what I have done and under what feelings…” (Niebuhr 1996, 155). Pivotal though, he departs from the Neoplatonic notion of a divine mind for in his concept, the soul maintains its individuality after death rather than being absorbed into the world soul.

Augustine’s concept of memory is also based largely on the Platonic notion of innate ideas. He believed deep within us are implicit understandings of the innate ideas that Plato saw in the intelligible realm. Augustine states in Confessions:
The memory also contains the innumerable principles and laws of numbers and dimensions. None of these can have been conveyed to it by means of the bodily sense, because they cannot be seen, heard, smelled, tasted. Or touched...We know them simply by recognizing them inside ourselves without reference to any material object. (Augustine 1961, 219)

In other words, we remember them as some primordial knowledge. But where Plato used this notion of memory to describe how one ‘knows’ innately mathematical or geometric concepts such as described in his *Meno* dialogue, Augustine takes it beyond the knowing of ideas to the knowing of God. In a long discourse on memory and the mind in *Confessions Book X*, Augustine racks his brain looking for where to find God in his memory and realizes he is not there among his images of material or temporal things, but is everywhere, omnipresent.

When it comes to his understanding of the will, Augustine is at times self-contradictory and increasingly displays a penchant for predestination with his doctrine on grace, which hinders individual freedom. Displaying a more modern viewpoint he says in *On Free Choice of the Will*, “If human beings are good things, and they cannot do right unless they so will, then they ought to have a free will, without which they cannot do right...The fact that human beings could not live rightly without it (will) was sufficient reason for God to give it” (Augustine 1993, 30). He rejects the stoic notion of fate as a chain of causes and redefines it as a chain of wills, thus all causes –fortuitous, natural, or voluntary – can be reduced to wills, whether the will of God, angels, or man.

This certainly vests the individual with more responsibility and freedom then the stoic

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18 In Augustine’s view, faith came before understanding, and faith was dependent on grace. Predestination is God’s eternal plan to give grace to some and not to others. Some may never have faith or understanding, despite how much they may try (Cary 1997, 37). The idea of predestination can be seen as contrary to individual freedom and will but this is not the meme under consideration, nor the one that endured.
In this Augustinian conception, all efficient causes belong to the will and all of these wills are subject to the will of God. Even so, Augustine does not see God determining the individual volition of every will (Sun 2012, 45). He said in *On the Spirit and the Letter*:

Do we then by grace make void free will? God forbid! Nay, rather we establish free will. For even as the law by faith, so free will by grace, is not made void, but established (Augustine 2014, 55).

Although he is vague on how this exactly happens, and his arguments between *On Free Choice of the Will* and *On the Spirit and the Letter* are contradictory and twisted at times as they struggle to reconcile free will and God’s omniscience. In the end, he simply stated:

So unsearchable are His judgments, and His way past finding out! For who has known the mind of the Lord? (Augustine 2014, 75)

Further complicating his view, while Augustine does not see God as determining individual volition, he does see all men’s wills as weak and tainted by the sin of Adam. Here is where Augustine takes his own sense of inner conflict and struggle with his will to overcome his habits and generalizes it to all mankind. The fall of man is his own story, his own struggle with the moral nature of himself and man. As he says in *Confessions*:

When I was trying to reach a decision about serving the Lord my God, as I had long intended to do, it was I who willed to take this course and again it was I who willed not to take it. It was I and I alone. But I neither willed to do it nor refused to do it with my full will. So I was at odds with myself. I was throwing myself into confusion. All this happened to me although I did not want it, but I did not prove there was some second mind in me besides my own. It only meant that my mind was being punished. My action did not come from me, but from the

19 In Augustine’s time, a common conception of fate was astrological fatalism, or the position of the stars when one is born determines all things that will happen. He later completely rejects this kind of fatalism in *The City of God* (Sun 2012, 35).
sinful principle that dwells in me. It was part of the punishment of a sin freely committed by Adam, my first father. (Augustine 1961, 173)

As Larry Siedentop says in *Inventing the Individual*, “Augustine sees himself in the human species and the human species within himself. The equality of our plight underpins everything he wrote as a Christian” (Siedentop 2014, 101). For Augustine, the fall of the soul is a turning away from God, just as Plotinus’ souls turned to look out from the sphere rather than in towards the light, and isolation. And this is very personal for him since competing forces in the heart of man can cause a person to flee from his own self, causing a loss of identity. While his concept of original sin may be anachronistic to modern ears and holistic rather than individualistic, his methodology of exploring and examining his inner most subjective self is not.  

As much as he intellectually desired it, Augustine believes his conversion could only be accomplished with grace; his own reason and will are just not strong enough. He says, “The mind gives an order to the body and is at once obeyed, but when it give an order to itself, it is resisted” (Augustine 1961, 172). Over and over he makes the point that he is almost of two wills and he cannot quite get to where he desires just by commanding his own mind. He sums it up as:

The same is true when the higher part of our nature aspires after eternal bliss while our lower self is held back by the love of temporal pleasure. It is the same soul that wills both, but it wills neither of them with the full force of the will. So it is wrenched in two and suffers great trials, because while truth teaches it to prefer one course, habit prevents it from relinquishing the other. (Augustine 1961, 175)

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20 It is important to recognize that Augustine’s concept of Original Sin was a way of explaining man’s moral dilemma while rejecting the Manichean dualistic view of good and evil, which denied the omnipotence of God. According to Manichean teaching, the story of Adam and Eve is the conclusion of a narrative begun in ages past when the powers of Light and Darkness first came into conflict (O’Brien 1978, 57).
He probes “the hidden depths of my soul” before having a break down and then hearing
the sing-song voice of a child, the voice of grace perhaps, pointing him in the right
direction (Augustine 1961, 177). For, like Paul, he regards the human will as frail and
dependent on divine support. Even after his conversion to the Catholic faith, he does not
see it as sufficient to enable him to act correctly, such is the stain of original sin in his
view. Unlike his contemporary Pelagius, who viewed God as a giver of laws that men
could freely satisfy if they chose to, Augustine thought the Kantian ‘ought’ that we
should be is unattainable by our will alone (Siedentop 2014, 106-107).²¹ Pelagius
dismissed this notion of some mysterious inner weakness, such as original sin. He
thought that human nature was essentially free and well-created, and the general misery
of men must be due to some external force outside their true selves. Pelagius thought it
was the social habits of the pagan past, which he fought against Christians adopting and
instead sought to reform, as being responsible for the general misery of men. As Brown
says, “…the difference between Augustine and Pelagius was capable of ramifying from
the most abstract issues of freedom and responsibility, to the actual role of the individual
in the society of the later Empire” (Brown 2000, 350-352).

But Augustine’s adamant belief in original sin as a hereditary stain transmitted
through every generation of humankind, was a meme that would permanently change
Christian, and thus Western European thinking, about the individual, free will and human
agency. While Augustine demonstrates a deep introspective self, struggling between its
intellectual aspirations and its primal desires, his codifying of original sin in Catholic

²¹ Pelagius was a British born monk who was a contemporary and adversary of Augustine. At the
heart of his position was an insistence upon the principle that “ought implies can,” i.e. that it is
unacceptable to require individuals to perform actions that they cannot in fact perform. While Augustine
won the war of Catholic doctrine on this issue and the need for divine grace, in modern American culture
the Pelagian meme is more of the norm; as Walt Disney said, “If you can dream it, you can do it.”
Doctrines are one of several contradictory aspects of his writings. Augustine invents the inner self but does not credit that inner self with the strength to confront the moral landscape that one faces. At the heart of Augustine’s metamorphosis was his judgment that the self was not sufficient unto itself. As Karl Weintraub framed it, man was neither wise enough nor strong enough to set himself as the law (Weintraub 1982, 46). From a modern vantage point the Christian doctrine of original sin in its classical form offends both rationalists and moralists by maintaining the seemingly absurd position that man sins inevitably and by a fateful necessity, but nevertheless, he should be held responsible for his actions. Sin is deemed natural for man in the sense that it is universal but not in the sense that it is necessary; it is a defect in the will. Thus the contradictory position emerges that the will is free according to Augustine, but not free to do good (Niebuhr 241, 243). Nevertheless, Augustine did raise the modern question of how does one define a viable concept of free will in the face of external determinism dictated either by religion or physicality.22

CONCLUSIONS

Augustine was a remarkable individual who was responsible for bringing memes into Western thought that still prevail today. Medieval thought is decidedly informed by Augustine as is the Reformation, as will be shown in Chapter Seven on Luther. Augustine was aware of himself not only as an individual, whose conscious mind was struggling with the enigmas of human existence, but also as a witness and participant in

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22 Determinism is a modern term for Democritus' ancient idea that causal deterministic laws control the motion of atoms, and that everything - including human minds - consists merely of atoms in a void.
the universal historical process (Gurevich 1995, 92). He distinctly exhibited many of the indicators of modern individualism that were laid out in Chapter Two.

Clearly in the *Confessions* and *Soliloquies* he articulates the first four attributes with frank openness. He displays a first-person standpoint, and is clearly his own self in relation to other beings, most notably God and the phenomenal world around him. He strongly exhibits the rationality and self-reflectiveness required to abstract two versions of one self, the examiner and the judge. In fact, that is the whole of *Confessions*. He articulates his tripartite view of the soul in multiple writings, alternating between memory, knowledge and will or existence, reason and will, but always focused on will. Moreover, he definitely recognized the dignity and worth of the individual, not as a part of a larger world soul, but as a being whose unique identity endures after death in the memories of others and in the resurrection of the body, and is precious unto its self.

Augustine strongly displays the critical reflective questioning of a transcendent self, capable of reflective questioning and seeing what could lie beyond. He also displays aspects of the responsibility attribute, although his doctrine of original sin and grace clouds his perspective on individual moral agency and human freedom. While holding human beings responsible, he also makes it clear the ‘ought’ in moral behavior is only achievable when coupled with divine grace. Thus, he accepts responsibility but limits human freedom and autonomy. It is important to note that when Augustine says in the *Confessions*, “At last my mind was free…”, he is following Paul in suggesting that this freedom is neither willed nor earned but bestowed by God’s grace along with healing to mend a broken spirit (O’Brien 1978, 55).
Overall it is Augustine’s counsel on plumbing one’s inmost self that is strikingly modern; he offers stronger advice than most modern introspective talk therapists. He clearly articulates an inner self that became a pervasive cultural meme visible in subsequent generations of Western writings. This quote from one of his last sermons is a perfect example, where he states:

Whoever does not want to fear, let him probe his inmost self. Do not just touch the surface; go down into yourself; reach into the farthest corner of your heart. Examine it then with care: see there, whether a poisoned vein of the wasting love of the world still does not pulse, whether you are not moved by some physical desires, and are not caught in some law of the senses; whether you are never elated with empty boasting, never depressed by some vain anxiety; then only can you dare to announce that you are pure and crystal clear, when you have sifted everything in the deepest recesses of your inner being. (Brown 2000, 436)

This quote clearly could have come out of modern meditative treatment technique, such as mindfulness. Augustine’s self-presentation leads to self-realization, using himself and his own subjective experience to arrive at a larger truth. And for him, that larger truth was the Christian God, cementing a clear link between his concept of inner self and the Christian mindset. This makes Augustine the pivotal bridge between the ancient world, which was literally collapsing around him, and modern Western individualism. He made himself a character in his own literary work and tells a grand narrative of redemption that will not be surpassed until Dante.

The crucial point however, is that Augustine was driven to this deep introspection of the inner self by his search for God and his conversion to the Catholic faith. There is a clear link in all his writings that couple the two in every aspect of his thinking. Indeed, the whole Christian doctrine of creation and the Christian view of man are pivotal in the development of Augustine’s concept of individuality. The individual is a creature of
infinite possibilities, which cannot be fulfilled during his temporal existence but only through his salvation in Christ. This salvation does not mean absorption into the divine, as in the Neoplatonic model. Rather, man can attain the highest reaches of self-consciousness and still retain his individual self (Niebuhr 1989, 170).

Augustine was one of the most prolific writers in the Christian tradition, influencing the faith as well as Western thinking on the individual by creating a new concept: the idea of the inner self. Through his inventions of the soliloquy and the autobiography he gave his new meme durable methods of transmission that allowed it to flourish and reproduce widely. Much of Augustine’s doctrine still prevails, some does not, however the psychology of the inner self and introspection has prevailed and dominated Western thought thanks in part to Augustine’s Christian perspective.
CHAPTER FOUR

ABELARD AND THE INTENTIONAL- SELF MEME

The intent of this chapter is to show how the individualism meme, as initiated by Augustine, is further advanced by Peter Abelard (1079 -1142), Heloise (1100 -1164), Guibert of Nogent (1055 -1124) and later William of Ockham (1285 -1347). Abelard is one of the best multi-dimensional examples of this period because he demonstrates emergent individualism in multiple aspects. He and Guibert both pen personal autobiographies, and his philosophical focus on the particular versus the universal, followed by Ockham’s work on nominalism. Most importantly his emphasis on intentionality, along with Heloise, exhibited and reified a key indicator of modern individualism. That is the recognition of an individual mind’s intentions as directing human acts based on free will.¹

BACKGROUND

Abelard was not a singular example of the emerging sense of self in the twelfth century renaissance, indeed Heloise outshines him in demonstrating an authentic inner self, but Abelard, followed by Ockham codify the intentional-self meme. It is a long jump from Augustine in the fifth century to Abelard in the twelfth century. Indeed, it was a tenuous thread of tradition that linked the ancient world, which Augustine closed out, to 12th century Europe.

With the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West, the Church became the main civilizing force in Europe, and literacy became largely the preserve of the clergy.

¹ Intentionality in its philosophical definition is that property of many mental states and events by which they are directed at or about or of objects and states of affairs in the world (Searle 1983,1). It is used here as the conscious recognition that I, as an individual, have an intention based on my will to act on something and from a moral perspective, that inner intention can have as much weight as the act itself.
Outside the monasteries the bonds of society were ethnic and hierarchical with, in some cases as with the Carolingians, a divinely authorized ruler at the head. Overall, the general level of learning was sufficiently low as to limit the exchange of complex ideas until around the year 1050 (Morris 1987, 20, 36). The very word human or humanitas was used in a pejorative sense to indicate human frailty until the 12th century, when it began to recover some of its former ancient meaning and dignity (Morris 1987, 10). With the exception of Boethius (480 -524), and Otloh of St. Emmeram (c.1010 – c.1072), autobiographical writings are relatively rare during this timeframe. Furthermore, Otloh’s writings, while remarkably objective about his own self, are what Willemien Otten calls autohagiography, which is an attempt to hide the real self beneath the self-chosen image of the saint (McCarthy 1997, 139).

It was not until the 12th century, when the troubadours of France introduced a new meme for the further expression of feeling by writing love poems in the first-person singular, when almost all artistic endeavors were collective. These were often written in the voice of a knight and expressed a vast first-person singular, when written by men. The women troubadours however, wrote mostly for purely personal reasons and authored the true breakthrough of love poems as a vehicle of deep self-expression, seeking to be acknowledged for who they were and seeking a voice in how the relationship was conducted (Bogin 1980, 68, 72).

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2 Europe had no word corresponding to the republica of the Roman world or to the state of the modern world, inferring borders (Morris 1987, 20). The term natio, however, being the Latin for nation, was commonly used to refer to a people, or race, or class of peoples.

3 Otloh, a monk of St. Emmeram, wrote an autobiographical account of his visions and dreams called Liber visionum. Otloh’s Liber is a spiritual biography, and was novel in the eleventh century as it included much self-examination and self-objectivity. He used his personal experiences to describe his own identity and the accounts of other people’s visions to define the larger collective identity (Joyce 2005, 95).
Christianity was the only organized worldview in most of Europe in this timeframe (with the exception of the Islamic Iberian Peninsula and pagan strongholds in the Northeast), and the only one that most of the population were aware of, making membership in society and the Church identical in many respects (Morris 2012, 60). The interior focus, which was so revolutionary in the early church, was significantly diminished by the year 1000 however, and had degenerated into rites, rituals and penitential practices with little thought asked of the individual congregant. European society largely regarded kings and higher clergy as divinely inspired and looked to them for direction, believing they could summon supernatural forces through ritualized prayer or providing divine justice, thereby influencing the physical world. As a result, they did not consider individual intention when assessing the morality of an action or interpreting the words of authority (Radding 1985, 153).

A dark image of humanity often pervaded the Christian view, as well represented in the work of Cardinal Lotario dei Segni, later Pope Innocent III, who in 1195 penned one of the most popular and influential works of the medieval era, *De Miseria Humane Conditionis*, or *The Misery of the Human Condition*. Utilizing the Bible as his primary source, Segni wrote a three-part treatise detailing the wretchedness of man’s conception, the disgusting physical aspect of humans, and the many miseries man must endure in his lifetime (Lewis 1978, 2). To be fair, Segni did intend to write a treatise with the oppositional view on the dignity of human nature but it was never completed, and *De Miseria* was so popular it could cast the entire medieval era in a dark light when viewed retrospectively from the early modern position.⁴

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⁴ The popularity of *De Miseria* is based on 672 extant manuscripts from the era, the quotations from it in other works, most notably Chaucer, the printing of 52 editions by the middle of the 17th century,
Unlike Augustine, Abelard was born into this belief system, not undergoing the same tormenting decision to convert. Christian traditions were embedded into everyone’s life and the Church stood above and beyond the independent judgment of individuals. For the majority of medieval Christians, the convictions of their faith were not abstract beliefs, but rather validated through their everyday experience. They saw the workings of the saints and the Holy Mother and the devil through either divine intercession or the evil misfortune they experienced. Thus, for many years, the rich cultural tradition of the ancient world was maintained by a small minority of the literate. It is the premise herein however, that basic cultural orientations such as individualism and collectivism are not static attributes of given societies, but adapt to socioeconomic change and environmental conditions. Economic development tends to drive a shift toward some of the cultural syndromes associated with individualism and away from some of the cultural conditions associated with collectivism, resulting in increased emphasis on individual freedom-focused values and reduced focus on traditional hierarchies (Inglehart and Oyserman 2004, abstract). Such was the case in Europe after the year 1000; climate conditions had begun to improve and crop production grew significantly, expanding the population and in turn the economy, as trade and cities began to grow.

This also led to increasing power struggles between rulers and the church in what Thomas Bisson calls the crisis of the twelfth century, eventually resulting in more

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and the fact that it was translated into eight different vernacular languages by the end of the 17th century (Lewis 1978, 3).

5 Charles Radding phrased it dramatically when he said the light of Western culture was probably never closer to extinction that it was in the seventh century when the only surviving literature was largely hagiographic works of little intellectual accomplishment (Radding 1985, 110).
secularized governments and nation states. But it is this change in environment that also opened the door for a cultural shift. This example of changing environmental conditions allowed for the cultural evolutionary adaptation towards individualism, which we see displayed in Abelard, Heloise, Guibert of Nogent (1055-1124), and later William of Ockham. As limned in this chapter, we see this cultural adaptation in four aspects of their writings: autobiography, the ethics of intentionalism, nominalism and conceptualism, and the theory of natural rights.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Abelard and Guibert, who was Abbot of Nogent, both follow Augustine with autobiographical writings in which they are the center of the narrative. Abelard’s *Historia Calamitatum*, or *Abelard’s Adversities* as it is known in English, is an honest attempt at self-disclosure, albeit not with the same level of inwardness and introspection as Augustine’s *Confessions*. Abelard’s *Adversities* does exemplify his consciousness of himself by engaging the reader’s feelings as he describes his own calamities and sentiments, although it was tinged with an arrogant pride that partially masks the real inner man. No one can read it or hear it “dry-eyed” as Heloise says in her first letter to him after seeing it (Abelard and Heloise 2003, 48).

Guibert on the other hand, writes an autobiographical memoir that tries to emulate Augustine’s *Confessions*, though he also fails to meet Augustine’s standard of deep

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6 Secular as defined here connotes worldly and/or temporal, as in the state of being separate, and does not connote anti-religious as it is sometimes used today. Historically, the word "secular" was not related or linked to religion, but was a freestanding term in Latin, relating to any mundane endeavor. With regard to the power struggles, Bisson gives several examples of monumental power struggles that occurred on the eve of the twelfth century in *The Crisis of the Twelfth Century* such as: the Norman Conquest of 1066, the Investiture Crisis of 1075, the First Crusade starting in 1095, and the Christian recapture of Toledo.
critical self-examination except for a few passages. Guibert starts his *Memoirs* in the same prayer style as Augustine, stating:

> I confess to Thy Majesty, O God, my endless wanderings from Thy paths, and my turning back so often to the bosom of Thy Mercy, directed by Thee in spite of all. (Benton 1970, 35)

And he sounds remarkably like Augustine with his inwardness when he says:

> Holy God, while my wits, recovering from the drunkenness of my inner being, come back to Thee, although at other times I do not go forward, yet at least meanwhile I am not turning from knowledge of my self. How could I catch even a glimpse of Thee if my eyes were blind to see myself? (Benton 1970, 37)

In his book on the First Crusade, Guibert speaks of the difficulty of writing the history of the self. His somewhat rambling autobiography has more accounts of the motivations and behavior of others than self-introspection. Colin Morris highlights the following passage as substantiation of his assertion that self-knowledge was a generally popular ideal by the twelfth century. Guibert stated:

> It is hardly surprising if we make mistakes in narrating the actions of other people, when we cannot express in words even our own thoughts and deeds; in fact, we can hardly sort them out in our own minds. It is useless to talk about intentions, which, as we know, are often so concealed as scarcely to be discernible to the understanding of the inner man. (Morris 1987, 66)

The doubts Guibert expresses in the quote above about intentions contrasts markedly with Abelard’s self-assurance in writing a whole book on the subject of intention and its relationship to sin, which is his treatise called *Ethica* or *Ethics*. These discussions of intentionality and the inner man (*interior homo* as Guibert expresses it) were not inventions of Abelard or Guibert; rather they were part of the ongoing debate of intellectuals, in the schools and monasteries of the twelfth century (Clanchy 2003, 298).
Guibert and Abelard both demonstrate individual voices of self-expression after a long gap from Augustine, though Abelard would disagree with Guibert about intentions.

Self-expression and self-knowledge started to become dominant themes among the literate of the twelfth century. In fact, Abelard offered an alternate name for his *Ethics of Know Thyself*, emulating Plato.\(^7\) It is this aspect, what Richard Logan calls the self gradually coming to behold itself as an inner entity in its own personal phenomenal space and a unique entity in the world, as was evident in Augustine, that we see emerging again with the twelfth century renaissance (Logan 1986, 254).

Abelard uses the letter format to recount the individual struggles of an individual who by choice and action shapes himself. While his *Historia Calamitatum* clearly is not at the same level of individualism or subjectivity as a modern autobiography, it compares fairly well with Renaissance era autobiographies such as Benvenuto Cellini’s (1500 - 1571). Both men use summarized episodes of their lives to convey a larger message about the whole man and a larger truism or moral; and both men certainly had a broad array of extraordinary experiences upon which to draw. In contrast with *The Confessions* however, Abelard’s story lacks a conversion point whereat he recognizes his own sins and begs forgiveness in the style of Augustine. Abelard continually emphasizes his own brilliance and the envy of others as the source of his misfortunes, showing a troubling lack of self-reflection and a stunted relational self, unable to understand the other.

Abelard had a foot in two of the three class structures governing society in the 1100’s. He was born into minor nobility, and later became a monk (somewhat unwillingly out of shame). The division of labor in medieval society, with the higher
clergy and nobility having the relative luxury of education, gave them an opportunity to
develop individually, which the working peasant could never have afforded.

Guibert, Abelard and Heloise all moved that individuality meme forward
significantly with their autobiographical accounts, letters and writings; especially Abelard
and Heloise with a heart wrenching story that encompasses many intense human
emotions and personality characteristics such as love, lust, betrayal, subterfuge, anger,
hypocrisy, anguish and shame. As Étienne Gilson says of them, “If all we need for a
Renaissance is to find individuals developed to the highest point, does not this pair
suffice?” (Gilson 2004, 126). Unlike the metaphoric women of courtly love tales,
Heloise is a real flesh and blood woman and she speaks openly about her passions and
her anguish in a self-reflexive manner that is clearly more individualistic than many later
Renaissance era authors such as Cellini, whose autobiography does not betray an ounce
of introspection.

Karl Weintraub, author of The Value of the Individual – Self and Circumstance in
Autobiography, disagrees that Abelard and Heloise saw themselves as real individuals,
arguing that their self-concepts were totally formed by models and conformance to the
Church. (This is analogous to Jacob Burckhardt’s position that individuality was not born
until the fifteenth century Italian Renaissance, which this thesis challenges.) Weintraub
observes that they lived their lives by the guidance of models and did not write a script to
fit their own lives, but rather sought to fit their personalities into scripts already written,
such as when Heloise drew on the speech Pompey’s wife Cornelia had made about
ruining a great man’s career.8 He says that such a reliance on models is not found in the

8 After Pompey was killed, Cornelia rejected suicide as an unfitting act for his widow and says,
“Great Pompey, it (my soul) could see your pyre and not take refuge in death …I want no sword, no rope,
autobiographies of those who seek to understand themselves as an individual (Weintraub 1982, 89). This seems an incongruous conclusion, which would also preclude most of the Renaissance humanists from being considered reflective individuals as well. The humanists were also well schooled, as was Heloise, in classical literature and history and frequently referred to classical models in trying to make sense of their own lives. Indeed, one could argue that modern individuals still do the same and seek to model celebrities such as entertainers or royalty as paragons in modern society.

Further, the relational self necessarily relies on the context arising from social and cultural connections and interactions. Even in the modern world, there is no such thing as a pure individual; we are all part of a collective self with shared orientations, values, and languages that shape our internal thoughts. For the relational self, the interactions with others and with God are the primary means of expressing personal identity, but this does not exclude an introspective self as well. The important distinction is that pre-modern individuality was less autonomous and more grounded in inclusion. Pre-modern individuality, according to Franz-Josef Arlinghaus, was more focused on being better, while modern individuality is more focused on being different. Being better keeps the relationship to a group in the forefront, while being different tries to cut the relationship (Arlinghaus 2015, 26-27). So, while the autonomous meme of individuality still had not evolved, portraying Abelard and Heloise as lacking a real self-concept of themselves seems unjustified.

no drop head first though empty air: heartbreak alone must kill Great Pompey’s widow.” She veiled her head in funereal black and sworn to shun the light, interred herself in cavernous depths of the hull to hug her bitter pain (Toohey 2004, 187). Heloise certainly emulated Cornelia in taking a veil and hugging her pain in silence but this does not mean her individuality was any less as a result.
In fact, Heloise demonstrates remarkable individuality as well as a feminist philosophical bent in her letters. As Gilson states:

If Abelard is a fatal obstacle to Burckhardt’s thesis, Heloise is in her own right a far more dangerous one, not so much because of the passionate ardor with which she analyzes herself, nor of the defiant air with which she publishes her most intimate secrets, but because of the ideas she expresses and the very content of what she says. Abelard himself was perplexed by it. (Gilson 2004, 134)

It is likely Heloise was equally as learned as Abelard but was of course limited by her gender at that time, and she dutifully, if not quietly, submitted to his will. She did undoubtedly influence Abelard though, with her expansive understanding of the ancient classics and her passionate feelings about the pagan sages. She conveyed to Abelard the importance of the moral standing of Socrates and the Stoics and he incorporated her ideas, later putting in his *Theologia* that the pagans were as good as Christians (Clanchy 1998, 278).

Heloise’s writings also display a sharp intellect and keen ability to analyze not only her own feelings and intentions, but those of others as well. She conveys a far more authentic and self-aware portrait of herself than does Abelard in their correspondence. It could be argued that these letters (and his guilt about the whole affair with Heloise) were the impetus that gave Abelard the idea to write about intentionality in his *Ethics* much later. In her first extant letter to him she told him she was at once, “wholly guilty though I am, I am also … wholly innocent. It is not the deed but the intention of the doer which makes the crime” (Heloise 2003, 53). Abelard went on to write the *Ethics* but she expressed the essence of its main tenet to him very succinctly first – if sin depended on the intention of the doer, then neither Heloise nor Abelard were sinful.
As argued in Chapter One, the insistent appeal of the Christian moral system rests on the principle that it depends on the interior will of an individual person. Moreover, the will and its subsequent human act, depends essentially on the intention that directs it, since the intention itself comes only from the will (Gilson 1991, 358). Thus, moral life becomes interiorized. The profound reality of Christianity is that it is basically existentialistic at its core.\(^9\)

The will’s intention in every moment counts because any moment could be your last, and it is the state of faith and active sin in an individual leading to that singular moment that salvation rests upon. This kind of self-knowledge as a path to God, which began with Augustine, was expanded by the monastic tradition, particularly Abelard’s chief rival, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 – 1153), who wrote to Pope Eugenius:

> Begin by considering yourself – no, rather, end by that …For you, you are the first; you are also the last.

And was also evident in Guibert, who as Abbot of Nogent said:

> No preaching seems to me more profitable than that which reveals a man to himself, and replaces in his inner self, that is in his mind, what has been projected outside; and which convincingly places him, as in a portrait before his own eyes…whoever has the duty of teaching, if he wishes to be perfectly equipped, can first learn in himself, and afterwards profitably teach to others, what the experience of his inner struggles has taught….

(Morris 1987, 66-67)

Guibert and Bernard clearly articulate the need for self-analysis and reflection and more importantly to see ourselves as others see us. This is an early manifestation of the reflective self, which is an active agent of its own realization, both in its own

\(^9\) Existentialism here meaning the human way of existing in the world, and our human essence or nature, given our will, consciousness and recognition of our own mortality. Existentialism assumes our nature as humans is the nature we make for ourselves by exercising our human freedom.
consciousness and in its relationship to the phenomenal world around it. While this may be most manifest of interiority, it also exhibits that aspect of a mental state which consists in the *aboutness* or *directedness* to things, objects, states of affairs, events and other people that constitutes intentionality.

Several scholars, such as Logan and Arlinghaus, suggest that this heightened awareness of the self actually comes from the isolation that is characteristic of monastic lives and was particularly true of Abelard after he cloistered himself away in shame after his castration and Heloise who was cloistered in a convent.\footnote{Although the Cluniac monastic experience might be an exception to this observation as they were highly corporate.} The monastic religious tradition did provide an autonomous viewpoint, separate from the corporate culture characteristic of the medieval era, which allowed for both introspection and allowed the self to see events and objects with an individual perspective (Logan 1986, 258).\footnote{It is an interesting parallel that linear perspective in painting was introduced shortly after the twelfth century, allowing one to see things from their own perspective, from the view of the individual versus the corporate view.} This is another example of Christianity providing the impetus for the evolution towards an introspective and individualistic approach.

It was also during this period that the practice of individual private confession became widely adopted in the Church, probably between 1000 and 1200 (Morris 1987, 73). The stress was not only upon confession and absolution, but on the sincerity of the individual in confessing one’s sins or true contrition as discerned by the priest. By 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council made confession to a priest obligatory on an annual basis at a minimum.\footnote{Arlinghaus argues that though this seems like convincing evidence of individuality, reflecting on sins in pre-modern times was primarily oriented towards a connection to specific punishments, as Dante} Overall, even though individual confession led to self-reflection, medieval
Christianity was highly communal and not conducive to leaving one alone with one’s thoughts. Which is why Abelard’s focus on intentionality was so transformative.

The scholastic era had sought to reconcile contrarian thoughts from the well-respected ancient philosophers with Christianity, so as to quell any notion that Christianity was not the one true path. Among the scholastics, Abelard was one of the most accomplished of the medieval scholastic logicians and philosophers of the twelfth century; and it was in his theological writings and his work on ethics, as opposed to his autobiography, that he put forth the distinguishing meme of intentionalism. Prior to 1100, the practice of settling philosophical or theological disputes was to cite authoritative writings from the ancients or the Bible. Starting with his work *Sic et Non*, Abelard however, encourages students to challenge authority, question uncertainties and reconcile contradictions. The citing of authoritative works is, to his mind, a matter of interpretation, and his constant rejoinder is to heed the intention of the author to understand the meaning of the text, though the interpretation of the author’s intention is itself an intentional act.

Abelard even goes so far as to say that questioning the authority of the saints does not excuse one from using one’s own individual judgment (Radding 1985, 205). He was also perhaps influenced by the larger power struggles happening across Christendom in his era. The effect was evident in the larger cultural milieu and in the legal realm. The twelfth century saw the start of the separation of the secular and ecclesiastical realms. A pivotal distinction was made between sin and crime, separating the two domains when it came to punishments; the royal law could punish a violation of the secular law, the

outlined, without personalized values or reflections on one’s inner self. Nevertheless, it is an institutionalized form of self-reflection that could not but help reinforce individual consideration of intentions and actions.
church would punish sins. Further, the canon lawyers set up two types of authority for sins. For internal sins, thoughts and desires that were against God’s will, there was contrition, confession, penance and absolution. For external sins, which were acts that went against the corporate body of the church teachings, there was the ecclesiastical law (Siedentop 2014, 232).

Abelard reinforced this new canon of thinking about internal sins with his sphere of conscience and intent, because only God could see into one’s mind. Thus, it was the purview of the individual, setting up a sphere of personal responsibility and personal autonomy that became fundamental to the development of modern individualism.

Evidence of how far the individualism meme had evolved in this regard is found in canon law from the twelfth century, which now recognized individual consent between two people as being sufficient to constitute a valid, sacramental marriage, without any other formalities being necessary (Tierney 1997, 56). Choice and intention were now recognized as within the sphere of the personal individual.

As previously stated, Abelard may have gotten the inspiration for his ideas on intentionality from Heloise. Her letters to Abelard are a psychological tour de force of the inner mind wrestling with intentions versus conscience. She states:

In my case, the pleasures of lovers, which we shared have been too sweet – they cannot displease me, and can scarcely shift from my memory. Wherever I turn they are always there before my eyes, bringing with them awakened longings and fantasies which will not even let me sleep. Even during the celebration of the Mass, when our prayers should be purer, lewd visions of those pleasures take such a hold upon my unhappy soul that my thoughts are on their wantonness instead of on prayers. I should be groaning over the sins I have committed, but I can only sigh for what I have lost…Men call me chaste; they do not know the hypocrite I am. They consider purity of the flesh a virtue, though virtue belongs not the body but to the soul. I can win praise in the eyes of men but deserve none before God, who searches our hearts and loins and sees in our darkness. I
am judged religious at a time when there is little in religion which is not hypocrisy, when whoever does not offend the opinions of men receives the highest praise. (Abelard and Heloise 2003, 68-69)

With these words, written well before Abelard wrote his *Ethics*, Heloise exhibits a deep introspective approach that not only acknowledges her passionate love, but also is keenly philosophical in its push towards understanding the intentionality behind human will. Her writing is far more individualistic than Guibert’s, and far more honest and introspective than Abelard’s. It was perhaps this exchange of letters that crystallized Abelard’s thinking and philosophical substantiation on the importance of inner motives and intentions as an internalization of true faith or sinfulness, rather than a ritual-based approach to questions of salvation. His approach represented a fundamental break with the tradition preceding the twelfth century where people were often condemned for their acts without any consideration of their true intentions or emotional state (Gurevich 1995, 127). It would be of course facile to say that Abelard alone influenced the entire society; many factors were driving the larger cultural change, but he understood it and he was the one who codified it in his theological treatise on ethics.

In fact, Abelard develops a fairly complicated moral psychology and lists the components of behavior as: mental vice, will or desire, pleasure, voluntariness, consent and intention, and the action or deed itself. But he makes clear that the only one that matters is individual intention and consent. For Abelard, sin was internal acceptance of evil by the individual. One either embarks on a path of sin or renounces it based on one’s own moral choice. He makes clear that sin is not the deed itself but the consent to it. He states in *Ethics*:

> Therefore, any kind of carrying out of deeds is irrelevant to increasing a sin. Nothing taints the soul but what belongs to it, namely the consent that
we’ve said is alone the sin, not the will preceding it or the subsequent doing of the deed...So it isn’t a sin to lust after someone else’s wife, or to have sex with her; the sin is rather to consent to this lust or to this action. (Abelard 1995, 10-11)

Employing this logic, he then regarded free from guilt those persons not familiar with the Gospel, who did not know the moral laws and teachings it contained as when he says of those who crucified Christ:

On the other hand if such people’s ignorance is hardly to be counted as a sin at all, then why does the Lord himself pray for those crucifying him ...For where no fault preceded, there doesn’t appear to be anything to be excused. (Abelard 1995, 24)

With this logic, Abelard asserts that the core of Christian morality is radically intentionalist. He presages Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals*, which also sought to highlight the intentionalist core of traditional Christian morality. All that matters in determining the moral worth of an action is the agent’s intentions alone in consenting to and committing that action. Thus, deeds and consequences are morally indifferent. Morality cannot be based on moral luck or getting the right outcome for the wrong reason or vice versa. As he states:

Indeed we call an intention good (that is, right) in itself. We don’t however say that “doing” takes on any good in itself, but that it proceeds from a good intention. Hence even if the same thing is done by the same person at different times, nevertheless because of the diversity of the intention, his doing it is called now good, now bad. (Abelard 1995, 23)

Thus, only subjective individually conscious beings, capable of experience, exhibit intentionality and can make moral choices.\(^{13}\) Abelard avoids the moral relativism charge his version of morality may suggest by asserting that his concept is based in the goodness and love of God. Good intentions demonstrate love for God and neighbor, bad

\(^{13}\) Intentionality is not the same as consciousness however. Many conscious states are not intentional, such as a sudden sense of elation. If I have an intention, it must be an intention to do something and directed at or about objects or affairs of the world (Searle 1983, 3-4).
intentions cause “sin which is scorn for God or consent to evil” (Abelard 1995, 38). A person who acts according to what he believes to be for the love of God incurs no moral fault, for if he is to be truly morally good his belief must be innocent of sin. Likewise, with penitence, it must be that “the love of God brings me to this penitence and draws my mind to sorrow for this sinful consent only because in it I have offended God …” (Abelard 1995, 39).

Bernard of Clairvaux also wrote about the human capacity to love, calling it truly divine, yet he places the conscious intellect on a higher level, for without it we could not have the discernment necessary to make proper choices. In his view, human dignity requires freedom of will, even to make wrong choices. As Bernard argues, “Reason is given to the will for instruction, not destruction.” Good choices are preceded by the exercise of right reason. But choice is free, and Bernard values the will as the most important faculty in determining one’s happiness (Houston 2007, 2). In this sense, he reinforces Abelard’s stance on intentionality and lays out the beginnings of individual autonomy, the confidence in human beings to come to the right conclusions using their intellect, albeit perhaps only after considerable persuasion.

Abelard’s Ethics was a prodigious step in dignifying the individual and defining the intentionality meme. He places true ethical discernment in the individual versus values imposed by civil or religious institutions. The real impact of this focus back to the individual conscience and intent would not be felt until the Reformation, but Abelard clearly set a meme development in motion when it is coupled with autonomy, and it was propelled by the Christian concern regarding sin and obtaining mercy and forgiveness.
The problem of universals, that is the relation of the individual object with the universal class to which it belonged, and humanity was often the center of this argument (Morris 1972, 64). Abelard played a key role in this debate and was one of the main writers (along with the later William of Ockham) who explored the concept of nominalism during the medieval era. Both Abelard and Ockham are characterized as nominalists, but it is difficult to come up with one definition to characterize nominalism as the nominalists differed among themselves on many important issues. William Courtenay bounds it as, "a nominalist is one who says that only linguistic terms are predictable of many" and both Abelard and Ockham would subscribe to this type of nominalism (Courtenay 1983, 161).

Abelard’s thesis called *Sententia Nominum*, from the first two words of his thesis, caused his disciples to be called nominalists. The term nominalism comes from the Latin word *nomen* (or *name* in English), indicating the nominalist’s position that the entities in one common class or category only share a name, not a real universal substance that exists independently. Abelard initially maintained that the universal is neither a thing nor a concept, but a logical term which describes both things and concepts (Fremantle 1957, 99). This initial concept, taken from Abelard’s teacher Roscelin, was the idea that universals were nothing more than a linguistic phenomenon – they are nothing more than words, which do not exist as real entities. Prior to this, belief in universals was

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14 The differentiation between the terms ancient and modern derives from this debate and the distinction of the *via antiqua* and the *via moderna*, based on two different interpretations of Aristotle. The *via antiqua* was the older realist path which saw universals as ultimately real, while the *via moderna* was the newer nominalist path that saw individuals and particulars as real and universals as names of concepts (Gillespie 2008, 4).
widespread based on Neo-Platonism and was ironically called realism, because it asserted that universals were real, with extra-mental existences, even though they could not be physically seen, and that individual beings were merely particular instances of these universals.¹⁵

Abelard goes beyond Roscelin though and draws a distinction between the two semantic properties that names possess: reference, or what the term applies to (nominatio); and sense (significatio), or what the term brings to mind or the informational content (doctrina), or the concept the word brings to mind (King 2015, plato.stanford.edu). In his Logica, Abelard discusses the intellection of the universals and individuals. To understand a universal term, argues Abelard, we conflate images formed from several realities. On the other hand, with an individual term, we conceptualize a form of a unique being, a form that represents only one individual. When we hear the word, man, a certain concept arises in our mind that is common to all but specific to none. As an example, if we hear the word Socrates, a certain concept manifests itself in our mind, which is the image we have of a specific individual. While the word man, signifies neither Socrates nor any other man, it does not refer to any particular man, even though it denominates all.

With this logic, Abelard moves beyond the extreme nominalism of Roscelin towards a theory of conceptualism, wherein the significance of a term is the informational content that allows an individual to associate that term with a concept. He differentiates between the Aristotelian theory of the transformation of the mind through the inherence

¹⁵ Abelard was one of the last great thinkers whose works were not influenced by the Latin translations of Greek works that became available in the 12th Renaissance. As a result, his transformative ideas are the product of his own reflections and not just the consequence of new sources (Radding 1985, 201).
of a form, and the mind’s possession of a concept – a concept that the individual mind interprets from linguistic signs it has received. Consequently, Abelard proffers a philosophy of the mind based on conceptualism (rather than strict nominalism, which is more individualized in its focus) and which has intentionality as an irreducible feature, since an act of understanding is an intentional act of the mind’s rational power. Abelard argues that an act of understanding is neither identical with, nor a representative likeness of the item understood. It is rather, an intentional act of thinking about and conceptualizing the nature or property of a sensed item (Brower and Guilfoy 2004, 207).

Over a hundred years after Abelard’s death, the Franciscan theologian William of Ockham further expanded the discourse on nominalism. Like Abelard, Ockham’s position changes throughout his writings on universals, but his body of work expounding nominalism and defining natural rights is a definite turning point towards modern individualism. Ockham also argued against the reality of universal essences, not that they absolutely did not exist however, but that we could not ever know them even if they did exist. As a result, God could not be understood by human reason, but only through mystical experience or scriptural revelation (Gillespie 2008, 14). Hence, the skepticism Ockham offered about proofs on the existence of God opened the way for more transcendental or mystical approaches to faith and later to fideism, which will be discussed in later chapters.

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16 No one work contains all the elements of Abelard’s philosophy of the mind. Some are in his Treatise on Understandings, others in Ingredientibus commentary on Porphyry, the Ingredientibus commentary on Aristotle and the Nostrorum. The analytic synthesis above is based on the work of Kevin Guilfoy and Jeffery E. Bowser in the Cambridge Companion to Abelard.
Originally Ockham had believed that a universal concept (for instance man) is separate from the actual act of thinking of it. Eventually, he came to a theory where the universal concept is just the act of abstract cognition or thinking about several objects at once. This cognition then is a result of an individual’s intellect working with the object known, and is “universal” only in the sense of being a mental sign of several things at once and being predicable of them in mental propositions (Brown 1990, xxix). Thus, in both the epistemological aspect (how we come to know or form a universal concept) and ontological aspect (the degree or type of reality possessed by a universal concept) Ockham was a nominalist (Courtenay 1983, 162).

Ockham has a different apprehensiveness with regard to realism than Abelard; he is convinced it is logically self-contradictory. Ockham argues that realism cannot be true because it holds that a universal essence is one thing and many things at the same time. He would argue that the universal says humanity is one thing, but it is also many things because it provides an invisible essence within each individual. This is to say that it is both one thing and not one thing at the same time, which is a contradiction and on this basis, he dismissed it as incoherent. On the other hand, Ockham did believe that things of the same species were in reality, similar, although he rejected as awkward and misleading the notion that they “shared” a particular quality or held it “in common” (Courtenay 1983, 162). Ockham states:

I maintain that a universal is not something real that exists in a subject either inside or outside the mind, but that it has being only as a thought-object in the mind. It is a kind of mental picture, which as a thought-object has a being similar to that which the thing outside the mind has in real existence. (Ockham 1990, 41)
Almost all the predecessors to Abelard and Ockham had argued that natures and essences considered in themselves had some kind of generality or commonness that existed objectively, and in order to become particular entities, their natures had to be individuated. Thus, prior thinking had approached the problem from the general to the specific; top down from the side of the universal while Ockham attacked it from the side of the individual, a change in outlook that Stephen Brown, in his Introduction to Ockham’s *Philosophical Writings* calls Copernican in its repercussions (Brown 1990, xxvii). Presaging some existentialists like Wittgenstein and Heidegger, Ockham saw the structure of the world as derived from linguistic consensus that may not necessarily reflect reality (Cruz and Gerberding 2004, 507). He presaged modern ideas with regard to language, which postulate our communication is based on the conceptual systems that we use in thinking and acting. As he says in his *Philosophical Writings*:

I maintain that a universal is not something real that exists in a subject (of inherence), either inside or outside the mind, but that it has being only as a thought object in the mind… I maintain, therefore, that just as a spoken word is universal and is a genus or a species, but only by convention, in the same way the concept thus mentally fashioned and abstracted from singular things previously known, is universal by its nature. To sum up: The mind’s own intellectual acts are called states of mind. By their nature they stand for the actual things outside the mind or for other things in the mind, just as the spoken words stand for them by convention…. (Ockham 1990, 41-44)

In sum, Ockham took a view that had been put forward initially by Abelard, arguing that knowledge for individuals is extrapolated from the particular and the individual. As William Courtenay states:

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17 He also foreshadowed Luther and Kierkegaard with his ecclesiastical writings where he held that truths of theology can be accessed only by faith; one cannot reason one’s way to knowledge of God.
Abelard and Ockham were both nominalists primarily in the sense that they espoused non-realism... Abelard and Ockham ... (displayed) two different approaches to the relations of thought, language, and things. Both placed their primary emphasis on individual things and considered universal concepts to be derived from and in some sense descriptive of individuals. The world of Abelard, however, was still a world in which logic was an integral part of grammar and rhetoric. For Abelard the process of signification creates the idea; for Ockham the idea signifies. (Courtenay 1983, 160)

Whereas the conventional thinking, based on the Greeks, had been to start with generalities or universals and work down to the individual, Abelard and Ockham turned that on its head by stating that we identify the group based on the individuals within it. This self-affirmation of individuals is a key indicator of the dignity and value of individuals in and of themselves, and it was driven by a Christian theological debate. As Michael Gillespie puts it in his book *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, “Nominalism destroyed the ontological ground of medieval science by positing a chaotic world of radically individual beings” (Gillespie 2008, 35). The individualism inherent in nominalism, combined with Abelard’s ethics of intentionalism, gave birth to a new meme that furthered the cultural evolution of individualism.

*NATURAL RIGHTS*

Modern individualism is embodied in the concept of natural rights, a concept that traces back to Ockham as well. Ockham’s analysis of how the mind works through language and metaphor is remarkably insightful and modern. He used this logic in defense of the Franciscan order against Pope John XXII (reigned 1316-1334).\(^\text{18}\) Ockham

\(^{18}\) Pope Nicholas III, had sanctioned the Franciscan’s vow to live simply and own nothing, not even their own habits, by arranging that everything they used, including their food, was officially the property of the papacy. The Franciscans used their position however, to expound on the evils of the wealth being accumulated by the papacy. Pope John XXII argued that since the Franciscans enjoyed exclusive use of the donations they received, they were the *de facto* owners.
developed his arguments by distinguishing among the various meanings of the Latin word *jus* (law, right) and *dominium* (rule, property) to defend an individual right to property and the Franciscan’s claim that they could renounce the power of appropriating property. Whenever Ockham discussed natural law or natural rights he persistently appealed to right reason as the grounds of the argument (Tierney 1997, 199). Ockham employed a roundabout argument to defend the Franciscan poverty case. First it is important to understand his definition of natural law as laid out in the later Dialogues (also written as part of his protracted dispute with the papacy), in order to understand his assertion that the Franciscan’s natural right to ownership could be renounced at the will of the right-holder. Ockham defines natural law three ways as:

…that is called natural law which is to be observed by those who use natural equity alone without any customary and human legislation. This is called “natural” because its contrary is contrary to the state of nature as originally established, and if all men lived according to natural reason or divine law it (meaning the contrary) should not be observed or done. In this second way… all things are common by natural law, because in the state of nature as originally established all things would have been common, and if after the fall all men lived according to reason all things should have been common and nothing owned, for ownership was introduced because of wickedness…In a third way that is called natural law which is gathered by evident reasoning from the law of nations or another law or from some act, divine or human, unless the contrary is enacted with the consent of those concerned. (Ockham 1995, 286-287)

Ockham employed this same line of thought in his earlier *The Work of Ninety Days* to establish the right of heaven (also in counter argument to John XXII’s claims) as equivalent to a natural right.

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19 Ockham’s life was full of controversy and his theological views, especially those in the *Sentences*, stirred considerable opposition and in 1324 he was summoned to the papal court to answer charges of heresy. Ockham concluded that the pope was in a state of heresy during an analysis of the Franciscan poverty case, and in 1328 he fled to Munich seeking the protection of Louis of Bavaria. Like Abelard, he died excommunicated (Spade 1999, 3).
Accordingly, this right is sometimes called a “natural right,” for every natural right pertains to the right of heaven. (Ockham 1995, 51)

These were further expansions on his original refutation of the Pope’s assertion delineated and argued against in *A Letter to the Friars Minor*:

The fourth assertion (made by the Pope) is that in things consumable by being used, use of fact cannot be separated from ownership or lordship…(Ockham asserts) This assertion plainly conflicts with divine scripture, natural reason and certain experience. For we see that thieves and robbers and others use such things without lordship and ownership…. (Ockham 1995, 5)

Using previously established Canon law on property, Ockham justified the transition from communal property before Adam’s fall, to the contemporary institution of private property. But he makes a crucial point in terms of key language: the owner retains a right (*ius*) to what he owns. As McGrade and Kilcullen say in their introduction to *A Letter to the Friars Minor*, “Ockham’s response is one of the most important texts on natural rights to be found in his work. He distinguishes between a right of the law and court, and a right of heaven, essentially a natural right” (Ockham 1995, xvi).20 Thus, the Pope retained the legal right to the food and clothing the Franciscans used, but they had a right of heaven, a natural right, to use them for their own preservation or comfort.

The idea of natural rights is one of the most important developments in Western individualism and the underlying basis of modern political theory. Christianity drove this idea of rights, for as Ockham explains in *The Work of Ninety Days*, a natural right, or right of heaven is the confluence of right reason being in harmony with things revealed to us by God (Ockham 1995, 50-51).

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20 Modern writers debate about whether a right is a “protected interest” or a “protected choice”. Ockham included both concepts in the phrase *iusa et libertates* (Tierney 2001,189).
Ockham extended his idea further and became one of the first to propose that the legitimacy of government is derived from the consent of the individuals governed - by once again drawing on canon law. In the case of the Church, he saw a pope’s authority over Christians as distinctly and specifically spiritual, and thus it must respect the rights of others, including both rulers and individuals. Ockham saw it not only as his individual right but his duty to expose John XXII’s heretical nature and chastised others that if they did not they were equally guilty. Ockham states:

Anyone, therefore, who wishes to recall me or anyone else of those withdrawing from the obedience of the pseudo-pope and his supporters should attempt to provide a basis for his constitutions...or else he should show ...that a pope cannot fall into heretical perversity, or that someone knowing that a pope is a notorious heretic should obey him. Let no one think, therefore, that because of the multitude of this pseudo-pope’s supporters or because of arguments that are common to heretics and to the orthodox, I would wish to abandon acknowledged truth. (Ockham 1995, 13-14)

In his model, even the meekest layman was obligated to use right reason to preserve the sanctity of the scripture against abuse of power such as John XXII manifested. Ockham calls this out as an individual duty in A Letter to the Friars Minor for everyone, even women, when he states:

Accordingly, knowing that all heretics “have nothing of power or right,” … and also, as far as each person’s state permits, effectively attacked (because “an error not resisted is approved”), when it is certain that the assertion conflicts with a truth of faith, concerns not only a general council or prelates or even the clergy “but also the laity and absolutely every Christian,””...what touches all should be dealt with by all,” from which it follows evidently that a question of faith concerns even Catholic and believing women, on the example of many holy women who with the utmost constancy underwent death and martyrdom for the defense and confession of the orthodox faith…. (Ockham 1995, 8)

This insight was foundational to the first modern democratic state. The American declaration of Independence and the Constitution draw a thread all the way back to Ockham.
Foreshadowing Locke, Ockham lays out a radical view of individual rights and duties that becomes the basis eventually for much of Western political policy.

CONCLUSIONS

It is evident that there was a growing sense of individualism from the 12th to the 14th century based on multiple aspects. These include: the autobiographies of Abelard and Guibert, the letters of Heloise, the philosophical and theological writings of Abelard with his work on intentionality and nominalism, and the extension of nominalism and the development of individual natural rights by William of Ockham. While the 15th century Italians are most often cited for their independence of mind and individualism, it is clear that 12th-14th century Western Europe was well ahead in developing some of the key building blocks of individualism.

Abelard’s treatise on ethics and his focus on individual intention, driven by his Christian need for redemption, were pivotal in furthering this cultural meme. Abelard’s idea of conceptualism and intentionalism was then furthered by Ockham into one of the bulwarks of modern Western society, individual rights. In fact, the famous French anthropologist Louis Dumont said:

…modern civilization differs radically from other civilizations and cultures. The truth is that our culture is permeated by nominalism, which grants real existence only to individuals and not to relations, to element and not to sets of elements. Nominalism, in fact, is just another name for individualism, or rather one its facets. (MacFarlane 1993, 5)

If we accept Dumont’s assessment above with regard to nominalism, it is clear that individualism was birthed in the medieval era and was conceived in Christian thinking. The nominalists turned philosophical and theological logic on its head in asserting that creation was radically particular. This not only established an important
meme of individualism, but also meant that God could not be understood by human 
reason but only through revelation or scripture. In fact, nominalist thinking laid the 
intellectual groundwork for the Reformation.

Clearly Abelard, Heloise and Guibert manifest a first-person standpoint and 
display a consciousness of one’s self in relation to other beings and the phenomenal 
world around it. One could not find two more independent and rebellious figures than 
Heloise and Abelard. They fly in the face of Jacob Burckhardt’s assertion that only the 
conditions in the Italian city states of the 14th and 15th centuries, where men led so intense 
a personal life that they were obliged to talk about it, could bring about real introspection. 
As Abelard’s Adversities and Heloise’s letters show, this self-awareness of one’s intense 
personal journey towards defining an identity was not unique to that time or place. They 
also display the self-reflectiveness and the ability to abstract two versions of one’s self, 
the examiner and the judger, so as to internalize other’s judgments of ourselves into our 
own consciousness. In fact, this is so clear in Abelard and Heloise, and so rooted in their 
Christian belief, that it directly led to Abelard’s ethical treatise on intentionality.

Burckhardt maintains the cause of an absence of individuality in medieval folk is 
none other than the subjugation and standardization of Christianity. He says, “Once 
mistress, the Church does not tolerate the development of the individual. All must be 
resigned to becoming simple links in her long chain and to obeying the laws of her 
institutions” (Gilson 2004, 126). As the last two chapters have shown, exactly the 
opposite is the case, as Christianity and the Christian emphasis on the individual will is a 
driving factor in the evolution of the individualism memes. The medieval era was 
clearly a transition point. While the corporate church still dominated society, Christianity
was also driving a much more individualistic sense of self, including the developing
doctrine of private confession and Purgatory which reflected a focus on the individual
soul. This directly translated into the legal realm as well as an increased emphasis on
individual rights based on Christian canon law. As Brian Tierney says:

> There can be no more holistic image of society than the medieval vision of
> the church as a mystical body; and no more starkly individualistic view of
> human destiny than the medieval vision of the Last Judgment, when each
> soul would stand alone, naked and trembling, before the divine judge.
> (Tierney 2001, 212)

Certainly Abelard and Heloise embrace individual responsibility, accepting
intentionality, and recognizing individual moral agency as an inherent human trait.
Abelard’s *Ethics* is a testament to this, with its focus not on the deed but on the intent.
And finally, Ockham and Abelard reaffirm the dignity of the distinctive person with their
focus on individual rather than the universal. This nominalist revolution enabled a new
ontology, a new logic and a new concept of man and his individuality.
CHAPTER 5

DANTE AND THE RESPONSIBLE-SELF MEME

This chapter will limn the far-reaching impact on the evolution of individualism by examining the major works of Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) including: *The Vita Nuova*, *De Monarchia*, *The Convivio* and most importantly, *The Commedia* as they relate to the meme of the responsible self. Dante could be considered one of the greatest spokespersons for the medieval era as he wrote about responsibility and destiny for his generation in three different dimensions: the religious, the political, and the philosophical. Unlike Augustine or Abelard, Dante was not a cleric; however, his worldview was imbued with a medieval hierarchy of spiritual meanings clearly circumscribed in the world and in the order of the cosmos. Yet he very much understood personal responsibility within that order and reflected that in his writings.

The purpose of this chapter is to show how Dante developed the responsible-self meme, which enabled the freedom for individuals to decide their own identity as a person; or to put it more succinctly, to answer the question “who am I”? Over and over in his writings, Dante makes the case that human beings choose their predicaments; they are not predestined, nor the victims of a faulty environment, nor the misalignment of the stars.\(^1\) Responsible individuals choose to do good or evil. And while they may need divine guidance, as Dante the pilgrim does, they take an active and responsible role in their own salvation.

Dante extends his views into the political realm as well as the personal and postulates that in order to lead a truly good and fulfilling life, men must be part of a

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\(^1\) Although Dante did suggest that certain personal predispositions were due to the star one was born under (*Paradiso* XXII) or whose circuit your soul passed through on its way to earth.
society with a just system of laws and a just ruler to enact them. He understood the importance of the individual as well as the importance of a stable society to protect that individual, and as this chapter will show, both were based on the responsible self.

Dante was very much the dualist as outlined in Chapter Two, seeing man as endowed with both an earthly body and an immortal soul. Man’s responsibility is twofold in his view, to enjoy intellectual fulfillment on earth and use his temporal existence fittingly to achieve eternal beatitude in heaven. As he said in the first part of *De Monarchia* when discussing human freedom:

> With this in mind we may understand that this freedom, or basic principle of our freedom, is, as I said, the greatest gift bestowed by God upon human nature, for through it we attain to joy here as men, and to blessedness there, as gods. (Alighieri 2012, 54)

Dante’s dualistic view of leadership, the Church for the spiritual and the Empire for the temporal realm, foreshadows the modern conception of separation of church and state.

*AN ENVIRONMENT OF CHANGING IDEALS*

As the last chapter showed, the introduction of Roman law had started to appear by the 12th century (the *corpus iuris civilis*) adding many new concepts, which formed the basis of the later civil law systems. This secularization movement was evident in literature as well with the rise of epics and sagas in national languages, rather than Latin, and most notably with the courtly love tradition which started in the Middle Ages with the Provencal troubadours. A chivalrous ideal male pursuing the perfect unattainable woman characterized the era of courtly love. It was the idealization of love in a society

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2 Dante endorsed the separation of the Church and Empire and that is perhaps why he put Gratian, the author of much of twelfth century canon law, which was distinct from Royal law, in *Paradiso.*

3 These epics were either stories, but more often songs, which were in the common vernacular. Examples include *Beowulf,* the *Chanson de Roland,* and the *Nibelungenlied* (which Richard Wagner later incorporated into his epic operatic *Ring Cycle*).
where marriage was purely utilitarian and used among the aristocracy as a means to cement power and property within families.

Marrying for love was not common as brides and grooms were pawns in transactions that were viewed as advantageous means of forming an alliance or preserving family wealth and were too important to consider any one individual’s feelings. The Provencal troubadours however, recognized the power of a personal relationship between two individuals, not the Eros of the classical world, which was simply sexual desire, but a true soul mate. In doing so, they introduced a new meme, which spread rapidly and was utilized by Dante in a Christian context. As Joseph Campbell said so eloquently in *The Power of Myth*:

> The troubadours were very much interested in the psychology of love. And they are the first ones in the West who really thought of love the way we do now - as a person-to-person relationship. Before that, love was simply *Eros*, the God who excites you to sexual desire. *Eros* is much more impersonal than falling in love... *Amor* is something personal that the troubadours recognized. *Eros* and *Agape* are impersonal loves. But with *Amor* we have a purely personal ideal. The kind of seizure that comes from the meeting of the eyes, as they say in the troubadour tradition, is a person-to-person experience. That’s completely contrary to everything the Church stood for. It’s personal, individual experience, and I think it’s the essential thing that’s great about the West and that makes it different from all other traditions I know. It was important in that it gave the West this accent on the individual, that one should have faith in his experience and not simply mouth terms handed down to him by others, it stresses the validity of the individual’s experience of what humanity is, what life is, what values are against the monolithic system. ... (Ambrosio 2009, 29-30)

This courtly love meme development sparked a whole new genre of literature with an increasing focus on individuality.⁴

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⁴ This era also saw a nascent feminism with a departure from the early Christian focus solely on a male deity. The repressed feminine value emerged not only in the courtly love theme but also in the cult of the Virgin and the development of the dogma on the Assumption of Mary (Luke 1989, 152).
Another locus of individuality began with St. Francis (1181-1226), who focused on intra-human relationships with one another. Francis wanted the gospel to enter directly into an individual’s life to change human relationships. He saw the gospels as evidence of God’s love for man and his romantic love for Lady Poverty was an exemplar of the willingness to accept the other as another authentic individual. Thus, in the courtly love tradition, the idea of human identity is realized through the personal responsibility inherently required in an interpersonal relationship such as romantic love. Dante displayed this same Franciscan sensibility in his heart-felt, courtly love tale of meeting Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova*. He begins his sonnet, “To every loving heart and captive soul into whose sight these present words may come for some elucidation in reply, greetings I bring for their sweet lord’s sake, Love” (Alighieri 1992, 7). An interpersonal relationship such as he describes in the courtly love tradition, is much more focused on personal identity between the partners, not social status.

In the late 13th century, when Dante was in his prime, the urban culture of Italy gave rise to a renewed interest in the moral and political values of human society, especially as reflected in the ancient Greek polis and Roman Republic and Empire (Kelley 1991, 2). Dante’s most famous work, the *Commedia* or *The Divine Comedy* as it was later coined, is a gospel of faith and a deeply psychological analysis of man’s place in the Christian cosmos set within the framework of a poem. The monumental Italian poem presaged the humanists as it established a direct link to antiquity, claimed the Aeneid as one of its major models, and underwrote Dante’s authority by placing the spirit of the Roman poet Virgil (70 B.C. -19 B.C.) at his side for the first two books of the *Commedia* (Witt 2012, 457).
The difference in orientation between the \textit{Vita Nuova} and the \textit{Convivio} and \textit{De Monarchia}, which are political and philosophic treatises, is telling. The \textit{Vita Nuova} is a discourse on love and the real meaning of happiness, while \textit{De Monarchia} is political and concerned with governmental well-being and the unfinished \textit{Convivio} more of a philosophical treatise. The \textit{Commedia} encompasses all of these, politics, philosophy, love and religion, although it primarily concerns the ultimate, eternal destiny of human life, and the transcendence of human understanding. While Dante never loses his need for intellectual understanding; in the end, the \textit{Commedia} relies more on love and faith, whereas \textit{Monarchia} relies on right reason being applied to the relationship between the empire and the papacy. All Dante’s works though focus on responsibility, whether the individual, the political, or the papal.

The \textit{Commedia} quickly became a sensation and was widely read even before Dante had finished the last book. His work was a huge success becoming the equivalent of a best seller in part because, like Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400) and Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), he wrote in the vernacular making his ideas widely understandable to those who were not necessarily academics or members of the clergy (Shaw 2014, xiiv). Copy houses rapidly reproduced the work, even before the printing press was introduced in Europe, enabling new expressions of individual ideas, styles and original patterns of thoughts to be rapidly disseminated.

As a result, the concept of silent reading to oneself, which had started in the 12th century, was becoming commonplace versus the oral transmission of knowledge, which had been the norm earlier. Silent reading allowed solitary reflection and helped to free readers from the collective control of their thinking, and also allowed them private access
to a multiplicity of different perspectives and other individual’s experiences (Tarnas 1991, 226).\(^5\)

**RESPONSIBILITY MEMES IN THE COMMEDIA**

The *Commedia* details one man’s search for his own identity by reaching out to others and moreover, it is a love story - a story of the love of Beatrice, who is a fantastical woman of sorts in sharp contrast to Heloise. We see little of Beatrice’s individuality in the journey, yet it is through her intervention that Dante finds his own identity.\(^6\) If we assume Dante the author is telling the story of Dante the pilgrim, it is an autobiography as deeply insightful and emotional as Augustine’s *Confessions* or Heloise’s letters. We are never told exactly what the crisis is he refers to in the opening, when he states:

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In the middle of the journey of our life
I came to myself within a dark wood
Where the straight way was lost. (Alighieri 1961, 23)
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Dante the pilgrim is terrified that his life is in free fall, both metaphorically as he falls through hell, and psychologically, as he struggles with the meaning of his existence. There are many reasons in Dante’s unhappy life that could have precipitated his crisis and though he sets it at exactly thirty-five years of age, it probably represents a conflation of critical events in his life, most notably his exile from Florence.

\(^{5}\) As Paul Saenger points out, modern reading is silent, solitary and rapid. Ancient reading was oral and usually in groups. The physiological and cognitive skills required for each differ markedly (Saenger 1997, 1). The impact of this physiological difference on the embodied mind cannot be dismissed with regards to the impact it could have on the development of the inner self versus the external self.

\(^{6}\) Beatrice the saint is based on the Florentine girl Beatrice Portinari, whom Dante fell in love with at first sight; but she also represents a metaphor for Divine Wisdom in the poem - the transcendent understanding that illuminates the human mind and helps lead it to God.
INFERNO

The Inferno is the most riveting segment of this journey of the self, using the particular example of the pilgrim Dante to tell the universal story of man’s search for meaning. Like Augustine, Dante is having a deep internal identity crisis, but instead of turning inward he reaches out to the cosmic order of the universe to understand how he belongs. In this way Dante is much more like Aquinas who embraced the Ptolemaic geocentric universe and brought it into Christianity, than Augustine. Dante’s poem speaks profoundly to the human condition on several levels including human freedom and individual self-responsibility.

Recognizing freedom as the innate capacity in each person to decide their own identity through the autonomous choices of which principles they will apply to their life’s decisions, The Commedia becomes a series of vignettes illustrating this point. Freedom in Dante’s world is neither the modern notion of choosing the kind of life one wants to have, nor does it necessarily mean freedom from external constraints. As Victor Frankl said centuries later, forces beyond your control can take away everything except one thing, your freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation. You cannot control what happens to you in life, but you can always control what you will feel and do about what happens to you (Frankl 2006, X).

Dante saw freedom as the ability to recognize your responsibility to shape one’s own life and identity; to restrain your desires and focus on what will be fulfilling. Man alone possesses this freedom with his innate ability to reason and act within the time and space of his temporal existence, and with freedom he has responsibility as well. Helen Luke described it in her book Dark Wood to White Rose, as the Jungian process of
Individuation.\textsuperscript{7} Freedom is his principle of individuation. In Dante’s view, the Church and the State have the first responsibility to train the individual to focus his desires appropriately and in his mind, both have failed miserably (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, 127).

Dante reflects a Thomistic psychological view in his writings but he evolves it to a new level. Man’s reason is manifested in his reflexive self through his judgment and will, and according to Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) the acquired attributes of an individual man are what he called the \textit{habitus}, but not the substance of man himself. Every action, every exertion of the will toward its goal leaves behind a trace, and the modification of the soul thorough this process is the \textit{habitus}. Diversities of \textit{habitus} account for the diversity of human characters, and it is the \textit{habitus}, which determines how each empirical man will realize his essence (Auerbach 2007, 85). This process depicts the relationship between the soul and an individual’s actions, which presupposes a temporal existence in order for man to fulfill himself – exactly the scenario laid out in \textit{The Commedia}.

The pilgrim not only meets unrepentant sinners, but those who either failed to exercise their freedom to make any choice at all, or who consciously chose to turn away from the higher good and their fellow man. All the sinners in Hell share the attribute of being the center of their own universe; there is no room for God or the other in their self-absorbed existences. One could view this as extreme individuality. Dante would caution the authentic self must recognize and embrace the responsible self as an inherent precept of Christianity. The responsible self thus defines the identity that characterizes the

\textsuperscript{7} Individuation is a process of psychological differentiation, having for its goal the development of the individual personality. In general, it is the process by which individual beings are formed and differentiated; in particular, it is the development of the psychological individual as a being distinct from the general, collective psychology.
relational self, the self that is constituted by its relations with others.

The *Inferno* consequentially relates the punishment intrinsic to the choices made by the damned. The logic of *contrapasso* rules in Dante’s inverted geography of Hell, and this principle of counter penalty is the nature of punishment precisely because it highlights the choices made by the sinners with their own freedom. The sinners in Hell get exactly what they sought in the mortal world through their own individual choice. It is an allegory on the condition of human sinfulness, and the worst sins in Hell are those that are against what makes us most human, such as betrayal. As the pilgrim Dante slowly recognizes some elements of his own character in the sinner’s faults, they open his eyes to the reality of sin—how it separates men from God, from their better natures, and from each other—and of his own individual responsibility for his soul.

The first striking example of this fundamental failure to acknowledge responsibility is in Canto V with Paolo and Francesca. Francesca seemingly has no cognizance of her own freedom and blames her fate on the romantic literature she happened to be reading, on her lover Paolo, and on the irresistible power of love. Like all the sinners in *The Inferno*, she fails to admit any responsibility for her own actions, claiming that given the story, they were carried away. Her reasoning about love poetry being to blame makes Dante faint away as he perhaps recognizes his younger self in her self-justifying story. Francesca typifies the damned; they are those who have fallen into the unconscious by not exercising their will to choose. They are the antithesis of the responsible-self meme.

The gates of Upper Hell are not locked and presumably any soul could just walk

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8 *Contrapasso*, from the Latin *contra* and *patior* means to suffer the opposite, referring to a process either resembling and amplifying, or sharply contrasting with the sin itself.
out, but in the inverted reality that is Hell, they use their freedom to choose to be there. Every gateway is a choice and by refusing to take responsibility the damned souls have perversely chosen to be in Hell. Dante the pilgrim slowly realizes this as he talks to more and more lost souls the deeper he goes. As he matures along the journey through Hell, he moves from having pity (*pieta*) on souls like Francesca, to having piety (also *pieta*) as he begins to understand the nature of his individual freedom. This play on words by Dante signifies a crucial shift in perspective. He makes the transition in Canto VIII when the pilgrim curses the damned soul in the slime stretching out for the boat. Here Dante begins to realize that individual moral agency includes accepting responsibility for all actions taken in one’s selfhood. Now the pilgrim sides with God in his judgment of the sinners, rather than taking their side as he did upon hearing Francesca’s story. Tellingly, he also says, “I’ve come, but I don’t stay.” This declaration of his own choice against Hell is the beginning of his recognition of his identity as rooted in human freedom.

Perhaps one of the most concise descriptors of *The Inferno* was written by Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) centuries later when he said, “Man is born free but everywhere is in chains.” The point Dante seeks to make is the chains are of our own making. As Dorothy Sayers aptly said in the Introduction to her translation of the poem, “Hell is not a place that God sends one to for punishment. It is the condition the soul reduces itself to through a conscious determination to evil” - in other words, an individual’s choice. Yet as humans with reason and will we have the capability to restrain and retrain ourselves, and this is the main focus of *Purgatorio*. The sinners in Purgatory are actively engaged in re-indoctrinating themselves, whereas in Hell, they embrace their sins and cast the blame elsewhere.
Dante’s metaphor for facing our own internal demons is still apt today. He expresses in poetic beauty what hundreds of modern self-help psychology books try to express: stop deceiving yourself and face the darkness inside yourself. Dante’s approach is ingenious. He leads the reader to reflect on each encounter he has with a shade and thereby come to an awareness of higher truths through an anagogical method, a symbolic interpretation of spiritual statements or events that teach by leading one to arrive at truths on one’s own. Dante presages Nietzsche in staring into the abyss and having the abyss stare back in the stories of the damned. This struggle to become self-aware and deal with mortality is as timely today as it was in 1300 and why the responsible-self meme struck a chord that was later amplified during the Enlightenment. The transitory nature of life is what gives such importance to our choices about our use of time and relationships.

**PURGATORIO**

The *Purgatorio*, with its stress on moral reform could be considered the most significant section of Dante’s poem because it is here that he accepts repentance. It is in Canto XXXI, after a long journey whereby Dante has recognized himself in the stories of the lost souls, and is finally confronted by Beatrice, that he accepts both responsibility and forgiveness. As in *The Inferno*, the penance in *Purgatorio* is related to the soul’s individual sins. But unlike *The Inferno*, this is an instructive cleansing and purging of the soul, not punishment. It is productive suffering in that it heals the wounds of sin, both the individual sins, and the Augustinian version of original sin.

The purpose of Purgatory is not to inflict pain, but to enable the self-examination necessary to achieve redemption, which is agonizing yet necessary for the attainment of

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9 In the *Inferno*, the sins become more social the further down Dante proceeds through Hell. In the upper circles the damage is more individualized, lower down in the depths of Hell the damage is to the society. In all cases, the individual is held responsible.
beatitude (and for authentic selfhood in the temporal realm). It is significant to note that
the shades the pilgrim meets in *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* are not divested of their earthly
correct. In fact, that character is highlighted as an exemplar of how they used their
freedom to make the choices that put them where they are. That freedom is bound to
their fate, preserving their individual character (Auerbach 2007, 88). Thus, the situation
and attitude of the shades in the other world is in every way individual and in concert
with their free choices made while on earth. Their situation in the hereafter is simply a
continuation, and an intensification of their situation on earth, with their particular
individual identity forever preserved. To quote Erich Auerbach from his insightful book,
*Dante Poet of the Secular World*:

> What radically distinguishes the *Comedy* from all other visions of the
> other world is that in it the unity of man’s earthly personality is
> preserved and fixed; the scene of action thus becomes the source of its
> poetic value, of its infinite truth, of the quality of direct empirical
> evidence which makes us feel that everything that happens in the work is
> real and credible and relevant to ourselves. (Auerbach 2007, 90)

Contrast this with Greek tragedy, where man’s fate, already interpreted, is revealed to him
but it is not something he can change; whereas Dante ties an individual’s ultimate fate
with his earthly character, and more importantly his individual responsibility. His
characters represent the sum of themselves in all aspects – their personality, their gestures
and appearance, and the decisions and actions taken while in the temporal realm. And
these follow them to the hereafter where divine justice is meted out in exact
apportionment to their individual actions. This decisive shift in a very Christian human
drama gave rise to the responsible-self meme and it rapidly disseminated into the culture
through the poem’s popularity. This is not the more cerebral Latin treatises of Augustine or Abelard but a series of individual accounts that almost everyone could relate to at some point in the story.

The sins and the souls the pilgrim sees in Purgatory are the same as in The Inferno, but the meaning has changed. The Purgatorio is about love, not hate and blame, because blame is by nature rejecting forgiveness. Every terrace on the mountain deals with love in some manner, either loving the wrong thing, or loving in the wrong way. The entire mountain is concerned with love, love as distorted or perverted by sin, love in the gift of forgiveness, and the individual love Dante has for Beatrice which undergoes a metamorphosis as he ascends higher and higher. In Canto XVII, with the discussion of natural vs. rational love, Dante lays out the different perversions of love, either loving tangible acquisitions, such as money, or loving lustfully without respecting the freedom of the other. So, it is love as the reflection of the choices we make and the responsibility we bear. Love and religious faith are analogous, as Luke pointed out, since both require unconditional trust and absolute surrender. It now becomes apparent why the story of the pilgrim’s search for meaning and his conversion should be told in the form of a love poem. Love, like faith, is the choice to say yes to something larger than the individual but paradoxically is a choice that can only be made through the responsible exercise of an

10 Most notably Petrarch, who lived shortly after the Commedia was finished, emulated Dante’s style with his courtly love lady of Laura and his spiritual guide of Augustine, also telling an autobiographical tale of spiritual redemption.

11 In portraying Beatrice as the one who takes him to the Paradiso, Dante identifies a woman as the reality of the incarnate word of God, thus completing the cycle of the courtly love tradition by equating femininity with God’s love. Beatrice embodies both reason and faith; she uses reason in her discussions with Dante, always responding to his need for intellectual understanding and then brings him to St. Peter. It is when Dante is being tested by Peter (Canto 24) that he moves into a faith position.
individual free will. The penitents here not only retain their early character, their penance itself is a form of individuality, related to the events and mistakes of the individual life. Thus, the individual life is not forgotten but highlighted and accentuated in *Purgatorio* with the particularity of the sinner’s punishment. The passage through Purgatory highlights the character and responsibility of the individual but necessarily refocuses and retrained it in preparation for being able to see God.

Dante particularly emphasizes the importance of self-responsibility in Canto XVI of *Purgatorio*, which is the central canto in the entire *Commedia*. Marco Lombardo emphasizes to Dante the pilgrim that freedom is an accomplishment towards which souls are working. Making a transition back to politics, another of Dante the author’s concerns, he echoes Aristotle by having Marco emphasize the need for honest leaders and strong laws to control men. More importantly, Marco emphasizes the power of an individual’s rational free will and chastises the pilgrim for blaming astrology or fate as an excuse for his circumstances. Marco says:

> Brother, the world is blind and indeed thou comest from it. You that are living refer every cause up to the heavens alone, just as if they moved all things with them by necessity. If it were so, free choice could be destroyed in you and there would be no justice in happiness for well-doing and misery for evil. The heavens initiate your impulses; I do not say all, but, if I did, light is given on good and evil, and free will, and if it bear the strain in the first battlings with the heavens, then, being rightly nurtured, it conquers all. To a greater power and to a better nature you, free, are subject, and that creates the mind in you which the heavens have not in their charge. Therefore if the present world goes astray, on you is the cause, in you let it be sought; and in this I will be to thee now a faithful scout. (Alighieri 1961, 213)

This is a telling moment in *Purgatorio* when Dante as pilgrim realizes it all comes back to oneself. There is no escaping both the freedom of our individual will or the burden it imposes. This responsible-self meme endured and evolved most famously into
the words William Shakespeare assigned to Julius Caesar almost 300 years later when he says, “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves…” (*Julius Caesar*, Act 1, Scene 2).

Further along in *Purgatorio*, in Canto XVIII, Virgil points out the limits to the intellect in understanding, advising the pilgrim:

As far as reason sees here I can tell thee; beyond that wait only for Beatrice, for it is a matter of faith … Those who in their reasoning went to the root recognized this innate freedom and therefore left ethics to the world. Admitting then that every love that is kindled in you arises of necessity, the power to control it is in you: that novel faculty Beatrice means by freewill … (Alighieri 1961, 235-237)

The clear echo of Aquinas is in this view: reason can only take you so far beyond which faith must be your guide. Virgil, representing virtue attained through reason takes him more than halfway through his journey but reason alone was not enough in Dante’s view to complete his whole identity. With a nod to the ethics of the Greeks and Romans, Virgil equates free will as the inborn freedom all men have when he tells the pilgrim, the power to curb that love that flames inside you is still your own.

Dante the author recognized his sins and Dante the pilgrim spends extra time on the terraces of pride, wrath and lust, to confront his particular transgressions. With the help of Virgil and another fellow poet Statius, a transitional figure between the philosophy of the classical world and Christian conversion, Dante overcomes his fear and walks through the cleansing fire representing death and still lives. He has made a Kierkegaardian leap of faith and is cleansed of his sins of anger, pride and lust. It is at this point Virgil leaves him saying profoundly:

No longer expect word of sign from me. Free, upright and whole is thy will and it were a fault not to act on its bidding; therefore over thyself I crown and mitre thee. (Alighieri 1961, 357)
These words emulate the New Testament saying, “…and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father” (Revelation 1:6). The metaphor is striking - Dante has cleansed his soul and his will is now strong enough for him to take charge of himself, thus Virgil places the crown of self-responsibility on his head. Dante has seen the cycle of blame in Hell and he makes a choice to reject blame and accept responsibility and with it, he gains his authentic selfhood; his will is now free and whole. The echoes of St. Augustine and St. Francis are visible in this tale of defining one’s identity and understanding one’s relational self and one’s responsibility to other responsible selves.

This very Christian tale of finding oneself reinforced the individual aspect of Christianity that had been lost during the scholastic era proofs of God and brought it back to its roots – the free will of each soul to believe in God’s gift and accept it responsibly.

Dante’s marvelous portrayal of Purgatory is an appealing concept. Like reincarnation, it entails another chance to get it right. As Joseph Campbell said of Purgatory, “The idea centers on persons in what might be called the ‘eternal sphere’, in which their experiences reflect or recapitulate those of their lives in time” (Campbell 2001, 100). It is a transit of purgation allowing one to open up to transpersonal grace and is present in many religions including Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism. All are centered on one’s power to change one’s reaction to the circumstances of frustration, suffering and sorrow that pervade our earthly existence. That is the responsible-self Dante seeks to have us become.
This theme of personal responsibility and realizing one’s own identity is fundamental to all three books of the Commedia; though in Paradiso the souls have undergone such a profound transformation that human eyes cannot see them as individuals, for they are obscured by the radiance of their beatitude. The pilgrim observes in Canto III, “The moment I was aware of them taking them of reflected semblances, I turned my eyes to see whose they were and saw nothing,” to which Beatrice instructs him, “These are real beings that thou seest, assigned here for failure in their vows; therefore speak with them and hear and believe…” (Alighieri 1961, 51).

Beatrice reminds him that, as in other parts of the Commedia, the change applies only to the outward appearance; the individual’s essence is still there. In several parts of the Inferno, Dante had changed the outward appearance of those condemned for suicide or thievery. The change does not change the individuality of the soul however; on the contrary it magnifies it. It is a continuation and intensification meant to highlight the true nature of that individual as they were in the temporal realm. Dante is one of the first great realist authors, even though his epic poem is a fantasy of the celestial hereafter. As Auerbach points out, “Dante was the first to configure man not as a remote legendary hero, not as an abstract or anecdotal representative of an ethical type, but man as we know him in his living historical reality…” (Auerbach 2007, viii). Thus he was a precursor to the humanist movement with his epic poem’s portrayal of great figures from both the Classical and Christian side by side, a style Petrarch replicated. Dante both anticipated and strongly contributed to shaping the Christian Humanist thought, which
followed in the Italian Renaissance, through his poetic portrayal of the spiritual vision and the freedom of man.

Though separated by a generation, it is clear that Dante had been deeply inspired by Saint Francis and his compassionate, individualistic Christianity. Francis sought to follow Jesus through representation and dramatization - living the life - not by churning out lengthy theological tracts. He brought the focus down from the celestial sphere to the human condition and to the particular individual. Dante emulated Francis’ courtly love metaphors in his poem when he referred to Francis as the second husband of Lady Poverty, whose first husband (Jesus) had died some eleven hundred years before. It is telling that the biography of Francis in Canto XI of the *Paradiso* is the longest of the whole *Commedia*, indicating the reverence Dante had for the Saint. In this Canto Dante emulates Francis’ use of the courtly love metaphor as he opens his story with the line, “But lest I proceed too darkly, take now Francis and Poverty for these lovers in all I have said” (Alighieri 1961, 167). Lady Poverty, who in the *Paradiso* climbs onto the cross with Jesus and unites with him on a marriage bed of the crucifix, represents a twist on the unattainable courtly love. For she is the woman no one wanted, whom no one seeks, and yet Francis, in his quest to emulate Christ in all aspects, eagerly married her and made her his queen (Chiarenza 1993, 153). This metaphor is more than an engaging way of telling Francis’ story, for in fact it can be argued that in the courtly love tradition, the idea of human identity is realized through the personal responsibility inherently required in an interpersonal relationship such as romantic love (Ambrosio 2009, 32).

Although Dante the pilgrim never talked directly to Francis in the poem, he obviously had learned a great deal from him, which is why Dante the author placed his
story in *Paradiso* in the circle of wisdom in the sphere of the Sun. Francis had
voluntarily changed his social position and given up his wealth, which he expressed as,
“leaving the world” (Boff 2006, 61).

Dante also left his social position and his world of Florence, albeit through exile,
not voluntarily. Both were searching to answer the question, “Who am I?” when they
had a dramatic conversion and a meeting precipitated both conversions. Francis met a
real knight on the road one day, who was poor and miserably equipped. A total empath,
he offered at once to give the real knight his opulent outfit, realizing the meaning he
sought was not in prestige (Leclerc 1983, 28-29).

Likewise, Dante the poet had a chance meeting with Beatrice, which became the
basis of the *Vita Nuova*, and years later this was the basis of Dante the pilgrim happening
upon Virgil, who starts him on the real path toward his true identity. Francis realizes
that his dreams of chivalry and knighthood had a different meaning - he was destined to
become a Knight of Christ. Even more slowly, Dante realizes the futility of violent
struggle and learns that he must fulfill his mission by being a crusader through the poetic
word. Just as the cross of San Damiano spoke to Francis, Dante’s ancestor Cacciaguida
speaks to the pilgrim from the cross in the sphere of Mars. Both men realize that they are
to become crusaders but without picking up the sword (Cook and Herzman 2006, 135-
136).^{12}

^{12} Dante was likely a Franciscan devotee perhaps from his dealings with them at Santa Croce. He
wears a cord when he enters Hell, which Virgil later tosses into the pit in Canto XVI, indicating he may
have been a member of a tertiary order. Chronologically the writing of the *Commedia* coincides with the
Papal involvement in the controversy concerning Franciscan poverty (about 1309-1312) and the
investigation and suppression of the Franciscan spirituals by the Papacy. Dante would likely have been
moved to consider the political issues surrounding this question of ecclesiastical authority.
Dante learned to feel from Francis, and to see all creatures and all humans as alive with meaning and to live in an immediate personal relatedness with them. He maintains a very personalist view which hinges on man’s existence being at the center of reality because that is how God, in this gift to man, created the universe. It is profoundly Franciscan, it is deeply humanistic, and very Christian because ultimately individual redemption is based on the belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and individual judgment before God.

Dante goes a step further though and presages Kierkegaard in envisaging faith as something every Christian person had to individually accept, since God had offered the gift through His teaching, as well as the condition to allow the learner to accept it. The bookends of freedom and responsibility are laid out in the poem from a balanced perspective on living life. Again, Viktor Frankl said it aptly, “Freedom, however, is not the last word. Freedom is but the negative aspect of the whole phenomenon whose positive aspect is responsibleness” (Frankl 2006, 132). Much heartache and hostility is at the root of people wanting the freedom to do whatever they want without recognizing the responsibility portion of the equation. Certainly, the most insightful aspect of the poem thus far has been Dante’s highlighting the concept that our identities are shaped by the relationships we have with others. Often our concept of self-actualization is to go off and “work on myself,” while the answer is plain in the Christian message as in the gospel of Luke, do unto others as you would have them do unto you, which was a message lost on the damned in The Inferno.
THE POLITICAL DANTE

Dante was a mid-level political player in his beloved Florence, serving on city planning commissions and in the Priorate in 1300. He was also used as a diplomat both before and after his exile and though his views may strike some as extreme, he was not an impractical ideologue. The environment in Italy during his adult life was one of constant struggle and turmoil between city states battling with one another, the power-hungry Papacy seeking to take over more territory, the Papacy and the Emperor warring with each other, and the turmoil and treachery of the Guelfs versus the Ghibellines. It is not surprising that Dante’s focus on stable and hierarchal celestial order carried over into his view of the state as well.

A good portion of the Commedia deals with political issues as Dante calls to account various world leaders, both emperors and popes, who had the power to affect positive change but failed to live up to their responsibility to do so. Examples include, Boniface VIII for his corruption and presumption at assuming temporal power, as well as Nicholas III for simony, and Corso Donati, head of the Black Guelph faction in Florence.\(^\text{13}\) He even reaches back to Homer and chastises Ulysses for failing his men for his own vainglory, again emphasizing this theme of the responsible-self focusing away from sins of pride or avarice.

Picking up where Ockham had left off on natural rights, he viewed the right of the Holy Roman Empire to govern as derived from natural law and demanded by social order, not something derived from the Church.\(^\text{14}\) Dante again focuses on the individual

\(^{13}\) The actions of Boniface played a role in the events that led to Dante’s eventual exile.

\(^{14}\) It is also a return to true Christian roots, as when Jesus said, “My Kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). With those words, Jesus overturned the tradition of Judaic theocracy implicit in Hebrew law.
with his view that the proper function of man, since he alone has the distinguishing
feature of understanding, is intellectual pursuits and this can only occur in a peaceful
world order. Thus, the ideal government should be one that can maintain stable order and
uniform justice throughout the known world for the benefit of the individual and society.

As he says in *De Monarchia*:

> It has been sufficiently set forth that the proper work of the human race,
taken as a whole, is to set in action the whole capacity of that
understanding which is capable of development: first in the way of
speculation, and then, by its extension, in the way of action. And seeing
that what is true of a part is true also of the whole, and that it is by rest and
quiet that the individual man becomes perfect in wisdom and prudence; so
the human race, by living in the calm and tranquility of peace, applies
itself most freely and easily to its proper work … (Church 2014, 43)

Here he presages Locke’s view of a government composed of individuals exercising their
right to the pursuit of wisdom, as the best way to serve the general humanity.

Dante expands his dualism and actually calls for the separation of Church and
State in the third part of *De Monarchia*. This should not be surprising given his
profound belief in man’s twofold nature, but it was a radical political concept at that time
and a foreshadowing of the modern concept of the secular state that democratic republics
around the world are based upon. Dante makes the compelling argument that God has
envisioned both forms of governmental elements, the Empire and the Church, but both
have distinctly different functions. The Papacy is responsible for their spiritual welfare
and “to lead the human race to life eternal by means of revelation” and the Empire, which
derives its authority directly from the universal authority, is responsible for men’s bodily
welfare and “to guide (men) to temporal felicity by means of philosophic instruction”

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15 Perhaps this is the reason why *De Monarchia* was denounced at the Council of Trent as
heretical and was among the first writings to appear on the Vatican’s list of proscribed books, the *Index
Librorum Prohibitorum* in 1564. This order was not rescinded until 1881 (Fried 2015, 375).
And though they are separate realms, “there is none higher than He, only God elects and only God confirms” (Alighieri 2012, 136).

The Empire was founded, Dante maintained on human rights and its progress was brought about by the unified will of its subjects for the purpose of their earthly happiness. Dante made a series of arguments based on different books of the Bible, but his most compelling rationalization was based on natural law. As he said, “God wills not that which is counter to the intention of nature” (Alighieri 2012, 99). And since nature must at some point end in the temporal realm, but continues in the eternal realm, they are clearly separate. Further exacerbating tensions, Dante challenged the Donation of Constantine, asserting that the Emperor had no right to donate an empire to the Papacy, nor the church to receive it, since its sole mission was mankind’s salvation.16

Moreover, the Empire existed long before the Church did so, “…ecclesiastical authority is not the source of Imperial authority is thus verified. A thing non-existent or devoid of active force cannot be the cause of active force in a thing possessing that quality in full measure” (Alighieri 2012, 128). It is no wonder that Dante put Pope Boniface VIII, who declared himself at the jubilee in 1300 as, “Caesar and Emperor,” in the eighth circle of Hell in the Inferno. Boniface put forward some of the strongest claims to temporal power of any Pope with his papal bull Unam sanctam. He based his plenary indulgence on the treasury of the Church and exalted in his use of two powerful keys, one temporal and one spiritual, to unlock the treasury (Cruz 2004, 17).17

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16 Dante is prescient here foreshadowing Lorenzo Valla’s argument a little over a century later that the Donation of Constantine was a forgery of the Papacy by comparing ancient Latin to the common Medieval Latin of the era when the donation was supposedly discovered.

17 He also had numerous statues of himself erected in Rome holding the keys in his left hand, reinforcing the papal assertions of plenitude of power (Cruz 2004, 17).
While *De Monarchia* is rather impersonal in its style and was written in Latin, it is significant, as it is a clear indicator of evolving views throughout Europe that set the stage for Ockham’s natural rights meme. The separation of Church and State became crucial in furthering the idea of individual rights and freedoms to be guaranteed by the secular governments. Dante put himself in further danger to make the points he did, exhibiting his own sense of self responsibility to convey his message.  

**CONCLUSIONS**

Dante was able to write in the multiple dimensions of philosophy, politics and theology and his best-known work, *The Commedia*, combines all three. It is an epic that presents an entire world order while telling the pilgrim’s personal story. Dante’s poem is an aesthetic theology of the totality of history, made up of elements from Augustine, Aquinas and Aristotle but never reducible to any of them. Yet, this is no Hegelian system of the necessary unfolding of God through human history. Dante is much more individualistic in his focus on man’s freedom, without which the reward and punishment system of the afterlife would be pointless.

Dante’s vision of the afterlife is appealing. It is appealing in its focus on justice, the thought that vengeance truly is the Lord’s, which opens the possibility to let go of rancor and bitterness. It is appealing in its focus on man’s individual freedom, a concept at the core of modern western culture.  

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18 It was in 1310, while Dante was writing the *Commedia* that Marguerite Porete was tried and put to death for heresy based on her book, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. Also written in the vernacular (French), it advocated the idea of individual freedom for the soul to act on its own to attain mystical union with God. Porete’s influence will be covered more in Chapter Six.

19 Dante still held the medieval mindset that relied on spiritual mediation. He was not calling for the dissolution of the papacy, just its reform. But his emphasis on responsibility set the tone for the overthrow of spiritual mediation that became the basis of the Reformation a little over 200 years later. This will be discussed more in Chapter Eight on Luther.
wanted, albeit in Hell in a perverse way where the logic of *contrapasso* rules. This principle of counter retribution highlights the choices made by the sinners with their own freedom and underpins his whole notion of the responsible-self meme. The sinners in Hell get exactly what they sought in the mortal world and the choice was always theirs to make.

Dante’s vision is one that embodies the Saintly worldview, one who seeks meaning in life primarily through the relationships with other persons and the divine. His focus is always on personal responsibility and freedom as the source of our dignity. You may have no control over the circumstances life hands you but ironically, you are still responsible. He displays all aspects of the modern markers for individualism as outlined in Chapter Two. He takes a first-person standpoint, albeit indirectly, by telling his own story of Dante the exiled poet, through Dante the pilgrim. He certainly displays a broad consciousness of his own self in relation to other beings and this dimension of his selfhood visibly deepens as he descends further into Hell, and then ascends Mount Purgatorio.

Moreover, he makes it quite clear he values the rational and reasoned free will of man’s ability. His whole poem is a case example of the ability to abstract two versions of one’s self, the examiner and the judger. That is what the Poet and the Pilgrim are as he takes the tales of other lost souls and uses it for his own self-reflection. He counters Virgil’s Stoic philosophy that free will should curb love with a Christian view the free will should direct love in the right way. And it is our responsibility to retrain ourselves to love this way.

His profound Christian message on the worth of every soul affirms the dignity of
the individual. Indeed, he has Beatrice turn away from God’s beatitude to go find Dante and to send Virgil to him. And they give him the perspective to understand his temporal life as when he says, referring to a view of Earth in *Paradiso*:

> …and I saw this globe such that I smiled at its paltry semblance; and that judgment which holds it for least I approve as best, and he whose thought is on other things may rightly be called just. (Alighieri 1961, 323)

Or as Carl Sagan put it in modern terms, earth is but a pale blue dot when seen from the greater cosmos.

Dante understood how sobering that perspective can be to one’s rampant individualistic pride. And he also understood the importance of the afterlife to give individual meaning. One does not necessarily have to believe in the Christian version of a conscious eternal soul that is judged by God and consigned to either Heaven or Hell to understand the importance of the afterlife. Belief in an afterlife still has a deep impact when it is defined as believing humankind and civilization will continue well after our own deaths, thereby giving meaning to our individual choices in the here and now. This belief plays an extremely important role in our lives, critically shaping our values, commitments and sense of what is worth doing, as it validates the relational aspect of our individuality.

As Samuel Scheffler asks in an opinion piece called *The Importance of the Afterlife; Seriously*, imagine you were guaranteed to die a peaceful death in your bed but you knew that thirty days later the earth and everyone on it was blown to smithereens. Would you lose a sense of purpose? The knowledge that we, and everyone we know, will someday die does not cause most of us to lose confidence in the value of our life’s work. The knowledge that no new people would come into existence after us would
make many of those things seem pointless. However self-interested or individualistic we may be, our capacity to find purpose and value in our lives also depends on what we expect to happen to others after our deaths. Dante understood this and in many ways his responsible-self is the creation of the relational self, emphasizing the importance of the individual’s responsible relationships with others, as well as the flourishing of man’s capacities. His political works emphasize not only individual responsibility but the overall importance of human flourishing and intellectual freedom.

Most importantly, Dante exhibits the ability for transcendence that is a key marker for individualism. His reflective questioning in *The Commedia* and *De Monarchia* on the possibilities outside the specifics of his unjust exile and the actual chaos that was Italy in that period is manifest of this. Dante’s major writings are exemplars of the pillar that personal identity is rooted in human freedom. He accepts that man must accept and act with autonomy, intentionality, and responsibility, as part of realizing individual moral. His responsible-self meme became the basis for endowing more and more rights and freedoms to people in both the ecclesiastical and in the secular realm, with the eventual birth of democratic republics based on individual rights and individual responsibilities.
CHAPTER 6

PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA: THE SELF-MADE MAN MEME

The Renaissance humanists of 15\textsuperscript{th} and early 16\textsuperscript{th} century Italy often receive most of the credit for the development of modern individualism thanks in large part to the scholarship of Jacob Burckhardt and Ernst Cassirer.\textsuperscript{1} Certainly the Italian humanists contributed a great deal to our modern concepts but, as we have seen in earlier chapters, many essential memes of individualism had already evolved and were reproducing and competing effectively in the cultural environment of Western Europe.

Humanism was more than an antiquarian scholarly program; rather it was a pragmatic initiative for rebuilding a new society that was more learned and more virtuous by way of gaining back lost wisdom from the ancients and enhancing the dignity of man. Thanks largely to Petrarch, it had a somewhat polemical edge to it: for it was meant to be a contrast to the so-called “dark ages” between the classical era and the 15\textsuperscript{th} century (Eire 2016, 68-69).\textsuperscript{2} This was a narrow view that failed to consider the humanism of the medieval era, particularly the work of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), which is replete with examples of the supremacy of man’s reason. As R.W. Southern says of Aquinas:

\begin{quote}
..man has never appeared so important a being in so well ordered and intelligible a universe as in his work. Man was important because he was the link between the created universe and the divine intelligence. He
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{1} The noun humanista is a Renaissance word, which originated in Italy towards the end of 15\textsuperscript{th} century, to designate members of a particular group who followed the studia humanitatis. Humanism was subsequently coined from the 19\textsuperscript{th} century German humanismus, and entered English shortly thereafter, to connote an educational and cultural program based on the study of the classics and colored by the notion of human dignity implicit in humanitas (Rice 1970, 66-67).

\textsuperscript{2} Where medieval scholars had divided history into an age of dark paganism and an age of light and truth ushered in by the coming of Christ, humanist historians drew two sharp chronological lines versus one. The first divided antiquity from what they called the start of the dark ages in 410 A.D. with the sack of Rome, and the second line was in the very recent past and delineated their own period from the dark middle age which had preceded it (Rice 1970, 68).
alone in the world of nature could understand nature. He alone in nature could understand the nature of God. He alone could use and perfect nature in accordance with the will of God and thus achieve his full nobility. (Southern 1984, 50)

Although medieval humanism did not imply the same notion of progress as in the 15th century, it did convey some dignity to man. Renaissance humanism was meant to connote progress as well and signified an age when men used intellect to shape and improve their lives through the study of ancient history and philosophy (Eire 2016, 68). Further, the Renaissance historians restored causal autonomy to history, beginning the separation from the prior explanations based on God’s providential plan or direct divine intervention. The explanations of events advanced by Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) for instance, are usually natural rather than supernatural, involving causes rooted in the nature of individuals or the ambitions of particular social groups (Rice 1970, 72).

The focus in this chapter will be on the self-made aspect of one’s identity. It is what we call today the self-made man or what in psychological terms might be called self-actualization, which is the desire and motivation to achieve our highest potential as an individual who is an active and willful agent endowed with the ability to navigate the world and make important decisions that shape one’s identity (Martin 2004, 15). It is

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3 The idea of progress being that civilization has moved, or is moving, in a desirable direction allowing for an increase in knowledge and a growing mastery of the forces of nature. This was a relatively new meme in the 15th century, as medieval Church doctrine had viewed history not as the natural development of man, but a series of events, ordered by divine intervention and revelations and moving toward the Last Judgment. This view held that without divine intercession, man would be miserable and thus, Providence and Progress were incongruous concepts. In the modern view, belief in providence can be held in tandem with the notion of progress (Bury 2006, 20,31).

4 In the twentieth century the term took on a more pejorative tone becoming aligned with secular humanism, which refers to an atheistic view of life centered on human agency and relying on science, rather than God, to understand and shape the world. That is not the definition used here, as Christian humanism was certainly pivotal in shaping this era.
more than just the outward affectation of personality that Stephen Greenblatt calls self-fashioning in his book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. As Greenblatt describes it:

…in the sixteenth century there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process. …fashioning may suggest the achievement of a less tangible shape: a distinctive personality, a characteristic address to the world, a consistent mode of perceiving and behaving. As we might expect, the recurrent model for this latter fashioning is Christ. (Greenblatt 2005, 2)

While not disagreeing with his premise that the Renaissance did see an increase in this self-conscious display of fashioning one’s personality through a cultivation of refined taste and self-expression (as displayed best in Baldassare Castiglione’s (1478-1529) book *The Courtier*), the meme under consideration herein is not the outward appearance, but the inward spiritual and intellectual dimensions of being and becoming, in addition to one’s public persona. In other words, one must be careful not to confuse an aesthetic (and preservative in the sense of keeping one out of trouble in the princely courts) pursuit of individual personality with the invention of the individual as a free and morally autonomous being. It is more of the thought that, what a man can do, he must do, reflecting the practical bent of the Italian humanists with their great emphasis on the potential of human beings largely through their educational system. It was a way of life committed to the world of ideas guided by the classics, which were to be read in the original Latin (and more rarely, Greek) mastered, imitated and enacted in civic communal life (King 2014, ix).

Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472), one of the quintessential Renaissance men, in the way we use the term today, characterized individuality when he said, the dignity of the human person lies not in a special ontological status inferred by metaphysical reasoning but in himself. In Alberti’s words, the dignity of the human person is in his
endeavor to create “as it were a second world in the natural world” (Blum 2010, 60). This is the meme that embodies the desire for individual self-fulfillment, that is to become actualized in what one is potentially versus what one is characterized as in the culture or chain of being. From our modern Western vantage point, where we are constantly coaxed to, “be all you can be” and, “you can do whatever you set your mind to,” it is hard to envision there was a time when one would not assume this.

The purpose of this chapter will be to show how the Italian humanists both built upon earlier memes, and developed their own, taking individuality in a new direction. A particular focus will be on Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, but will also cover the writings of many noted philosophers and humanists of this era including Lorenzo Valla, Giannozzo Manetti, Marsilio Ficino and Pietro Pomponazzi. Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) is also considered a Renaissance humanist, but since he embodies a different meme development he will be covered separately in another chapter.

Another aspect of Pico, which makes him so intriguing, was his mysticism. Pico carried this into his philosophical writings but this also reflected a legacy built upon concepts embodied in the writings of earlier mystics, particularly women. Included further down in this analysis is the mystic Marguerite Porete (c.1250-1310), whose fearless writing was far more modern than the scholastic era in which she lived.5 Certainly there is no human identity that can be totally independent of the culture in which one lives; however, the mystics in particular show a striking foray into independent identity development and will be covered in this chapter as they relate to the

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5 This is not to suggest Pico was directly influenced by her writing; although it was translated into Italian during his lifetime.
meme of “making oneself.” While an anomaly in her own time with her vernacular mysticism, Porete’s ideas dovetail with the discussion of Pico.

BACKGROUND

Renaissance scholar Paul Oskar Kristeller describes individualism, as “…the tendency to express, and to consider worth expressing, the concrete uniqueness of one’s feelings, opinions, experiences, and surroundings” (Kristeller, 1979, 30). Kristeller makes the point that those who interpret the individualism of the Renaissance (the era he focuses on) as simply the existence of a number of great individual geniuses have missed the point of the larger universal phenomenon. Likewise, Kristeller describes humanism as the emphasis on man, on his dignity and privileged place in the universe through cultural, educational, and philosophical systems, which echo the theme of dignity. He adds that humanists attached great importance to the individual, their experiences and opinions. Their belief in personal immortality (fame as well as Christian salvation) was a metaphysical counterpart of this individualism, an extension of it into other dimensions (Kristeller, 1964, 46). Humanism looked forward and backwards, coupling the forward notion of human potential with a backwards revival of ancient literature and wisdom.

The seeds of humanism had been laid by St. Francis in the 13th century, with his pathos and empathy for individual beings, with little concern for theological precepts. He set the tone for a change in human relationships and how individuals saw themselves. Francis believed men were worthy to hear the gospel first hand and live it every day, quite a change for a legalistic and theologically driven church, which placed

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6 The influence of Franciscan humanism can be seen in art as devotional paintings moved from icons, which are more symbolic, portraying little emotion, to frescoes which are largely human narratives. Many of the earliest fresco cycles of Renaissance art cover the life of St. Francis.
itself as the intermediary between God and individuals. Franciscan humanism which presented humans as they are, with Christ as the supreme individual who saw value in each and every being, precipitated a quiet but persistent revolution in thought and in action that ushered in the Renaissance of the 14th and 15th centuries (Tabarroni and Carrozzo, 244). Yet, while the humanists of 15th century Florence were definitely Christian, they certainly did not embrace Franciscan poverty. In fact, one must keep in mind throughout this chapter that these are primarily the views of wealthy, educated men.

Humanism was well suited for the elite in flourishing mercantile republican and princely city-states of Italy of this period, but it was a small circle within the upper classes. As the merchant class rose in influence, tensions arose between the old noble families and the recently wealthy merchant classes, creating an opening for cultural adaptation. Florence had grown enormously wealthy from woolen cloth production and banking and it was fiercely independent. Kenneth Bartlett maintains that it was the needs of the merchant class for a cultural model of self-definition that birthed humanism here – the need for their own cultural narrative so to speak. Social mobility, competition, and personal responsibility (a meme Dante had introduced only a few years earlier) were the values embedded in the collection of ideas under the humanistic

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7 Ironically, it was Innocent III, author of The Misery of the Human Condition, who granted Francis permission to found a new religious order in 1209, and some sources say the Pope personally tonsured him.

8 The humanist studies did include a number of women, more than had been the case in earlier eras, albeit largely confined to aristocratic women in princely courts. Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444), wrote On Studies and Letters about 1420, outlining a program of Latin learning suitable for the well-educated nobelwoman and sent it to Battista da Montefeltro, who was born into the ruling family of Urbino and married the lord of Pesaro, Galeazzo Malatesta (Cox 2016, 170).

9 While this explanation fits the Medici family well, it was not the case with Petrarch for example.
They turned to the model of the Roman republic with its model of civic virtue, reinforcing a turn towards secularism, and a separation of function between church and state that had begun with the Papal reforms of the 11th and 12th centuries (Bartlett 2011, 17).

Humanism was not only a philosophical perspective, but also a comprehensive educational program, the *studia humanitatis* – or the traditional program of the seven liberal arts, which in classical times was thought the appropriate education of a free man (Nauert 2006, 12). The rapid economic expansion and trade during the Renaissance, coupled with the collapse of the Eastern Roman Empire, led to the introduction of many Greek texts from Byzantium and a resurgence in the search for Latin texts in Europe. Ancient texts were certainly not unknown in the medieval era, but the humanists studied them in search of how an ethical and virtuous life on earth could be best lived, how to be more fully human, rather than the scholastic focus on grammar, logic and theological debate. Faith was still crucial for salvation, but there was also a growing recognition of the importance of the individual and knowledge of the humanities in order to be a good citizen.

As stated earlier, there are a number of aspects to Jacob Burckhardt’s conclusions about individualism that are at odds with this thesis and other aspects that must be

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10 The unique economic and governmental environment of the independent Italian city states could be said to have been akin to an isolated geographic environment that favors the biological reproduction of adaptations that may have been overwhelmed in a larger environment, making this a cultural example of natural selection analogous to what Darwin observed in the biological dimension in the Galapagos Islands.

11 The *studia humanitatis* was a phrase of Cicero’s picked up and put into usage by the Italian humanist Coluccio Salutati (1301-1406). This type of humanism refers to an educational system and a critical approach to learning based on rhetoric, history, poetry and moral philosophy and is hence the origin of the modern humanities. It contrasted with Scholasticism, which was based on formal logic and disputation, tending to the abstract, and geared towards the production of universal, general truths (Cox 2016, 40-41).
clarified. His view that medieval individuals had no conception of themselves outside of the hierarchical collectives, be it family, party, people, etc., has been refuted by enduring memes put forth by Dante, Abelard, Ockham and others. One important insight Burckhardt does correctly bring to bear, however, is that those who shaped history were essentially dissenters, as they were willing to break with their predecessors and take civilization in another direction, based on a belief they knew better how to create the good individual and the good society (Rabb 2000, 3). They were the variants in the cultural gene pool and when the environmental conditions favored them, their memes reproduced more frequently. James Hankins characterized it as:

   It is sometimes said that reformers fall into two classes: those who believe in reforming the individual through the reform of institutions, and those who believe in reforming institutions by reforming individuals. The Italian humanists of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries fall, by and large, into the latter class. (Kraye 2011, 119)

Burckhardt also recognized the sense of the self–improvement and the investment in education that characterized this period, particularly with the humanists. This desire of excellence in one’s self, apart from whatever collective entity one may belong to, is a concept that Burckhardt attributes exclusively to the Renaissance. Whereas, John Jefferies Martin maintains:

   Renaissance people were never as certain about their identities as the term ‘individualism’ implies. They lived in a culture that valued theatricality and emphasized the importance of self-presentation, performance and rhetoric…Renaissance identities were almost always anxious identities, uncertain about the nature of the boundaries … (with) a kind of wall between the inner and the outer ‘self.’ (Martin 2004, 18)

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12 Those dissenters were evident in society much earlier than the 15th century though, as in the case of Abelard, Heloise, Ockham, Dante and Porete.
Although not as extreme as Greenblatt’s description of individual self-fashioning, Martin maintains that Renaissance individuals were very aware of their collective environment, as were medieval era people before them. Life at the princely courts or in the republics was often dangerous, as Baldassare Castiglione made clear in his famous book *The Life of the Courtier*, and Machiavelli outlined in *The Prince*, giving good reason for individuals to be as anxious as Martin maintains.

Burckhardt also points to the cult of celebrity or fame - the tendency of individuals to do anything, even commit a crime in order to have their name imprinted on the collective memory of the general public as a marker in the rise of modern individualism (Garner 1990, 50). This tendency does connote individual personality, though not necessarily introspection, and is also manifest much earlier in many 12th century figures, most notably Peter Abelard who was fixated with his reputation.

*THE HUMANIST PERSPECTIVE*

The individualism of the Italian humanists emphasized a sense of personal worth that rested on the capacity of the individual and a growing sense of optimism. Dante Alighieri and Francesco Petrarch had signaled the early beginning of the Renaissance humanist movement; Dante with his focus on self-responsibility and Petrarch with his focus on reviving the classical model of writing, recovery of ancient texts and his own personal fame. Petrarch cherished ancient texts, not just as models for proper Latin, but as worthy instruction in how to live a good life and as literary expressions of the individual soul, a key aspect of the humanism to come. He recognized the inner-self

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13 Petrarch harbored great hostility towards the scholasticism of the middle ages and he dedicated entire works to criticizing the Aristotelian philosophers, including Averroes, based on his personal dislike rather than on any objective grounds (Kristeller 1964, 6-7). His view became an enduring meme itself when he coined the phrase “dark ages” which still persists.
meme of Augustine, whom he deeply admired and attempted to emulate in his search for an understanding of himself. His writings display a very personal, subjective and individualistic character as he talks about a variety of ideas and himself and how he feels. As Paul Oskar Kristeller says, he displays a high degree of self-consciousness that is especially apparent in his letters, which he (and many later humanists) prefer as a literary genre since it allows one to speak of everything in the first person (Kristeller 1964, 13).

Petrarch saw the ancients as fellow human beings and sought to know them personally by understanding their writings. This was a fundamental shift from the scholastic view, where ancient texts were known but used primarily as authoritative guides to a general truth. Petrarch studied ancient texts not to find ‘the’ truth but to grasp the perspective of the writer and to experience directly the personality of that individual writer. Petrarch felt that when he possessed a book, he possessed a piece of the writer himself (Wilcox 1987, 62-63). He wrote letters to Cicero and Virgil and selected a random passage from Augustine’s *Confessions* as his inspiration in his climb up Mount Venotoux, just as Augustine had done with the Bible in the *Confessions*. Thus, Petrarch set the tone for the humanist search for wisdom and ethics in the ancient classics within a firm Christian framework, and the humanist influence would change the perception of not only the Christian individual, but of Christianity itself as evidenced by Giannozzo Manetti (1396-1459).

Taking the oppositional view from Innocent III’s 12th century work, Manetti wrote an optimistic treatise, *On the Dignity of Man* in 1452, rebutting the negative view of man and restoring his dignity. Not long after Manetti died, Pico della Mirandola was
born and wrote the *Oration on the Dignity of Man* in 1486. Both men’s most famous works maintain that we must endeavor throughout our lives to achieve our full dignity by *doing*, both by overt action and contemplation. Manetti and Pico signal it is not enough to just be born human rather, because we have the autonomous capacity of free will, we also have an obligation to self-transform.

Manetti specifically set out to rebut Innocent’s depressing description of the nature of man, pointing to the potentiality of the human spirit as noted above. He systematically goes through the joys that can be experienced by individual humans exercising their mental, physical, and spiritual faculties as counterposed to Innocent’s denigration of the human body. He quotes Augustine in saying, better to have a human body that suffers pain than be a stone, which feels nothing (King 2014, 50).

Manetti explores the many dimensions of human existence and identifies the human capability of reason as a unique source of pleasure for humans, not the desolation Innocent described, while on earth. He places a humanist’s high valuation on the intellectual and physical capabilities of the body, and argues the pleasures it affords outweigh the weaknesses and pains (King 2014, 44-45). Further and most importantly, he departs from his predecessors by placing the whole of the intellectual function in the human body as well, and not the soul, a very modern view. As Margaret King points out, this stark contrast between Manetti and Innocent III is sometimes broadened to be emblematic of the difference between the Christian medieval and Humanist Renaissance outlooks, but such a conclusion is superficial. Neither Manetti nor Pico repudiate Christianity and its dualistic nature, rather they use it to new ends to make their point about the dignity of man’s spirit. In a true Christian and humanistic spirit, Manetti
implores his readers to reject vice and pursue virtue, since acts of virtue make us blessed (in opposition to the Lutheranism that was soon to come).

It appears much of Pico’s views had been shaped by Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), who had been his teacher and friend during Pico’s short life. Ficino was one of the foremost philosophers of the humanist era, and the immortality of the human soul was his main preoccupation. He entitled the first chapter of his *Platonic Theology* (written between 1469 and 1474 and published in 1482) accordingly: “Were the soul not immortal, no creature would be more miserable than man” (Celenza 2015, plato.stanford.edu).

Ficino was a syncretist, he thought philosophy should not be separated from religion as both are manifestations of spiritual life with a single aim – the attainment of the highest good. Like Plotinus and Augustine, he believed the human soul is endowed with a “natural appetite” that induces it to return to its divine origin (Kristeller 1988, 181). While not as extreme as the Platonic model in considering the body the prison of the soul, Ficino viewed them rather as partners in a harmonious relationship, but one that had to be treated cautiously. In a letter to his friend Lorenzo Franceschi, he sounds reminiscent of Dante, stating:

The best principle for living is to think, and to do your utmost to live in harmony with the mind, for this is to live forever and to live happily. For it is in the mind that stability and peace are found. The man who falls from the mind sinks into hell. Do not set your heart upon a long life in the body,

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14 Craig Truglia disagrees on this point, pointing out Ficino’s view of the soul was greatly revised in Pico’s *Oration*. Truglia maintains that Pico was most influenced by al-Ghazali, a Muslim mystic and philosopher, who in 1106 wrote *The Alchemy of Happiness*, which invokes a chain of being doctrine that asserts humans, using free will, have the capacity to transcend their station in the chain (Truglia 2010, 151). As for this thesis, both could be assumed to have influenced Pico. It is not when an adaptive idea is first introduced that matters, but when the meme began reproducing because of a favorable environment.

15 Ficino cited Augustine as his guide in judging Platonism to be superior to all other philosophies (Cassirer, Kristeller 1948, 186).
for a long time in the physical world is nothing if you compare it to eternity. (Ficino 1997, 188)

But this soul is not the extensionless mind that Rene Descartes (1596-1650) would describe over a century later in his Meditations, for Ficino’s dualism was not the mind-body dualism of the Enlightenment. Rather, for Ficino, and for medieval thinkers before him, the soul could have material effects on the phenomenological world in ways that the mind could not in the Cartesian tradition (Celenza 2015, plato.stanford.edu).

Miranda Anderson makes this case as well in her book, The Renaissance Extended Mind, which examines the then current philosophical notions of an extended mind and embodied realism, and examines analogous ideas in texts circulating between the 15th and 17th centuries. She illustrates where, in Renaissance accounts, terms such as brain, mind, spirit and soul are frequently exchanged one for the other, terms that involved embodiment and extendedness. Further, Anderson maintains that in the Renaissance the human subject was understood as extended both in terms of its material properties, which shared in the properties of all creation, and as a soul, which linked man to God and other souls (Anderson 2015, 69). In Ficino’s model, both body and mind extend, with the emphasis on the earthly body’s inability to extend as widely as the human mind.

As Ficino stated in Five Questions Concerning the Mind (published in 1495):

…the power which inquires earnestly concerning both intellect and sense is the same as that which discovers these by argumentation, and which by reason decides which is more perfect. Because this power inquires by reasoning and assigns a reason for its decision, it is reason, not sense … Intellect is at least as much more perfect than sense, as its power is extended in its action more widely and more perfectly than that of sense. (Cassirer, Kristeller 1948, 204)
Ficino was still a long way from the modern view of the mind being biologically based, rather than bodily imprisoned, and he was firmly rooted in the Christian concept of an immortal soul. As an ordained priest, Ficino firmly believed the dignity of man lay in that immortality of his soul.

Within the field of inquiry of the mind, Ficino also considered magic as a means of controlling experience. Ficino studied medicine as a young man and he carried this forward, applying an organic worldview to his philosophy. He thought just as all the organs of the body affect one another, so do the parts of this world “all depend, like the limbs of a living being, on one Author and are connected with each other through the nature which they share,” thus man is embedded in the totality of the world (Blum 2010, 84). Ficino sees man as a free being who moves at will in the relational web of nature, and through his mind he rules the intellectual world and ultimately his own self. These views reflect a remarkable transition point in the evolution of the modern self-made individual.

Ficino’s younger contemporary, Pietro Pomponazzi (1462-1525), embodied more of the classical mindset and placed moral conduct as the ultimate goal of life in action. Further he thought this was more attainable by most people versus the contemplative life.

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16 It was not until the Lateran Council of 1513 that the Church condemned Averroes doctrine of the unity of the intellect and Alexander of Aphrodisia’s view that the human soul is mortal, and made the personal immortality of the soul Catholic dogma (Martin & Barresi 2006, 113).

17 There were two major traditions of magic, the Hermetic and Cabalistic, which played major roles in the thinking of the Renaissance humanists. Ficino was interested in the Hermetic, Pico in the Cabalistic. The Hermetic was a natural magic, seeking the beneficent influences of objects and relations that exist in nature, showing an extendedness of the mind. The Cabala is a tradition based on mysteries purportedly handed down from Moses, in which the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet hold mystical power and reflect the spiritual nature of the world and the creative language of God (Wilcox 1975, 118-119).

18 This was radical for Ficino at that time, since Christianity has a disembodied, otherworldly conception of spirituality and transcendence that downplays one’s relation to the world, and the natural environment because that is what is required for salvation (Lakoff, Johnson 1999, 564).
Ficino endorsed. Pomponazzi maintained in his treatise *On the Immortality of the Soul* (1516) that the contention the soul is immortal was a “neutral problem” and could not be affirmed nor denied (Cassirer, Kristeller 1948, 274). He thought individual virtue could be viewed as its own reward and that is how the dignity of man is realized in the earthly life (Kristeller, 1964, 87). Not surprisingly, his views caused uproar in the clergy, and he was stung by this. Nevertheless, he maintained that while he was prepared to die for an article of faith concerning immortality, it could not be demonstrated by reason.

Pomponazzi demonstrated the extendedness of the Renaissance mind to explain nature when he said:

> Man is clearly not of simple but of multiple, not of certain but of ambiguous (*ancipitis*) nature, and he is to be placed as a mean between mortal and immortal things…man is clearly not of a simple nature, since he includes three souls, so to speak – the vegetative, the sensitive, and the intellective - and that he claims a twofold nature for himself, since he exists neither unqualifiedly (*simpliciter*) mortal nor unqualifiedly immortal but embraces both natures. (Cassirer, Kristeller 1948, 282)

He echoes not only Plotinus, but presages modern embodied realism in thinking that the soul “is at once divisible and indivisible” – divisible in that it communicates itself to every part of the body; indivisible in that in each of these parts “it is simultaneously present as a whole and simple entity” (Martin & Barresi 2006, 111).¹⁹

Likewise, Ficino’s writing assumed that Christian piety and humanist learning could also be harmonious partners and support each other. His *Theologia Platonica* was a synthesis of Christianity with Platonism, ushering in the Christian Humanism that

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¹⁹ Embodied realism contends that mind and body are not separate entities, and experience is embodied, not ethereal. Thus, when we use the words mind and body we are imposing bounded conceptual structures artificially on an integrated process that constitutes our experience (Lakoff, Johnson 1999, 97).
became emblematic of the Renaissance. Ficino sought to explain how the ultimate reality of the universe was manifested in the individual, based on his concept that God is inherent in the human personality (Wilcox 1987, 113-114). His letters also clearly show the theme of freedom that Pico later expounded on so eloquently. He stated in a letter to Lorenzo de’ Medici (1449-1492):

Free movement is the property of reasonable beings, and because it is free a man may therefore advance beyond any finite limit whatever, to achieve all that he deserves, so that he can rise above the bliss of many of the angels; indeed we can rise above them by loving and rejoicing rather than by apprehending. Therefore, by cognizing God, we reduce His size to the capacity and understanding of our mind; but by loving Him we enlarge our mind the immeasurable breadth of divine goodness. By the first we bring God down to our own scale, by the second we raise ourselves to God. (Ficino 1997, 130)

Both Pomponazzi and Ficino clearly influenced Pico, as well as many others, with Ficino probably the most influential, through his work at Lorenzo de’ Medici’s Florentine “Platonic Academy”, as well as through his translations and his original writings, all of which had an enormous impact in his time.

**THE HUMANIST MANIFESTO**

Pico, like Ficino, also became a well-known and published philosopher. He was well read in Platonic philosophy as well as the scholastic tradition, the Hebrew Cabala, the hermetic writings of Hermes Trismegistus and Arabic works. He delighted in religious diversity and saw each religion as having its own true insights but consistent

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20 This era benefited from the introduction of the woodcut for images (c.1400), copper plate engraving (c.1430’s) and the moveable type printing press (c.1450) in Europe, which were all pivotal in sustaining and spreading the humanism movement. These technological advances, along with the introduction of paper in the Middle Ages as an alternative to parchment, allowed the price of books to drop dramatically (Cox 2016, 104). Within 30 years of the printing press coming to Italy, over 700 books relating to Aristotle were printed and when Ficino finished his translations of Plato, bringing them back into circulation, it sped the circulation of ideas even further (Copenhaver and Schmitt 2002, 22).

21 The Medici Platonic Academy was more of a social network of like-minded friends sharing thoughts and ideas from their reading of the classics than an institutional academy.
with Christianity. Pico’s most famous work, *Oration on the Dignity of Man* was originally the preface to a debate on 900 issues he hoped to engage in with the learned of Europe in Rome in 1486. And while his debate plan was cut short by charges of heresy, his concise homily of human freedom spread widely.

Like Manetti, Pico was concerned with the general human condition and nature of man, not particular individuals, but they both saw the concept of human dignity as universal. Pico takes it further with his assertion that man has no fixed nature and no fixed place in the universal hierarchy. In Pico’s reasoning, since God had already created the natures of all things, spiritual and material, nature was complete (until Charles Darwin published his theory of natural selection over 370 years later). Instead of a nature then, God gave man freedom – the freedom to create himself and choose his own created nature (Nauert 2006, 75). In this respect, he presages Sartre’s famous proclamation that existence precedes essence.

While Manetti constructed a rational defense of human excellence and dignity, Pico gave it a cosmological and metaphysical foundation (King 2014, 52). What set Pico apart from the other humanists was his positive interpretation of the changing nature of man. Pico, who tried to syncretize many different intellectual and religious traditions into one, glorifies man’s capacity for freedom as the sign of his divinity. In his schema man, through his free will, occupies a privileged place in the universal hierarchy. And man’s freedom is the source of this uniqueness, enabling him to shape

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22 The problem of free will in the modern era is more complex. It is not simply the autonomy of individuals against the all-seeing power of divine providence – with the emergence of the theory of evolution by natural selection and economic determinism we see this same problem today from a different perspective. Hence, the individual of the Renaissance is still not the modern individual we think of today, it is not quite the clean quantum leap that Burckhardt’s writing would suggest.
his own world, as well as himself. The triumph of the free will was a classical Stoic idea that the Italian humanists revived and it fit well with the defense of the dignity of man (Kelley 1991, 46).  

To understand Pico’s argument in the Oration it is important to understand the mindset relative to the Great Chain of Being, which applied to the natural, supernatural and social order of this time. The Great Chain posited a hierarchical universe in which every creature was placed therein at a particular rank as established by God. Therefore, to challenge that order, or try to rise higher than one’s allotted place in the chain, was to challenge God’s own mandate (Bucholz 2006, 16).  

European society at that time valued order over opportunity and the chain was a theological, as well as sociological, construct used to justify the vast inequities that existed. In that respect, the chain was a chain, not a ladder, which makes Pico’s assertions all the more revolutionary at the time; although from a cultural evolutionary aspect it is not surprising that this transformation in thinking would come at this time.  

Several environmental factors were at play during the late medieval and early Renaissance eras, most notably the rise of cities by the 13th century throughout Europe and earlier in Italy and Flanders, and an increase in manufacturing versus the agrarian economy on which the Great Chain depended. With the rise of successful city states, most notably in Italy, with its geographic positioning making it well suited for trade, the

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23 It was Cicero who called blaming fate for life decisions a “lazy argument” and “slothful” because using this reasoning one would never take action (Pereboom 2009, 8).

24 The celestial and worldly hierarchy was based on the Ptolemaic universe and consisted of God, angels, man, animals, plants and at the bottom, stones. Apart from God, each of the ranks could be further divided, such as the nine ranks of angels and the human social hierarchy consisting of the King, greater aristocrats (Dukes to Barons), lesser aristocrats (Knights and Gentry), peasants and the very poor. Likewise, the Church was very hierarchical as was even the family, with the male children always being ranked higher than their older sisters (Bucholz 2006, 21).
cities based status on wealth not birth, giving individuals a chance to shape their fortunes based on hard work and capitalism rather than birth rights, although these still mattered. Charles Trinkaus sees this as one of the core issues. As he says:

…the cultural problem of the Renaissance and Reformation, with which the question of free will was directly concerned, was the fact and the consequences of a divorce between ethics and economics, between the moral and the expedient, between the spiritual and the material. While one set of values and one set of rules and injunctions applied to the individuals’ pursuit of goodness and spiritual well-being, an entirely different set applied to his conduct of business, political relations and the daily routines of worldly life. (Trinkaus 1949, 51)

The humanist movement, which sought to address the need for a code of ethics and virtue in these changing times, was also an urban movement for this very reason. This environmental shift produced a very modern mutation, a growing commercial society with different requirements and imperatives for survival and a different definition of success than the old society that generally sought to maintain a man in the condition in which he was born. A new hierarchy of self-made princes arose including the Medici in Florence, who rose from accountants and bankers, the House of Montefeltro in Urbino, and the House of Sforza in Milan, where both Federico Montefeltro and Francesco Sforza started as condottieri.

They were the social embodiment of Pico’s ethereal manifesto, which is best summed up in the words he attributes to God addressing Adam in the Oration:

We have given you, Oh Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor any endowment properly your own, I order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess through your own judgment and decision. The

25 The Black Death was a major environmental factor as well, occurring simultaneously with the beginnings of the Italian Renaissance. The plague cut the population of Europe roughly in half after the scourge of 1348-1349. As a result, wages rose as the availability of labor became scarce. In France, the Hundred Years War left the countryside ravished and whole regions were desolate and almost abandoned, giving the peasants who remained a stronger bargaining position than ever before (Rice 1970, 59).
nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very center of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine. (Pico 1956, 7-8)

Pico started with the Great Chain of Being but went beyond that hierarchy to a synthetic conception, inspired by ancient Greek heroic ideas and the biblical Genesis, of man’s mobility and self-transforming nature. Like Manetti, Pico has an optimistic evaluation of man’s powers and place in the world. He concluded, “…we can become what we will” if we devote ourselves to humanist learning, meaning philosophy and theology, including the hermetic teachings and the Cabala (Kelley 1991, 44). He sounds almost Nietzschean in his optimism of man’s abilities.

The paradoxical issue in Pico’s Oration for some scholars is that he ironically also urges man to disdain the things of earth and emulate the dignity and glory of the angels and “to be inferior to them in nothing” (Pico 1956, 12,13). The humanistic charter of freedom in the Oration is mainly limited to the very beginning, where Pico seems to presage the Kantian view of morality grounded in human freedom and dignity. Then, assured that “we can be what we want to be”, we are told that what we should strive to become is not human at all but divine angels, to achieve a mystical union with God (Copenhaver 2016, plato.stanford.edu). Pico does take care to point out that “it is not freedom from a body, but its spiritual intelligence, which makes the angel” (Pico 1956, 12). Pico tells us however, that we should proceed to first emulate the life of the
Seraphim, who burns with charity, so that, “if we burn with love for the Creator only, his consuming fire will quickly transform us into the flaming likeness of the Seraphim,” and then the Cherubim who flashed intelligence, and finally the Thrones who stand firm with justice; (Pico 1956, 13-14). In words reminiscent of Marguerite Porete’s seven stages to finding mystical union with God, or Dante’s vision at the end of Purgatorio, Pico’s final goal is also union with God, where the self-will gives way to the divine will. He said:

Let us bathe in moral philosophy as in a living stream, …this, however, will not be enough, if we are to be the companions of the angels who traverse the ladder of Jacob, …we shall penetrate being from its center to its surface and from its surface to its center…Finally in the bosom of the Father, who reigns above the ladder, we shall find perfection and peace in the felicity of theological knowledge. (Pico 1956, 18-19)

There is no doubt that Pico is a mystic, but to focus on that aspect of his Oration is to miss its larger point that is pivotal to individualism, namely freedom. The value that truly gives man his dignity, and makes the Oration such a compelling work (emblematic of the conceptual change occurring in the Renaissance) is the way it points out the unique nature of man to break out of any given place in the order of creation and define himself not in his being, but in his doing. As Ernst Cassirer insightfully comments:

We may ascend the hierarchical ladder of being as high as we like, we may climb to the celestial intelligences, even to the divine source of all being: so long as we remain standing at any rung of this ladder, we shall not be able to find there the specific value of freedom. In the rigid hierarchical system, the value of freedom must always seem something foreign, something incommensurable and ‘irrational’, because the order of mere being does not capture the meaning and the movement of pure becoming. (Cassirer, 2000, 84)

It is this becoming that is the meme that replicated and reproduced so effectively as a result of the humanists. It is transitional as Stéphane Toussaint says in his essay on Pico:

…the divine logos no longer speaks in the terms of a logic that possesses an existential character for the entire creation, but in dynamic concepts
that accordingly are “free” of any preexistent model or archetype. It is not enough to call this freedom “existential” (where the human becomes what he wants) or “moral” (where the human person himself chooses what he wants), since it is a higher freedom in which the old model of a hierarchical nature is replaced by a discourse about the human person qua human person. (Blum 2010, 73)

Thus, Renaissance humanism emphasized the becoming aspect of the individual, inherent in Christianity, to elevate man toward the ideal of the universal man: artist, genius, scholar, and a reflection of God’s creation. It could even be thought of as a revival of the ancient writings and philosophy for the benefit of a religious goal. The humanists also began to broaden the view that allowed individuals to hold secular heroic values in tandem with their Christian beliefs and to embrace both a secular immortality (fame) as well as a saintly one (heaven). Pico’s vision challenges the hierarchy of the Church, as did Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457), who pushed the individuality of Christian humanism even further. He rejected the pre-eminence of the clergy, asserting that the essence of religion and piety consists in the free relationship that the ego, the subject of faith and will, has directly with God (Cassirer 2000, 79). This foreshadows the Reformation that was to come early in the next century.

After this shift we see writings like Machiavelli’s The Prince and autobiographies like that of Benvenuto Cellini’s (1500-1571), which led Burckhardt to comment, “Whether we like it or not, there lives in this figure a wholly recognizable prototype of modern man.” Cellini is a free-standing independent personality who defines himself not through his religion (which he only employs to get a pass for multiple homicides he has committed) or his philosophy, but like modern man, through his profession and his fame. Unlike Pico, he is not concerned with a wider view of man or history; he is solely concerned with personal providence as it affects his own life and being (Weintraub 1978,
Unfortunately it is very emblematic of modern man, for as Jaspers says, the individual is never entirely independent in his judgment of himself. He always attaches importance to the judgment of another (Jaspers 2015, 68).

**MYSTICISM**

The challenge to the clergy was also amplified in Pico’s mysticism. He manages to give man freedom to find the divine spark within himself, which frees man from the Pauline and Augustinian stress on divine grace with its potentially fickle application, and its implication that man’s own efforts in his struggle are relatively inconsequential compared to God’s ultimate power. Pico was also very much the mystic in addition to being a humanist, and it is not surprising some of his assertions were considered heretical. Like Ficino, Pico saw a role for magic in the soul’s journey towards a mystical union with God. In his mind, magic aids the transition from natural philosophy to natural theology and beyond by propelling the soul through the heavens towards the super-celestial divinity (Copenhaver 2016, plato.stanford.edu).

Where Ficino saw a role for astrological influences and attempted to build it into his theological system, Pico however, launched a polemic against it. Ficino had identified a threefold order of things he called *providentia, fatum,* and *natura.* Providence is the realm of the mind, fate the realm of the soul, and nature the realm of the body. Still, he saw man’s reason as the key to being masters of ourselves and this flowed into the realm of thought that influenced Pico (Cassirer 2000, 114). Ficino’s reliance on fate and astrology is more characteristic of the classical worldview, hence his struggle to couple this with his theology. This view was anathema to the basis of Pico’s *Oration* where man possesses the place in the hierarchy he gives to *himself.* His individual
definition depends upon his determination and free action – not the stars. Despite the strong influence magic and Cabalistic and Hermetic thought has on Pico, he totally rejects astrology because to accept it means to invert the order of value he has defined, making the planets, which are matter, the masters of spirit. Pico rejects any determination on man that obstructs the pure, creative power of man and his power to shape himself.26 In this regard he is like Dante, who saw astrology as an excuse for not embracing responsibility for shaping oneself.27

The real basis of Pico’s mysticism was like all mystics – the desire for mystical union with God as their final goal, and for them extinguishing the self is a necessary consequence of achieving it. This is Brian Copenhaver’s argument against interpretations of the Oration by Kristeller and Cassirer. He argues that to understand this aspect of what Pico was saying is to understand he was not advocating a new humanist individualism but impersonalistic annihilation of the spirit into God. Charles Trinkaus, writing in Adversity’s Noblemen, agrees with Copenhaver and actually finds Pico’s Oration pessimistic because, though man seemingly has the freedom to find his own end initially, in the latter half of the work it becomes clear that this end necessarily had to be contemplative of God, thus subordinating man’s this-worldly potentialities to the divine end. He finds Manetti the true optimist in that he viewed man’s excellence as deriving from the fact that man seems to be the ultimate end or purpose of the creation (Trinkaus 1965, 64, 66)

26 Pico could not eliminate astrology, it still persists with horoscopes being printed in The Washington Post to this day, but he strengthened the individualism meme.

27 Although Dante strongly endorsed self-responsibility, he still thought the stars had some influence on one’s life, though not determining one’s life.
They are both accurate because, just as with Marguerite Porete, Pico does advocate becoming something other than man. As Porete says in her book *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, “In the fifth stage, the will must ‘depart its own will’ and ‘render itself back to God.’” These mystics seek to replace their own free will with the divine will, since they view the separation inherent in self-consciousness as an egoistic, unholy act, for to will differently is to steal the divine will (Porete 1993, 32). Porete advocated “putting the will to death” and sought her identity through her own religiosity, outside the mediation of the Church (Porete 1993, 190). Ironically though, she was fiercely independent and remarkably courageous in outlining her interpretation of what religious life should be, advocating a direct relationship with God without sacramental meditation and through the power of faith versus works (Lerner 2007, 241). Intense self-expression was the basis of Porete’s work as well as the works of other women mystics, but always with their own being defined *in and through* their relationship to God. They exhibit what Cassirer calls “mythical consciousness.” Thus mystical religion accentuates individuality through its reliance on self-consciousness, but Christianity, with its faith in God’s self-disclosure becomes the basis of our modern concept of personhood and individuality (Niebuhr 1996, 14-15). Neither Ficino, Pico or Marguerite set out to be dissenters, and certainly not suspected heretics; they were simply outliers in how they viewed the soul and its interactions with the divine. And these outliers, or cultural mutations, are what drive adaptations and meme developments. They were harbingers of the paradigm shift to come with Martin Luther in 1517.

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There is no evidence Pico was familiar with Porete’s work or knew anything about the Free Spirit movement; nor was he suspected of this, as the papal condemnation of his theses refers to his revival of pagan and Jewish errors in thinking (Lerner 2007, 242).
Like other figures under examination in this thesis, Pico and Ficino exhibit contradictory ideas regarding individuality and even the meaning of Christianity. Although, even if Pico’s intent was to show how man could use his freedom to achieve a mystical union with God, thereby annihilating the self as Copenhaver and Trinkaus maintain, it is immaterial to the argument herein which maintains that the meme that developed and reproduced from the humanist movement, of which Pico’s manifesto is so emblematic, is one of man’s freedom to make himself what he will. There is no intent in Darwinian natural selection - environmental factors and reproduction are the factors that lead to meme endurance. Thus, the *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, a speech that was never given, became the emblem of the self-made man meme, even if that was never Pico’s intention.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Overall, the humanists were very important, not because of the development of any great new philosophy, but because of their attitude towards openness, learning, and human freedom, without which the modern West could not have emerged (Jaspers 2015, 179). Robert Bucholz claims there were six phenomena that were pivotal in the path to modernity: humanism, the rise of nation states, the discovery of the New World, the printing press, the Reformation and the scientific revolution.

While these are all pivotal historical events, they are not independent. It is clear some acted as environmental factors that enabled other cultural memes, such as humanism to reproduce and endure.\(^{29}\) The success of humanism was due in part to its

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\(^{29}\) The word ‘individual’ came into general usage in the 15th century, (‘individualism’ as a word came into usage in the 19th century) as indicated by the historical dictionaries of the English and French languages, almost concurrently with the word ‘state’ as defined by a nation governed by sovereign authority (Siedentop 2014, 347). Both Siedentop and Bucholz maintain that this is because the emerging
birth in the unique ecosystem of Italian city-states and was sustained due to the introduction of the printing press into Western Europe. It occurred in the midst of increased social mobility, enabled by a scarcity of labor after the plague of 1348, ushering in a profound change in self-understanding which stressed the importance of human action.

The purpose of this chapter has been to explore the relationship between humanism and the rise of individualism and the self-made man meme as embodied in Pico and other mystics and Renaissance humanists. Certainly, Ficino and Pico meet Reinhold Niebuhr’s succinct definition of the individual selfhood as, “expressed in the self’s capacity for self-transcendence and its rational capacity for conceptual and analytic procedures” (Niebuhr 1996, xxv, 14). Certainly they display a first-person standpoint although the humanist who characterizes this most aptly is Petrarch with his letters and his *Ascent of Mont Ventoux*. They also display rationality, exhibiting self-reflectiveness and self-sufficiency. The markers most on display by Pico and other humanists however, are dignity and transcendence. More than anything else, the humanists ushered in a new self-affirmation of the individual, a belief in the value and ability of human beings to make themselves what they will based on their own capacity and freedom. Indeed, Pico turned the Great Chain of Being into the ladder of opportunity for man. He had internalized Dante’s responsible-self meme and accepted and advocated defining one’s being, one’s place in the cosmos based on one’s actions by accepting responsibility for making oneself.

individualism in Western Europe was also in part dependent on the rise of nation states, showing the interrelatedness of various factors in cultural evolution.
Finally, Pico clearly displayed transcendence in his vision of what could be, both as a self-made man, and as a mystic who achieves union with God by losing himself in the Divine. Even though some monastic orders and individuals still have a mystical orientation, they are outliers, and only the former meme has broadly survived. The point of this conclusion is the self-made man meme has not only survived, but endured. Modern man has a view of himself as rooted in freedom and the ability to make himself, which traces back to Pico and the other humanists. Pico took a bold step in defining the freedom of man to determine his own nature; however, it is still not the modern conception because man’s ends are still set by a cosmically realized order of good. Yet, the new understanding of human productive power prepares for the incipient subversion of the cosmic order and great chain of being (Taylor 1989, 200). The humanist focus on freedom and will, in union with knowledge and human capacity, was a meme development fundamental to the evolutionary development of the modern individual. The identification of human dignity with moral freedom was a paradigm shift and had a profound influence on the sense of self we now call individualism. Ernst Cassirer deems the psychology of the Renaissance as the beginning of a newer, deeper subjectivity (Cassirer 2000, 141).

The humanists embodied the optimism that man can do anything if he will, as Alberti said, with the three things he can truly call his own: his spirit, his body and what time he is allotted by nature and circumstance (Blum 1999, 60). What was fundamentally different was the embodiment of certain elements of the heroic mindset into the Christian, a union that allowed Renaissance men and women to remain devoutly religious, but
recognize the virtue and honor in their individuality. They were interested in man, his place in the world, his dignity and fame, and how to deal with the human condition and live a good life. Renaissance humanists sensed that human experience has a coherence and unity that must be perceived in the details of history through the study of the classics, the personal relations between individuals (the Franciscan element), and the freedom to shape one’s self. These were humans who were confident and optimistic, skeptical of orthodoxies, increasingly rebellious, and willing to take responsibility for their own beliefs and actions, laying the groundwork for the autonomous man meme to come with Martin Luther (1483-1546), which will be covered in the next chapter.

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30 As was the case with Aristotelianism, the availability of ancient texts that contradicted Christian dogma was not sufficient in and of itself to undermine the Christian belief system, in which the humanists were heavily invested. They were able to combine profound admiration for the classical culture while maintaining a conviction of its fundamental inadequacy, as it was the product of human reason operating alone without the aid of divine revelation (Cox 2016, 70).
CHAPTER 7

MARTIN LUTHER: THE AUTONOMOUS-SELF MEME

This chapter will focus on the precipitous turn in Christendom after the Renaissance. The Italian humanists had empowered the self-made man meme with their vision of humanity’s ability to climb a ladder to become what you will within a Christian worldview.¹ Not long after, Martin Luther (1483-1546) became an instigator in a revolution he never sought, which sprang from a growing instability in the foundation of the institutional Church. The Reformation that ensued embodies a host of different ideas and movements, many of which were not conducive at all to individualism, particularly Luther’s view on free will, predestination and his eventual turn towards a state Church. The basic core of his conviction however, was on the autonomous nature of man’s relationship to God, in which the individual is in direct and personal engagement with God without any institutional intervention or mediation, and his stress on individual conscience. These basic theological premises gave rise to the autonomous-self meme that was a crucial stepping-stone in the evolution of individualism and was key to the development of individual rights and liberties that later emerged in the Enlightenment.

In Chapter Two the modern individual was defined as one in which the subjective or the internal side of one’s identity is an active and willful agent, an autonomous and self-conscious person, endowed with the ability to make important choices as it navigates

¹ Just as Luther would call for a debate on his 95 theses, Pico della Mirandola had also called for a debate, in this case on his 900 Theses concerning the basis of knowledge and the chain of being and his views could be considered heterodox. A few of his theses were declared heretical and some were suspect, as he was willing to consider non-Christian Hermetic literature traditions as compatible with a Christian worldview.
the external world (Martin 2004, 15).² The autonomous-self meme declares freedom from authority, particularly religious authority, and recognizes the need to live, think, and interact with God independent of any third party mediation, and it is this meme that in part ushered in the anti-clerical milieu of the Enlightenment.

BACKGROUND

Luther is one of the most controversial, paradoxical, and complicated thinkers covered in this thesis. He was born in a part of the Holy Roman Empire that is now Germany, of a solidly middle-class family and received an excellent education as his father (a social climber) wanted him to establish a career in law.³ After instruction in several Latin grammar schools, Luther attended university at Erfurt, the capital of Thuringia, starting in 1501 to begin legal studies. Erfurt, like many Northern European universities, was an institution dominated by a faculty trained in nominalism and Luther would have been exposed to the works of great nominalist thinkers such as William of Ockham and Gabriel Biel (1420-1495), a follower of Ockham (Marty 2004, 5). This nominalist education was to become pivotal in shaping Luther’s reliance on Scripture alone as the source of guidance in seeking God.⁴

The well-educated Luther was also influenced by the humanist’s rejection of scholasticism. Further, his view of an omnipotent and wrathful God was suggestive of

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² The aspect of an active and willful agent is problematic in this era as will be discussed later, since Luther denied the ability of humans to have truly free will.

³ Sources differ on this, but most modern sources explain while Luther’s paternal lineage came from a peasant family of miners, his father made a fortunate marriage, which allowed him to purchase several foundries and as a result, the family moved solidly into the middle class (Gillespie 2008, 103).

⁴ As Ockham put it in his commentary of the Sentences of Peter Lombard, "For nothing ought to be posited without a reason given, unless it is self-evident or known by experience or proved by the authority of Sacred Scripture" (Spade 2016, plato.stanford.edu).
Ockham who had said, “There are many things God is able to do that he does not will to do … And these things God is said to be able to do by his absolute power” (Spade 1999, 298). Like Ockham, Luther had an increasing sense of skepticism, not about the existence of God, but about man’s ability to understand the divine order of the world. Luther’s nominalist education amplified his unease about the nature of God and whether humans could ever have the capacity to understand what God demanded of them. This had a profound impact on Luther who had growing doubts and terror about his own salvation in the face of a harshly judging, unknowable, and unpredictable God, whom Ockham had described as no man’s debtor (Gillespie 2008, 104).

When Luther decided to enter a monastery rather than complete his law studies, a decision some historians see as a response to his increasing fear of death and search for salvation, he chose an observant Augustinian hermit order in Erfurt, where he studied theology under the tutelage of Johannes Nathen, a colleague of Gabriel Biel. Luther pored over the theological works of Biel and was certainly exposed to the Facientibus principle promoted by him or the notion that if you do the best that is in you, God will not deny you grace, or to put it another way, God will save anyone who gives his all (Gillespie 2008, 28). While doing the best one could do was not good enough to merit

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5 Biel departed from Ockham on this point, and subsequently Luther as well. For Biel, the word preached is not redemptive in itself rather; it is a “consilium” exhortation that prods the sinner into the path of righteousness. The preached word is the seed, but man has to provide the proper disposition, which will enable it to flourish (Oberman 1963, 22). Thus for Biel, man has a will and must use it to trust that if he tries his best, God will not abandon him, while Luther on the other hand denies free will. Ockham thought God was unknowable and had established a world and a way to salvation that man can trust, but never understand. Further, Biel maintained that contrition for sin out of love of God, not fear of punishment, was enough to move a person from a state of sin to a state of grace. Most other theologians, including Aquinas thought this took place in the second part of the sacrament of penance during absolution (Wengert 2015,14).

6 “Facientibus quod in se est, deus non denegat gratiam” or the so-called Facientibus principle was a nominalist reaction to the fear of a terrifying and merciless God (Gillespie 2008, 28). The issue with Facientibus is that it implied that the standards for salvation could be idiosyncratic to each individual and
salvation on its own, it at least would show a desire for grace to which God would then respond.

Apparently *Facientibus* did not comfort Luther, who was obsessed by his terror of not achieving salvation. Erik Erikson, in his book *Young Man Luther*, attributes this to an unhappy childhood with a harsh and demanding father which caused Luther to become consumed with the idea of God as an avenger and the devil as a real demon stalking him. Erikson relates that Luther had several fits while a young man, one of which set him to screaming, “it isn’t me, it isn’t me” or “I am not,” depending on the translation, revealing an inner need to deny an accusation in an overly introspective young man. He interprets this as suppressed rage against his father that was redirected at God, the Pope and later toward anyone else who disagreed with him (Erikson 1962, 38).

Like many progenitors Luther was an extremist, and it is impossible to do psychoanalytic examination of Luther centuries after his death and outside the prevailing cultural context. Thus, the focus here is to set the context as one of the possible environmental factors precipitating this cultural adaptation leading to the meme of individual autonomy. William L. Langer suggested that Luther's trials were typical of his time and argued that it was inconceivable that Luther should have evoked so great a

was thus seen as undermining the moral authority of the Church, as it defended a concept of salvation that bordered on Pelagianism (Gillespie 2008, 105). Pelagianism, based on the thinking of a British monk called Pelagius (c. 360-418 A.D.) had been unorthodox since Augustine, who found his advocacy of achieving salvation by living to the highest standards and as purely as possible in this life, to be at odds with the writings of Paul and the need for God’s grace in light of man’s inherent sinfulness. Pelagius also objected to Augustine’s view of original sin as being hereditary (MacCulloch 2005, 107).

Historian’s primary objection to Erikson’s work is mainly the limited number of source materials available, especially on the young Luther. As Lewis Spitz says in his critique of it, “there are ‘grave difficulties’ to psychoanalyzing the dead.” The information that was available to Erikson could not really allow for a thorough analysis of his unconscious motivation, as with a living subject. In Luther's case, there are only two basic references concerning the circumstances of his early home and school life, and both are somewhat suspect according to Spitz (Spitz 1973, 190).
popular response unless he had succeeded in expressing the underlying, unconscious sentiments of large numbers of people at the time (Spitz 1971, 185).

Coupled with this background, there is a panoply of other factors that contributed not only to shaping his views, but creating the right conditions for his meme to take hold and replicate so quickly. Carlos Eire cites five major traditions which influenced Luther: (1) the theology of St. Augustine and his stress on the total corruption of human nature; (2) the scholarly tradition of Renaissance humanism and its emphasis on texts in their original language; (3) the Rhineland mystical tradition which stressed a radical abandonment of the self to God thereby allowing the divine to redeem the human self; (4) nominalism and its stress on the radical otherness of God and the absolute necessity of accepting all propositions about God based on faith not reason; and (5) the conciliarist movement, which denied popes were the ultimate authority in the church (Eire 2014, 144). All of these aspects manifest themselves at some point in Luther’s writings.

In addition, Luther exhibited an eschatological worldview, seeing the Pope as the anti-Christ. This is not unexpected given that the political landscape of Europe at the turn of 16th century was changing dramatically. The rise of nation states rapidly changed the balance of power, compounded by the discovery of new continents, which were being claimed as territories of various competing crowns. This unsettled environment was ripe for evolutionary adaptation.

In addition, Luther, like most people in Christendom, was deeply affected by the encroaching Turks. Many people were expecting something dramatic to happen when the year 1500 dawned and they believed that God had sent the Sultan for a purpose, to

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8 In Luther’s time, it was mainly the Spanish and Portuguese who were competing for global territory. The French, British and Dutch began their colonization of the New World mainly in the 17th century.
show his wrath and proclaim the end of days (MacCulloch 2003, 152). The Eastern Empire had already fallen in 1453 and the Turks were pushing steadily northwest into Austria. The whole century and a half after the Black Death had been one affliction after another in Europe with recurrences of the plague and the Hundred Years’ War instilling an apocalyptic mindset in many Christians (Wilcox 1987, 293). As a result, there was widespread fear and anguish over impending doom and a sense that the second coming was imminent. Coupled with all these factors, was the relatively recent Great Schism in the Papacy, resulting in three rival Popes at one point, leading to greater anxiety and fear of damnation by following the wrong pope.

As a result of this focus on death and the fear of facing judgment the idea of intercession, where the living could alleviate some of the suffering of the dead souls by appealing to Saints and the treasury of merits they provided, gained momentum. This idea of intercession was not new; indications are intercessory prayers for the dead date back to the third century (Cruz 2004, 4). The institutional Church responded to and capitalized on this fear by offering indulgences (first in the Crusades and then closer to home) in lieu of performing actual penitential acts or to release already deceased relatives early from Purgatory. Earlier, Dante had raised questions about the relation between

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9 Indulgences were not a new idea, dating back centuries and made infamous by Boniface VIII (1230-1303) and the Jubilee of 1300. As Jo Ann Moran Cruz points out, Boniface reacted to powerful institutional and popular pressure to broaden the scope of indulgences for the centennial year of 1300, so he declared an extraordinary Papal indulgence. Further, by extending it to those already deceased, it was revolutionary (Cruz 2004, 11). Dante challenged the tradition in his Inferno by reserving a place for Boniface in the eighth circle of Hell as a condemnation of the practice (Alighieri 2004, 174). Nevertheless, while indulgences were theologically dubious, they were very popular—both with the people, who saw them as a way to avoid the torments of purgatory, and with church officials who saw them as an effective fundraising device. They were however, diametrically opposed to Luther’s growing sense that God’s grace was a free gift, and not contingent upon human efforts (Sorensen 2016, 24).
intercessory prayers and penance and whether the Pope could remove the culpability or stain of the sin as well as the temporal punishment (Cruz 2004, 4,11).

The practice was based on the presumption that the Church was the sole repository of all forgiveness earned by the virtue and sufferings of saints and martyrs, and thus it claimed the right to sell excess merits to release sinners from purgatory (Gillespie 2008, 108). Masses were also sold as a way for the living to help the dead. Many Churches had side altars where Masses for the dead were said that no one but the priest was attending, and these became a major part of the medieval economy with over 900 such masses said in Wittenberg alone in 1517 (Cary 2004, 11). Luther attacked these practices as being harmful to the Christian life of dying to sin while rising to faith in God’s promise, and he insisted that this treasury of merits the Church claimed was none other than the gospel itself (Wengert 2015, 30). Indeed the first of his 95 theses is simply “Do Penance,” clarifying that he does not mean sacramental penance, but living a life of penance including inner contrition and mortification of the flesh (Luther 2015, 34-35).

Lastly, the introduction of the printing press into Northern Europe by the mid 15th century cannot be underestimated in its impact in helping this meme to rapidly replicate. Luther’s students did what they could to make his theses on indulgences known, and indeed they spread with a rapidity that was extraordinary at that time.10 His theses, dated October 1517, were reprinted three times, in three separate cities and also translated into German, all by May of 1518. Luther himself told a correspondent, “What is happening is unheard of” (Pettegree 2015, 75). It was this rapidity of transmission to the ordinary lay folk that was the underlying engine of the meme replication.

10 Christian humanists embraced the previously obscure author Luther as a kindred spirit and circulated his Ninety-Five Theses far beyond Germany. Erasmus sent a copy to his friend Thomas More in London (Gregory 2017, 49).
Luther’s initial intent was undoubtedly reform not revolution. He wanted to return Christianity to its roots in the gospel of Christ. He had a deep faith but also growing concern about the efficacy of the Church and the Pope to affect his salvation. In 1510, early in Luther’s religious career, he was assigned to represent his order in Rome on a matter of doctrine. He was shocked by the rampant corruption and debauchery he found there and began to doubt the ability of the institutional Church to intercede with God on his behalf. Rome under Pope Julius II was full of priests, bishops and cardinals who were cynical at best, and hypocritical at worst, using their positions to live well and secure their own fortunes (Cary 2004, 10-11). This crisis was a likely seed of Luther’s early theological ideas, which focused on man’s sinfulness and espoused a form of self-hatred for one’s wicked sinfulness as a means of true penance. As Luther states in Lectures on Romans:

To become a sinner means, then, to destroy this obstinate way of thinking that lets us imagine that we live, speak, and think well, piously, and justly, and to take on another understanding of ourselves (which comes from God), according to which we believe in our heart that we are sinners who do, speak, and live evil, and are in the wrong, so that we must accuse, judge, condemn and detest ourselves. (Luther 2006, 83)

The early Luther was focused on contrition and self-loathing in view of the wrath of God, the unknowable God of Ockham. He was obsessed with the idea of true penitence and despairing over the depths of human sinfulness. He also emulated the introspective conscience of Paul who summed it up as, “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want to do is what I do …” (Rom. 7:19). Luther thought of man not as animal rationale, but as homo religiosus, as Charles Taylor puts it, or in other words, humans long for God and have a sense of incompleteness (Taylor 1989, 256). Certainly,
this anxiety and intense feeling of self-inadequacy shaped much of Luther’s early thought – he did not feel forgiven. Later he turned towards the Gospel as a promise of God, believing faith is all that is needed, which finally gives him solace. This focus on individual faith and individual understanding of the scriptures without intermediaries was a pivotal change towards autonomous individuality.

Luther had spoken out against the idea of indulgences in his preaching prior to the 1517 posting of the ninety-five theses; these sermons pose insightful and piercing questions regarding the practice, without questioning the validity of the church or its representatives. In fact, the theses still assume papal authority; Luther’s real issue was with the careless dispensation of indulgences, which implied more than just remission of church-imposed penalties. The sacrament of penance involved three parts: contrition, confession and satisfaction through good works. The conservative 12th century understanding of indulgences held that they were meant to reduce or eliminate the temporal penalty of the third part imposed by the Church (Wengert 2015, 14-15). This was the interpretation with which Dante had agreed, but after 1300 the Church inflated their efficacy in the afterlife and it is easy to see how Luther, who was always concerned with his own true level of contrition, could be concerned about others misconstruing this. Luther himself practiced grueling self-examinations of his own conscience, simply going to confession was not enough to assuage him, since he did not believe any individual

11 It is debated whether the document, which is officially a Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences, was ever nailed to the Church door or was simply included in letters that Luther sent to his superiors. In any event, the posting of theses for disputation was a normal part of late medieval university life and not the defiant act of a dissatisfied monk, as it is often portrayed in later art (Wengert 2015, 25). Apart from the bishops, Luther also sent the theses to a few close friends, which set off a chain reaction (or in modern parlance we would say they went viral), quickly reaching Nuremberg, Leipzig, and Basel where they were printed and distributed by December of 1517.
could plumb the depth of his own sinfulness.\textsuperscript{12} In fact, he wore out his mentor with six hour-long confessional sessions; so uncertain was he about God and his own worthiness (Marty 2004, 15). Luther was reportedly troubled by demons he heard in his mind telling him over and over, “God doesn’t want to forgive you” until finally his confessor upbraided him saying “God is not angry with you, you are angry with God” (Eire 2016, 141).\textsuperscript{13} Luther engaged in daily confessions, analyzing every sin and every motive in great detail until finally his mentor decided to divert him from this intensive self-examination by ordering him to obtain a doctorate in biblical studies; this Luther did, in the process becoming one of the best biblical scholars in Europe, a necessary turn of events in formulating his future theology.

The matter came to a head for Luther when a Dominican friar named Johann Tetzel (1465–1519), the Grand Commissioner for indulgences in Germany, began selling them in Brandenburg, outside of Wittenberg.\textsuperscript{14} Luther’s outrage over the Tetzel incident was likely driven by his own deeply felt religious anguish and his deep pastoral concern that people were being led astray. The peasants were paying an inordinate amount of their small income for indulgences, which Luther feared resulted in their complacency

\textsuperscript{12} Later Luther theorized that this was because even being sorry meant being self-centered and seeking contrition by performing penance was seeking to use God, thus turning him into a convenience.

\textsuperscript{13} Luther, like many people in his day, believed that demons and the devil were everywhere. Being tempted by demons or the Great Fiend, the Evil One, the Tempter, was not a metaphor as in modern parlance. Many people were convinced of the presence of demons in their midst as an example, Julian of Norwich (1342-1416), an English mystic who also wrote about nightly visits from the devil (Eire 2016, 138). This “enchanted world” however, ended rapidly with the advent of science, and to talk of “one’s demons” became a meme to refer to one’s troublesome internal, individual doubts and thoughts, not actual spirits.

\textsuperscript{14} Tetzel was not allowed to sell indulgences in Wittenberg because the Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise, had his own collection of relics that were available for viewing as a way of gaining an indulgence and he feared the loss of gold from his territory (Wengert 2015, 19). This placed an undue burden on the poor who had to travel to buy these spiritual benefits. The unequal access to indulgences also was of concern to Luther.
regarding the true contrition necessary for forgiveness. As Brad Gregory puts it, Luther felt Tetzel was reckless, sacrificing pastoral care in order to maximize profits (Gregory 2017, 42-43). Charles Taylor says, “Luther was touching on the nevralgic issue of his day, the central concern and fear, which dominated so much lay piety, and drove the whole indulgences racket, the issue of judgment, damnation, salvation. In raising his standard on this issue, Luther was on to something which could move masses of people, unlike the humanist critique of mass piety, or the reflection of the sacred” (Taylor 2007, 75).

It appears Luther was so sincere he may have naively thought that once the abuses were pointed out to the Pope the practice would be curtailed or stopped. Pope Leo X (r.1513-1521), the former Giovanni di Lorenzo de' Medici (1475-1521), initially dismissed Luther’s theses as merely the squabbling of monks, in one of those great missed moments of history.\(^\text{15}\) When the challenge to papal authority became more explicit however, Luther was rebuked and threatened. It was at this point, in the opinion of Brad Gregory in his work on *The Unintended Reformation*, that Luther came to the conclusion, in line with his apocalyptic expectations, that the Pope was the Antichrist. By 1520 he was referring to the curia as, “an entangled, swarming mass and mess … more wicked and disgraceful than any Sodom, Gomorrah, or Babylon ever was” (Gregory 2012, 145). Erikson sees Luther’s rebellion centered fundamentally on the question of man’s debt of obedience to God, to the Pope, and to Caesar, or rather the

\(\text{15}\) Pope Leo X was the son of the Renaissance humanist and political arbitrator in Florence, Lorenzo the Magnificent (1449-1492), a sponsor and friend of Pico della Mirandola. Lorenzo’s nephew, Giulio de’ Medici (1478-1534) was elected Pope Clement VII in 1523. He refused to annul Henry VIII’s (r.1509-1547) marriage to Catherine of Aragon (1485-1536) causing the break with the English Church. Thus, both Medici popes oversaw irreversible schisms in the Catholic Church.
multitude of secular princes who enforced the laws (Erikson 1962, 49), but this
minimizes the deep pastoral concern Luther had for souls being misled into complacency
and risking their salvation.¹⁶

By 1520 Luther was advocating a sharp delineation between secular and sacred in
his treatise Temporal Authority. He states:

Christ himself made this distinction, and summed it all up very nicely
when he said in Matthew 22[:21], “Render to Caesar the things that are
Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” Now if the imperial
power extended into God’s kingdom and authority, and were not
something separate, Christ would not have made this distinction. For, as
has been said, the soul is not under the authority of Caesar; he can neither
teach it nor guide it, neither kill it nor give it life, neither bind it nor loose
it, neither judge it nor condemn it, neither hold it fast nor release it. All
this he would have to do, had he the authority to command it and to
impose laws upon it. But with respect to body, property, and honor he
has indeed to do these things, for such matters are under his authority.
(Luther 1989, 685)

Luther makes clear that every human belongs to two entirely different kingdoms, each
with its own distinctive and separate jurisdictions over bodies and souls respectively.
This seemingly modern notion of separation of Church and State took Christianity back
to its core roots, but was also a strike against the immense secular power and wealth of
the Pope.

Luther used the term Christendom interchangeably with the Church and/or
Christian community. To him, they all meant the virtual commonwealth of saints and
sinners and he called it ‘a stinking lie’ to say that Christendom was in Rome (Greengrass
2014, 6). Luther then turns to focus on Scripture as the one genuine source of certitude

¹⁶Luther wasn’t the first to preach reform by any means; Jan Hus was burned at the stake for
advocating a similar message only a hundred years earlier. His reform movement did take hold in the
Czech lands but was suppressed by the Church from spreading further. Luther’s message benefited from
the environmental factors present in 1517, most notably the printing press, which allowed rapid
reproduction of his meme ideas, and the poli
tical cover he received from his German prince.
about God and from this truth claim his whole theology and individual focus evolved. He envisioned Scripture as the decisive source of truth. Like Ockham, Luther’s thinking is based on a linguistic turn, where epistemology and phenomenology are based on the word, that is on language. He states in *The Freedom of A Christian*:

> The Word is the gospel of God concerning his Son, who was made flesh, suffered, rose from the dead, and was glorified through the Spirit who sanctifies. To preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free, and save it, provided it believes the preaching. Faith alone is the saving and efficacious use of the Word of God… (Luther 2003, 27)

As Reinhold Niebuhr puts it, “the emphasis lies not so much upon the individuals’ capacity to know the truth as upon his indivisible responsibility to God, and upon an assurance of mercy for his sins, which no institution can mediate, if individual faith is wanting (Niebuhr 1996, 60). This unmediated faith means every individual has their own personal experience of Christ, but unlike the mystic’s union with God, it is achieved only through faith and the grace of God, rather than through the discipline of a mystic, such as Marguerite Porete’s seven stages of spiritual journey to divine union.

*A REBUFF OF HUMANISM*

Luther was an impressive scholar and assimilated many aspects of the humanists who preceded him, such as knowledge of the classic languages and works, and a disdain for Aristotle and Scholastic theologians. He initially had great respect for the Northern humanist Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) and drew on his work for his epoch-making translation of the Bible into German (Kelley 1991, 57). Luther could not however, accept the humanist essential outlook on the world and the divine. He could neither accept nor understand the humanist’s open mindedness, which he saw as reluctance to commit fully to any specific philosophy or truth, as becomes very evident later in his debate with
Erasmus over free will (Wilcox 1975, 289). Humanists saw man as defined by his free will, a free will that God had created, but also a self-creating will, such as Pico’s picture of man.\textsuperscript{17} Luther would have very much disagreed with Pico’s image of a self-made man who could secure his salvation by his own power.\textsuperscript{18} In Luther’s view man endeavors nothing towards his being made a creature and once he is created, he does and endeavors nothing toward his own preservation (Luther 2013, 134), and he certainly does not contain a divine spark imprisoned within his body, as the Neoplatonists imagined (Gillespie 2008, 113). Man certainly could not lift himself up to the divine; he could only have faith in Christ and trust in his redemptive sacrifice. Luther was explicit on this in his sermon on \textit{Two Kinds of Righteousness} where he states:

\begin{quote}
Man is only redeemed through alien righteousness, that is righteousness of another, instilled from without. This is the righteousness of Christ by which he justifies through faith… The second kind of righteousness is our proper righteousness, not because we alone work it, but because we work with that first and alien righteousness. This is that manner of life spent profitably in good works, in the first place, in slaying the flesh and crucifying the desires with respect to the self… (Luther 1989, 155, 157)
\end{quote}

Unlike the humanist self-made man, this alien righteousness is passive, in that it is God’s doing, not man’s, and requires the self to look away from itself, towards Christ. As he says in the \textit{Heidelberg Disputation}:

\begin{quote}
It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ. The law wills that man despair of his own ability, for it leads him into hell and makes him a poor man and shows him that he is a sinner in all his works… (Luther 1989, 42-43)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} The humanist’s concept of free will differed from the will that Ockham, Biel and other nominalists attributed to humans in one decisive aspect. It was not simply a created will, but also a self-creating will. God gives humans the capacity to will and they then can make themselves into what they want to be (Gillespie 2008, 31), as was evident in Pico.

\textsuperscript{18} Humanism’s focus on glory and fame versus humility, would also have been anathema to Luther.
In this regard, as John S. Dunne says it aptly in his book *a Search for God in Time and Memory*, “…the road to heaven passes through hell for Luther as truly it did for Dante” (Dunne 1977, 83). Although Dante, who like Luther criticized many individual popes and the practice of Papal indulgences, never questioned the need for the spiritual mediation of the Church.

**THE AUTONOMOUS SELF**

Luther’s focus on returning Christianity back to its roots brought it back to the interiority that distinguished it from the pagan religions it superseded. That personal affirmation of human dignity, based on the belief that God became man to ensure man’s salvation, was an epochal change in focus towards the individual that had been lost with the growth of the Institutional Church’s hierarchal structure, which had become highly corrupted. The medieval church subscribed to the notion of *Universitas*, that is, through baptism a distinction is made between a person’s natural status of flesh, or *Humanitas*, and their rebirth as a member of the body of the Church. The person is now subject of the Church, which was defined as *Universitas Fidelium*, with the emphasis on faith and subjection to clerical authority (Morris 1996, 268). The Church had adopted this notion of hierarchy and the superiority of the priesthood based on an interpretation of Paul, while ignoring the overall egalitarian emphasis of the Gospels. The meaning is obvious – the individual lacked autonomy as part of the larger ecclesiastical corporate hierarchy.

As discussed in Chapter One, Christianity with its basis in forgiveness and redemption had an essential moral root that was fundamentally different from the barter basis of sacrifice in paganism. That moral root had been compromised in this corporate hierarchy with the bartering of indulgences for cash. Luther’s passionate insight to return
to the basics was the right message at the right time. The heightened sense of individuality in the autonomous self-meme is expressed best in Luther’s assertion of the “priesthood of all believers.” As Luther states in his 1520 letter *To the Christian Nobility*:

…we are all consecrated priests through baptism, as St. Peter says in (I Peter 2:9), “You are a royal priesthood and a priestly realm…Therefore, when a bishop consecrates it is nothing else than that in the place and stead of the whole community, all of whom have like power, he takes a person and charges him to exercise this power on behalf of the others. (Luther 2003, 40)

Luther goes on to state in his sermon on temporal authority:

How he believes or disbelieves is a matter for the conscience of each individual, and since this takes nothing away from the temporal authority the latter should be content to attend to its own affairs and let men believe this or that as they are able and willing, and constrain no one by force. For faith is a free act, to which no one can be forced …Hence arises the common saying, found also in Augustine, “No one can or ought to be forced to believe.” (Luther 2003, 61-62)

Luther sounds surprisingly modern and democratic in these writings, especially compared to what had been common church practice of using secular authority to enforce belief by executing heretics. Later derivatives of Lutheranism did not maintain this, but the autonomy and freedom of belief that was born of this initial protest quickly spread.  

Luther boiled Christianity down to its core essentials again as he states:

First, let us consider the inner man to see how a righteous, free and pious Christian, that is, a spiritual, new, and inner man, becomes what he is. It is evident that no external thing has any influence in producing Christian righteousness or freedom, or in producing unrighteousness or servitude…One thing, and only one thing, is necessary for Christian life, righteousness, and freedom. That one thing is the most holy Word of God, the gospel of Christ… (Luther 2003, 26-27)

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19 Members of the priesthood of all believers were interiorly as free as could be, governed only by God, but in the public sphere secular rulers were the sole stewards of the day to day life that unfolded for these Christians according to Luther’s doctrine of two kingdoms (Gregory 2015, 148).
The problem with his two kingdoms, however, as Gregory points out, is that however free the inner man might be in his faith, the individual is an embodied person – and the embodied person is subject to the political power of rulers and the society in which he lives (Gregory 2017, 151). Thus, the religious individual in conflict with the state has a narrow number of choices: sustaining persecution or imprisonment, martyrdom, or going into exile. Yet, internally, members of the priesthood of all believers were totally free and answerable only to God.

The influence of Augustine is also evident here with the focus on the inner man as Luther seeks to bring Christendom back to its Pauline roots. Luther takes Augustine’s inner-self meme but instead of using it to find God inside himself, he used it to find the sins inside him. Both Paul and Augustine advocated that salvation was brought about through grace, which is received individually, and both men heavily influenced Luther. As Gillespie points out though, what distinguishes Luther from his predecessors is his further insight that grace can be obtained only through faith, not works, only though trusting in the word of Christ (Gillespie 2008, 116). This was very much an individual, personal trust for Luther, who saw Christianity as captive to “godless preachers of fables.” As he stated in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*:

> What we deplore in this captivity is that nowadays they take every precaution that no layman should hear these words of Christ, as if they were too sacred to be delivered to the common people. (Luther 1989, 297)

Luther further attacks the common practice of offering a mass for the dead as wicked and an attempt to influence God through works. Luther states his core message as:

> Who can receive or apply, in behalf of another, the promise of God, which demands the personal faith of each one individually? Can I give to another the promise of God, even if he does not believe? But this is
what must happen if I am able to apply and communicate the mass to others; for there are but two things in the mass, the divine promise and the human faith, the latter accepting what the former promises. (Luther 1989, 304)

He goes on to say:

Therefore, let this irrefutable truth stand fast: Where there is a divine promise, there every one must stand on his own feet; his own personal faith is demanded, he will give an account for himself and bear his own load (Gal 6:5); as it is said in the last chapter of (Mark 16:16): “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” Even so each one can derive personal benefit from the mass only by his own personal faith. (Luther 1989, 305)

Luther’s exhortation to stand on one’s own feet and be responsible for one’s own faith is profoundly individualistic for his era. At the same time, he abominated the idea that the Mass is a sacrifice or a good work. That notion implies too much human power in offering a mass to God in order to receive a reward, rather than spiritual rewards being a gift freely promised by Christ (Cary 2004, 43). In his view, the “priests are our servants” and “we are receiving through them the ‘promises and the sign; we are being communicated unto in the passive sense” (Luther 1989, 305). In this sense, Luther’s preaching was a return to Christianity’s egalitarian essence of the individual alone, standing on his own feet, who could find faith through Scripture and thus be saved through Christ’s sacrifice, not the magic of the Church.

More importantly for evolving individualism, Luther highlighted the importance of individual conscience; he believed his convictions and would not betray his own conscience. As he said in *The Proceedings at Augsburg* when asked to recant:

Indeed, it will please me most of all if the truth is victorious. However, I do not want to be compelled to affirm something contrary to my conscience, for I believe without the slightest doubt that this is the meaning of Scripture. (Luther 2015, 147)
This must have been a stunning statement at the time, placing individual conscience as preeminent even above papal authority. Luther’s refusal to recant inevitably led to his excommunication and his trial before the Imperial Diet at Worms. When pressed again at that forum to recant his writings, Luther replied:

I have been subdued through the scriptures I have brought forth, and my conscience is held captive to the Word of God, as a result of which I cannot and will not recant anything, because to act against conscience is burdensome, injurious, and dangerous. God help me! Amen. (Gregory 2017, 83)

He said he could recant nothing, because “without a conviction from scripture or plain reason (for I believe neither in Pope nor councils alone)” his views could not be changed (MacCulloch 2003, 131). The most famous words he never said, as MacCulloch put it, “here I stand, I can do no other” were likely added later. The pivotal point is Luther put his individual conscience and personal convictions above any other mortal authority. Gregory cautions, however, that though his words may sound strikingly modern, wherein one’s individual conviction is valuable in and of itself; in fact what Luther meant was he stands by his own experience “because he believes it is an experience of the true, plain meaning of God’s saving Word. God’s law demolishes the sinner, then his gospel rescues the desperate from despair” (Gregory 2017, 84). This would be consistent with other writings of Luther that are profoundly anti-individualistic, so Gregory’s point is well taken, but recall memes can generate and replicate without any regard to original intent.

Luther took his views further, arguing that if faith came from a personal encounter with the gospel, then priests, and indulgences and many of the sacraments were not needed, specifically those that were not based in the Bible. This meant coming to know
God was a private matter effected through personal study of Scripture, listening to
sermons, and one’s own introspective conscience. The implication being individuals
could then make their own decisions and be responsible for their own salvation outside
the institutional Church.

To accomplish this, Luther, like Dante, saw the power of the vernacular language.
He insisted that the words of the Eucharist be heard by the common man, in his own
language, so he could really understand the promise of Christ, and not just hear some
incomprehensible Latin that magically turned the bread and wine into the body and blood
of Christ (Cary 2004, 45). To Luther, the Gospel was not mere words but contained
promises as in, “this is my body, it is given for you” (Luke 22:19). Both Philip Cary and
Diarmiđ MacCulloch emphasize the power of language that Luther harnessed. Eloquent
in both German and Latin, Luther could communicate at many different levels: he
debated with scholars, shouted from the pulpit to his flock, wrote vigorously, and
composed and sang hymns and songs (MacCulloch 2003, 153). He was a passionate
speaker and preacher, as well as a prolific writer of letters, texts and hymns, who
understood the power of the word and harnessed it to appeal to the common folk. He
developed a ministry and wrote two catechisms to instruct ordinary Germans in
interpretation of the Bible and basic Christian teachings (Cary 2004, 48). Luther’s focus
was on the promise made by Christ to each soul, making it very personal and

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20 In line with this view, Luther saw monastic life as an attempt of the clergy to elevate themselves
above the common people and he thus called for the abolishment of the monasteries. Many monks and
nuns left their holy orders and Luther married a former nun, giving further affirmation to the spiritual
standing of family life. This affirmation of the fullness of Christian existence within the bounds of a simple
life of marriage and family was a positive meme that reinforced individualism (Taylor 1989, 218).
individualistic. It was also an affirmation of everyday life, as it was not just the clergy and the literate who could understand the words of the gospel.

Obviously, it was an enormous threat to the clerics and a taste of freedom for Luther’s followers who understood the implications and made this autonomous self-meme spread rapidly.21 Again an autonomous-self meme was hardly Luther’s intent, as he gave no credence to man’s ability to have either the will or the power to better himself in the eyes of God. Even though he insisted on the common man being able to read scripture in his own language and eventually have the Mass said in the vernacular, Luther did not think the common man should interpret the Bible himself.

From a modern vantage point Luther’s views are often paradoxical and his intent was certainly not to enhance personal autonomy overall, even though his meme enabled it. As Wilhelm Pauck points out in his introduction to Luther’s Lectures on Romans, his intent was to usurp the authority of Aristotle in explaining the Gospel of Christ. He was adamantly opposed to the scholastic’s interpretation of the Bible through the philosophy of Aristotle, which was the Thomist tradition, though he is careful not to call out Aquinas by name (Pauck 2006, li). Aristotle’s philosophy of becoming virtuous was simply by practicing virtue, or in other words – works vs. faith. As he stated:

> It is well said, then, that it is by doing just acts that the just man is produced, and by doing temperate acts the temperate man; without doing these no one would have even a prospect of becoming good. (Aristotle, 1105b.9)

This was anathema to Luther who, while not discrediting good works that flow from faith as an important aspect of Christian life, preached that Jesus was the sole cause of

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21 Luther was a good strategist and played to the Germanic people’s nationalism by referring to the Papacy and curia as “Romanists” over and over again, fueling the growing dissatisfaction with Italian intervention in their territories. This was a sore point with many of the Princes in the Holy Roman Empire who were aggrieved to see large amounts of money going to Rome from their states (Wilcox 1975, 329).
salvation and gave no credence to man’s ability to contribute to his own redemption. This view, which as in all things Luther took to an extreme, was the anti-individualism side of his writings.

**The Paradoxical Luther**

As stated in the preface, Luther was one of the most self-contradictory writers in Christendom, taking after Augustine in this regard. This aspect should not be surprising in one who brought so many original memes to fruition. Like Augustine, Luther produced a large quantity of work, much of it revealing growth or change in his outlook as he matured. Some of his ideas were counter to the growing individualism in Christendom, and many never replicated widely as memes. Stanford professor Robert Sutton notes, “Original thinkers will come up with many ideas that are strange mutations, dead ends, and utter failures. The cost is worthwhile because they also generate a larger pool of ideas – especially novel ideas” (Grant 2016, 37). Just as in evolution, there are a great many mutations that never replicate because they are not adaptable to the environment, so it is with cultural meme generation, and in particular with the plurality of Luther’s ideas.

Perhaps this paradoxical aspect of him is best summed up in *The Freedom of a Christian* when he states:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.
These two theses seem to contradict each other. If, however, they should be found to fit together they would serve our purpose beautifully.

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22 Other deplorable ideas did replicate, such as Luther’s railing against the Jews in his later work (1543) titled *The Jews and Their Lies*. Some of the things he states such as, “Therefore be on your guard against the Jews, knowing that wherever they have their synagogues, nothing is found but a den of devils in which sheer self-glory, conceit, lies, blasphemy, and defaming of God and men are practiced most maliciously and veheming his eyes on them,” inflamed anti-Semitic memes that produced terrible results in Germany 400 years later, though they were not uncommon at all in Luther’s time (jewishvirtuallibrary.org).
Both are Paul’s own statements, who says in I Cor. 9:19, “For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all,” and in Rom. 13:8, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another.” (Luther 1989, 596)

Luther readily admits he is making two paradoxical truth claims, yet they both sum up his theology well. A Christian is free in conscience but dutiful to society and the law. A Christian does not need the law, but for the sake of sinners he will obey. For Luther, man is justified, that is made right in light of his innate sinfulness, simply and only through faith. Good works cannot merit salvation, for that would imply God could be “bought” so to speak, the whole basis of the indulgence controversy.

Luther also rejected the notion that some sins were so called reserved sins, that could only be forgiven by the Pope. He favored the egalitarian and communitarian view, that all humans are afforded salvation just by believing the promise of Jesus Christ. Further, if you are justified by faith you will be filled with love and want to spread the love of Christ to your neighbor through good works.

Luther released one of the most democratic interpretations of the gospel by maintaining the need to have direct access to the gospel of Christ without intervention, while also maintaining that his teachings were not political and refusing to support any types of economic or political reforms such as had been demanded in the Peasants Rebellion.23 Luther was somewhat understanding at first but later dismissed the rebel’s demands with harsh rhetoric, charging that Christian freedom was not some political

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23 The Peasant’s Revolt of 1524 is a good example of how fast the autonomous self-meme replicated. Thomas Muntzer had been a follower of Luther but developed a conviction of his own divine inspiration. Becoming aligned with the suffering poor, he advocated all princes had to heed the call of God or be exterminated. The peasant’s, believing the end of days was at hand and that God would join their cause, rebelled in what was one of the largest mass uprisings in the history of Europe, and were subsequently put down in a brutal repression where thousands were slaughtered. Luther saw the rebellion not as an example of the emerging autonomous self-meme, but as the work of the devil and harshly condemned it, siding with the princes in the end, for Luther disdained any kind of disorder (Gillespie 2008, 112; Eire 2016, 199-201).
principle, but a purely spiritual one. In answer to the peasant’s most egalitarian demand, the abolition of serfdom, Luther replied:

You assert that no one is to be the serf of anyone else, because Christ has made us all free. That is making Christian freedom a completely physical matter. Did not Abraham (Gen 17:23) and other patriarchs always have slaves?…This article completely contradicts the gospel. It proposes robbery, for it suggests that every man should take his body away from his lord, even though his body is the lord’s property. A slave can be a Christian, and have Christian freedom, in the same way that a prisoner or a sick man is a Christian, and yet not free. (Luther 1974, 82)

Luther qualified Christian freedom as freedom of conscience only; thus he foreshadowed one of the more significant and intense debates in later Western democracy – how a country based on liberty and equality can deny physical freedom and individual autonomy to a significant number of its population? American slaveholders also based their belief on selected readings of the Bible, and like Luther, they cherry-picked passages to match their views.

**FREE WILL**

While Luther’s focus on the individual conscience and the individual understanding of the gospel helped to propel another aspect of individualism, his denial of free will was anti-individualistic in the modern sense. While this is a debate that still rages in philosophy, with many modern determinists such as Sam Harris and Dan Dennett also denying we have truly free will, the prevailing cultural meme is the opposite and the individual will is one of the most fundamental cornerstones of the modern state.24

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24 Some modern philosophers such as Harris are atheistic determinists, in that they believe we live in a pre-determined reality. From the Big Bang forward, the path of each particle interacting with other particles determines everything right down to the most mundane choices we seemingly make. However, modern particle physics is based on probabilistic models, allowing some uncertainty at the most fundamental level and perhaps a free will?
In opposition to Luther, Erasmus of Rotterdam was one of the best known Christian humanists in his era and, like Luther, was also focused on reform of the Church. He was also prolific in his writings. He wrote the famous work *In Praise of Folly* as a critique of Church corruption, but where Erasmus chose satire, Luther was much more direct in his writings. It is often said that Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched. Indeed just 20 years after his death, all of Erasmus’ works were put on the Index of Prohibited Books by Pope Paul IV (r. 1555-1559) (Collinson 2006, 39). Erasmus first heard of Luther in 1518, when he read his *Theses on Indulgences*, with which he strongly agreed (Gillespie 2008, 136). Both Luther and Erasmus were Augustinians and both were well versed in classics and the Church fathers, but Augustine, like Luther, had changed his position on many issues during his long vocation and was ambiguous on man’s will. As Gillespie points out, Erasmus clearly preferred the earlier anti-Manichean Augustine, and Luther the later anti-Pelagian Augustine (Gillespie 2008, 147).

Augustine had thought grace and free will were compatible because man had to have free will in order to gain merit, but Luther, eschewing any concept of works in gaining salvation throws out this whole argument. His reasoning is again based on Paul, “No human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law” (Rom 3.20). To Luther, free will is willfulness or self-will, and self-defeating as one cannot will oneself to love God. He quotes Augustine in the *Heidelberg Disputation* stating:

Free will, after the fall, exists in name only, and as long as it does what it is able to do, it commits a mortal sin. Not that it is nothing, but that it is not free except to do evil… Hence St. Augustine says in his book, *The Spirit and the Letter*, “Free will without grace has the power to do

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25 Luther was an early admirer of Erasmus and used his translation of the New Testament from the Greek as his source to translate it into German.
nothing but sin”; and in the second book of Against Julian, “you call the will free, but in fact it is an enslaved will,” … (Luther 1989, 39-40)

Erasmus on the other hand, never broke with the Church and never accepted Luther’s denial of free will, which Erasmus described as the power of man to direct himself towards or turn away from what leads to eternal salvation (Erasmus 2012, 6). Luther’s subsequent debate with Erasmus was focused on this issue and began when Erasmus published his work On the Free Will: Diatribe or Discussion in 1524.

Erasmus hoped his treatise would open a discussion on what he thought was a relevant topic – the question of the relationship of the divine and human wills.

Luther responded to Erasmus with his tract, The Bondage of the Will, in 1525, in which he proclaims in the introduction that, “free choice is a pure fiction” (Luther 1989, 176). Luther relies on Scripture almost entirely and bases much of his argument on passages from Paul’s letters to the Romans, for example, “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who in wickedness hold back the truth of God” (Rom 1:18). From this Luther concluded:

This passage of Paul’s therefore, stands unyielding in its insistence that free choice, or the most excellent thing in men – even the most excellent of men, who are possessed of the law, righteousness, wisdom, and all the virtues – is ungodly, wicked, and deserving of the wrath of God … Therefore, Paul in this passage lumps all men together in a single mass, and concludes that, so far from being able to will or do anything good, they are all ungodly, wicked, and ignorant of righteousness and faith. (Luther 1989, 180)

The modern Western democratic system is based on this concept of free choice in men possessed of the law and virtues that Luther decries as wicked. Luther quotes Paul

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26 Erasmus himself had been calling for reforms for years, and was under pressure from both the Pope and Henry VIII of England (as Defender of the Faith) to declare his true allegiance. Instead of defending Papal supremacy, he decided to start a dialogue on freedom of the will, which he believed would be a less divisive topic hoping to draw Luther into a cordial theological debate (Gillespie 2008, 137).
extensively, particularly his letters to the Galatians and Romans and even points out where Paul makes contradictory statements. His logic is based on the separation of the Law from Faith; obeying the law is necessary but not sufficient because, “those who are most devoted to the works of the law are farthest from fulfilling the law, because they lack the Spirit that is the true fulfills of the law, and while they may attempt it by their own powers, they achieve nothing” (Luther 1989, 190). In his view, only grace from God can give you the faith to be justified. As he says, “Paul’s words here are absolute thunderbolts against free choice” (Luther 1989, 194). He states the thunderbolts as:

“The righteousness of God is manifested apart from law.” This distinguishes the righteousness of God from the righteousness of the law: for the righteousness of faith comes from grace apart from the law…A second thunderbolt is his saying that the righteousness of God is revealed and avails for all and upon all who believe in Christ, and that there is no distinction. (Luther 1989, 194-195)

Luther not only denied we can do anything to save ourselves, his view on free will also meant that we are powerless to reject grace if it is offered. We are mere pawns in his view, as Luther compares human will to a horse and says when God sits upon it, it goes where God wants, and when Satan sits upon it, it goes where Satan wills, and it has no choice as to which rider it will carry, nor can it seek him; the riders are the ones fighting over the possession of the horse (Luther 2011, 23). This view led to the subsequent doctrine of pre-destination that became a staple of Calvinism and some other latter forms of Protestantism. Luther also stated in The Bondage of the Will that:

27 Compare Luther’s analogy of man as a beast being ridden by God or Satan, to Plato’s chariot analogy in Phaedrus where it is the soul of man who must steer a chariot with two horses; One who represents reason and rationality, and the other horse who represents the irrational passions and appetitive nature (Plato, 246a–254e). In this case man is in charge of the human soul. This ancient meme is still a fundamental part of our Western conception of responsibility.
If God be not deceived in that which He foreknows, that which He foreknows must, of necessity, take place. (Emphasis Luther’s) If it were not so, who could believe His promise, who would fear His threatenings, if what He promised or threatened did not of necessity take place! (Luther 2011, 69)

This deterministic view takes us back to the modern arguments of Dennett and his denial of a real self (although based on different reasoning) and is profoundly anti-individualistic. This is perhaps the most troubling part of Luther’s tract for it undermines any notion of man’s freedom to do good. All freedom in Luther’s view necessarily belongs to God, and this is a devastating blow to the modern ideal of the free individual – but for Luther, this was a comfort. To know that salvation did not depend on so-called free will, was a solace to his troubled mind, since if salvation did depend on the strength of the will, he could never be certain and secure that he pleased God, but would always be doubting if he had done enough (Dunne 1977, 104). On the other hand, he exhorts people in Temporal Authority that it is their responsibility to “believe rightly” and further says, “How he believes or disbelieves is a matter for the conscience of each individual…” (Luther 1989, 682)

Erasmus approaches the argument from moral principles rather than theological ones, and a moral argument necessarily presumes some freedom to do the right thing. He does not quote Scripture as an absolute truth in the same way Luther does, though he does say he finds the Gospels and The Acts of the Apostles are writings that “breathe a certain fragrance of the Holy Spirit which I do not find in the writings of very many persons” (Erasmus 2012, 129). Erasmus, being ever the good humanist, saw a role for nature, good works and faith as when he stated:

Therefore we are born under three kinds of laws: the law of nature, the law of good works, and the law of faith, to use Paul’s expression. The
law of Nature, carved deeply into the minds of all, tells Scythians as well as Greeks that it is unjust to do to another what one does not wish to suffer himself. Without the help of Scripture and without the light of faith, philosophers have gained a knowledge of divine kindness and greatness by observing the created world. They have left us many moral precepts which bear and astounding resemblance to the precepts of the Gospels. We possess many of their sayings, encouraging virtue and detesting turpitude. Thus it seems probable that they had a will tending to moral good, but incapable of eternal salvation, unless grace be added through faith. (Erasmus 2013, 31)

One hears the categorical imperative of Immanuel Kant to come in these words. They allow for the gift of grace and the necessity of faith but allow for the free will of the individual and the wisdom of the ancients. Ironically, though Luther is better known in history, the memes that endured are a combination of Luther’s autonomy and Erasmus’s moral humanism. As Gillespie points out, Luther won the debate in the context of his times as the Reformation expanded, but in the long term it was not Luther’s theocentric apocalyptic vision that won out but Erasmus’s more moderate and moral Christian humanism (Gillespie 2009, 139). Erasmus’s meme of moral consciousness and free will, with the aid of grace for those of faith, became a contributor to modern individualism as well as Luther’s autonomous self-meme.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The least visible marker of individualism in Luther is transcendence. He is not interested in looking beyond and finding a vision of what could be; he is too focused on finding certainty to calm his troubled conscience and expecting that God will keep his promise. Luther sees identity in universal terms, rather than the individualistic terms we use today. He would not understand our modern perspective that moral questions cannot all be solved in universal terms. Where post-modern man sees meaninglessness, or
emptiness Luther saw the terrible wrath of God and the temptations of devils. Yet, his focus on individual conscience was pivotal and profoundly individualistic.

Several biographers and scholars, including Marty, Eire and Erikson, describe Luther as almost on the brink of madness in his early years, formulating his faith alone (Sola fide) theology as a way of coping with his feelings of self-inadequacy and unease about being truly forgiven. Sources differ on this but clearly his theology evolved out of an early spiritual crisis. Luther’s mentor was prescient in diagnosing his anger with himself as the anger toward God or anger at his perceived lack of identity; he was not what his father wanted him to be and perhaps not what he himself wanted to be. Erikson’s study of Luther sees this crisis of faith in modern terms as an identity crisis, but this fear of death, which was all around one at that time, and salvation was very much part of the fabric of 16th century culture. Ernest Becker in his book The Denial of Death, refers to the Augustinian-Lutheran tradition as a curriculum whose “school of anxiety is the unlearning of repression of everything that the child taught himself to deny so that he could move about with a minimal animal equanimity” (Becker 1997, 88).

In any regard, Luther is a deeply introspective, self-reflective individual, who clearly abstracted two versions of himself - one as judge and one as examiner - and came up with a new theology. In one sense it is profoundly individualistic, the autonomy meme, and in another it is profoundly anti-individualistic through the denial of free will and belief in predestination. His abrogation of reason in his free will argument leads some modern thinkers like Richard Dawkins, who invented the meme concept, to generalize in his book The God Delusion that religions themselves operate on natural selection; the driving factor is the need to cater to our wishful thinking that our
personalities survive our bodily death. He surmises Luther’s statement that “reason is the greatest enemy that faith has” could lead to a conclusion that Luther would have had no difficulty in intelligently designing unintelligent aspects of a religion in order to help it survive (Dawkins 2006, 190). Luther’s thinking does clearly show an individualistic sense of self and drive for self-preservation (salvation). Yet at the same time, he exhibits a surprising level of self-loathing as he tries to eliminate the implicit Aristotelian emphasis upon reason as master of the body. For him, sin was essentially lust, which includes both self-love and sensuality. This lust is the consequence of man’s turning from God resulting in the corruption of his heart and will (Niebuhr 1996, 232).

Of the individualism markers laid out in Chapter 2, Luther does exhibit the first-person standpoint clearly. He plainly is a being that is conscious of being a self, talking to itself, and also in relation to other beings; however, Luther would completely abrogate the intentional self and the self-made man memes of his predecessors even though he was well versed in nominalism and humanism. His deterministic view of God’s necessity and man’s impotence left no role for these memes. It is Erasmus who wins the day here with his combination of faith, nature and Christian morality. Our current system of justice is built on a moral basis premised by a “universal and persistent” foundation of free will, distinct from a “deterministic view of human conduct that is inconsistent with the underlying precepts of our criminal justice system” according to the United States Supreme Court decision in U.S. v. Grayson, 1978 (Harris 2012, 48). Erasmus’s humanist view allows for faith and moral responsibility and is the enduring meme.

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28 Dawkins sees all religions as evolving through both natural selection and intelligent design by man in order to satisfy basic human psychological needs. He states that while he believes Luther would have had no difficulty designing aspects of a religion in order to help it survive and replicate, his form of Christianity probably evolved through natural selection, with Luther not the designer but a shrewd observer of its efficacy (Dawkins 2006, 190).
Moreover, despite Augustine and Luther’s vehement arguments against it, Pelagianism is now embedded into our Western concept of morality and justice, with our belief that normal human nature possesses a will that is capable of choosing between right and wrong on its own.

Luther however, sought his own explanation because it lifted the terror of not ever knowing if one’s contrition is sincere enough or one’s works good enough to please God and attain salvation. As Charles Taylor assessed Lutheran liberation, “I not only unload the burden from myself, not only recognize the general plight of depravity; I also rejoice in the confidence that liberation comes from elsewhere” (Taylor 1989, 443). From a modern perspective, this seems like an attempt to escape from the self and responsibility altogether. Yet paradoxically, Luther had stressed the importance of individual conscience at his defense. Luther ascribes free will to the divine Majesty only (Luther 2011, 23). Indeed, Luther says in his reply to Erasmus:

As for myself, I frankly confess, that I should not want free will to be given me, even if it could be, nor anything else be left in my own hands to enable me to strive after my salvation. And that, not merely, because in the face of so many dangers, adversities and onslaughts of devils, I could not stand my ground and hold fast my free will … but because, even though there were no dangers, adversities or devils, I should still be forced to labor with no guarantee of success and to beat the air only. If I lived and worked to all eternity, my conscience would never reach comfortable certainty as to how much it must do to satisfy God. (Luther 2013, 138)

So there it is, Luther would trade human freedom for certainty - anathema to modern ears but comforting to many in the context of the times. He relieves himself of his existential dread and despair. A dread that as Dunne points out is really dread of oneself after all mediation is taken away and man stands alone before God (Dunne 1977, 101). The question becomes, how can one be an authentic individual if one does not possess a truly
free will? Human freedom is a fundamental underpinning of the dignity and responsibility inherent in defining one’s identity. As Sartre later said, this freedom of choice is what makes man unique, for in choosing one’s life, man excludes other possible lives. We choose the destiny, and the finiteness of human life is not so much the fact that it is terminated by death, but the fact that one life excludes the other. Fortunately, this predestination meme of Luther’s survives only in a small minority, but his autonomous-self meme, which is able to determine its own relationship with God and the temporal world and be responsible for its own faith, has endured.

Further, Luther’s emphasis on Two Kingdoms, one belonging to God and one to secular rulers was a pivotal breakthrough towards the modern separation of church and state, allowing for individual religious autonomy. His interpretation of the Gospels to mean that each individual belonged to two entirely different kingdoms, each with discrete, and separate jurisdiction over bodies and souls, made faith a private matter of personal and individual preference, such as it is in the modern West today. Religion has been interiorized, subjectivized, and compartmentalized and is just one wedge of the pie of an individual life, as Brad Gregory puts it (Gregory 2012, 164), in part due to the autonomy afforded by Luther’s emphasis on individual conscience.

As a result of the religious pluralism engendered by the Reformation, religious convictions are deemed an individual matter with each person deciding what to believe. As Gregory termed it, “each person is widely thought to be his or her own sovereign authority; this is in effect what freedom of religion means. Certainly it is what the laws of Western states protect” (Gregory 2015, 76). This is a far cry from what Luther may have intended but it is the meme that endured.
CHAPTER 8

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE: THE SUBJECTIVE-SELF MEME

The intent of this chapter is to highlight the subjective-self meme. The term subjectivity is most commonly used as an explanation for that which influences, informs, and biases people's judgments, perceptions, experiences, and expectations; recognizing that it is based on personal experience shaped by interaction in a given family, social network, overall society, culture, and belief system that surrounds that individual.

It is the contention in this chapter that the writings of Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) in his Essays gave voice to the emergence of this meme in the 16th century. This meme could also be called the particular-self meme, as that aspect of Montaigne is what distinguishes him most from other individualists; he revels in the laborious self-examination of the particular, each individual’s idiosyncratic originality, sometimes with no intent to frame it into a general doctrine, and other times extrapolating his own particularities broadly on various topics such as: friendship, virtue, educating children, prayer and even smells. As Charles Taylor claims, “The search for the self in order to come to terms with oneself, which Montaigne inaugurates, has become one of the fundamental themes of our modern culture” (Taylor 1989, 183). In today’s parlance, we would call it “finding yourself.”

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1 Subjective is used here in its more mundane definition as giving priority to personal opinions, biases, tastes and idiosyncrasies. Subjectivity is often used with, but is not synonymous with relativism, which refers to the idea that fundamental concepts such as truth, right, the good etc. are all ideas that must be understood as relative to a specific conceptual scheme, framework, society or culture. Unlike objectivism which is the basic conviction that there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical framework to which we can ultimately appeal for determining the nature of truth, reality and knowledge (Bernstein 1988, 8). Montaigne displays aspects of all of these. He was most noted for his subjectivism, celebrating the particular in every individual while recognizing the relativistic aspects of time and culture. On the other hand, like many meme developers, he was self-contradictory at times and was also fideistic, believing there are objective Christian truths that can only be known through faith.
Montaigne seeks this self-knowledge through examination of the discrete individual that is himself, recognizing that the search for a universal human nature can never resolve the issue of who we are as individuals (McCarthy 1997, 29). It is almost the antithesis of Luther, who made sweeping assertions about human nature based on Scripture. Montaigne however, returns to the responsible self of Dante, seeking to explore ourselves to find our own identity, albeit in much more secular fashion. Where Luther found solace in faith alone and looked away from himself towards the promise of God’s grace, Montaigne looked inside and sought self-knowledge as a step toward self-acceptance. Thus, the subjective-self meme is that turning point which was enabled by Montaigne, where we define our individuality in our differences, rather than by reasoning out broad interpretations of human nature in general. Taylor again frames it well when he says, “Montaigne served as a paradigm figure to illustrate another way in which Augustinian inwardness has entered modern life, and he helped to constitute our understanding of the self” (Taylor 1989, 184).

Montaigne is being treated separately from the other humanists in this treatise for several reasons, most notably is that he gave rise to a different meme of individualism. His focus is on the subjective, particularly with an awareness of the cultural relativism that influences our perceptions. Montaigne’s focus on the individual in the context of one’s social structure and culture make him a precursor to modern identity theory; wherein rather than objectifying our own nature, the assumption in modern identity

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2 Montaigne’s subjectivity foreshadows the major phenomenologist of the 19th century, Edmund Husserl. Husserl expounded on inter-subjective experience, which is empathic experience; it occurs in the course of our conscious attribution of intentional acts to other subjects. Husserl posited that we maintain a belief that a being that looks and behaves more or less like myself, i.e., displays traits more or less familiar from my own case, will generally perceive things from an egocentric viewpoint similar to my own, in the sense that I would roughly look upon things the way he does if I were in his shoes and perceived them from his perspective (Beyer 2016, plato.stanford.edu).
theory is that we have to undertake self-exploration to know who we are. This is why according to Taylor, Montaigne is the representative figure of a major turning point towards the modern-self (Taylor 1989, 178).

**ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS**

Montaigne was a 13-year-old teenager when Luther died, but the change in his world in the short amount of time from his birth to reaching adulthood was epochal in nature. The Reformation Luther had initiated only a few decades before had exploded into bloody religious wars that were prominent in shaping Montaigne’s worldview. The dominant theological authority and power of the Catholic Church had been overthrown in much of Europe, opening the way for both religious pluralism and skepticism, creating an era of profound religious divisiveness and fear. The French Catholic crown was actively suppressing Protestantism and men were executed for Lutheranism in Montaigne’s hometown of Bordeaux in 1544 (Frame 1963, 35).

Compounding this was the assault on traditional cosmological concepts triggered by the Copernican Revolution in science. Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543), who was born in Poland and a Catholic in good standing, as well as being a mathematician and astronomer, summarized the conclusions of his astronomical calculations with a stunning

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3 Even Montaigne’s own family was divided; he and his father remained Catholic, while the rest of the immediate family was drawn into Protestant churches (Popkin 2003, 46).

4 Montaigne was born in a period when moderate, peaceful religious reform was being sought by Erasmus and others, and these views were popular in France. This type of humanistic reform sought to understand the Bible better through education and philology and to make it more widely known to the general public, but this moderate view did not prevail. Before Montaigne was two years old, Pope Clement VII had secretly excommunicated Henry VIII (r.1509-1547) of England and persuaded King Francis I (r.1515-1547) to put pressure on heretics, including John Calvin who fled to Geneva. Things got progressively worse under Francis’ son, Henry II (r.1547-1559) of France and the massacre of over twenty Protestants at Vassy by Catholics in 1562 led to intermittent civil and religious wars which continued throughout Montaigne’s life and after (Frame 1963, 36-37).
assertion – the sun, not the earth is the center of the universe. Copernicus’s heliocentric theory thus was in direct conflict with the Bible, which Protestants, as well as Catholics, held as the absolute authority, and a fundamental threat to the entire Christian framework of cosmology, theology, and morality, upending Ptolemy, the Scholastics, Dante, and Aristotle in one blow (Tarnas 1991, 253). Fearing retribution, Copernicus wisely held publication of his book, *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* until shortly before his death in 1543.

Both of these revolutions set in motion a profound change in how individuals saw themselves in the world. One enabled autonomy and pluralism, while the start of the scientific revolution brought on the disenchantment of the world, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Thus, Montaigne came of age at a key turning point of competing tensions when, as Richard Tarnas says, “two apparently contradictory – or at least incongruent – truths had to be maintained simultaneously, one religious and one

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5 Copernicus was not actually the first to assert this. Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) had stated in his book, *On Learned Ignorance* that the earth is not fixed in place and it cannot be the exact physical center of the natural universe, even if it seems nearer the center than “the fixed stars.” He also asserted that the universe is in motion without a fixed center or boundaries, and none of the spheres of the Aristotelian and Ptolemaic world concept are exactly spherical, none of them has an exact center, and the “outermost sphere” is not a boundary. The universe is therefore physically unbounded. He thus described a modern view of the universe, which he had reasoned out based on ontological grounds, not observations (Miller 2017, plato.stanford.edu).

6 Psalm 104:5 states, “He set the earth on its foundations, it can never be moved” and Joshua10:13 states, “So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, Until the nation avenged themselves of their enemies. Is it not written in the book of Jashar? And the sun stopped in the middle of the sky and did not hasten to go down for about a whole day.”

7 Today the term Copernican revolution is a meme of its own, referring to anything that totally upends the current prevailing worldview. It is most often used though in philosophy to refer to Immanuel Kant’s (1724-1804) so-called, Copernican Revolution, which revolutionized the explanation of how the human mind structures its experience. It is based on the 1957 book by Thomas Kuhn *The Copernican Revolution*, which is an analysis of Copernicus’ work. Kuhn argued that the Ptolemaic system provided broader appeal than a simple astronomical system but became intertwined in broader philosophical and theological beliefs, making it more difficult for other systems to be proposed.
scientific” (Tarnas 1991, 243), and both were factors in the development of Montaigne’s mindset and the cultural meme adaptation of the subjective self.

BACKGROUND

Montaigne is one of the best known of the Renaissance humanists, being as well-schooled in the classics as any of the Italian humanists discussed in Chapter Six. He was very much a product of a studia humanitatis education, emphasizing a scholarly ideal based in the study of classical antiquity. At his father’s insistence, he learned Latin as fluently as his native tongue so he could read and discuss original classical texts (Frame 1943, xvi).

Montaigne’s life roughly falls into three phases and he exhibits a different type of self in each of them. He did seem to shift back and forth between the vita contemplativa and vita activa, making any hard divisions in his life impossible, as Manuel Vázquez notes in his book The Skepticism of Michel de Montaigne (Vázquez 2015, xiii). His early life is marked by dependence on his father and then the conduct of official business and activities at the French court – a superficial and carefully self-fashioned persona that must deal with the ceremony, pedantry, and hypocrisy that he recounts in personal letters (Frame 1965, 59). He was only 21 years old when he was appointed by Henry II to the Cour des Aides at Périgueux, and from there he advanced to the Parlement of Bordeaux, where he met Étienne La Boétie (1530-1563), his intellectual companion and dearest friend (Weintraub 1978, 168).

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8 He also was taught Greek but failed to master it to any degree. He later said, “As for Greek, of which I have practically no knowledge at all, my father planned to have taught it artificially, but in a new way, in the form of amusement and exercise” (Frame 1965, 40).

9 The Bordeaux Parlement was one of eight regional bodies headed by The Parlement in Paris, the highest court of justice in France. Montaigne was made a magistrate when he was only 28 years old. He
enriched by this deep friendship with La Boétie, a colleague in the Parlement who inspired much of Montaigne’s later writings on friendship. Montaigne made his first appearance at the French royal court in 1559 at the age of 26. This was a remarkable advancement for one so young, and an indication that his prodigious education and intellect was widely recognized.

The second phase of his life is marked by death, including that of La Boétie, and of his father, upon whose passing he inherited the family seat. As a result, and after being denied an opportunity to move to a higher chamber after fourteen years at Parlement, he decided to withdraw from public life. Without the intellectual companionship of La Boétie, politics no longer interested him and he decided to pursue an ideal humanistic life of reading, writing and meditation. As biographer and Montaigne scholar Donald Frame says, “La Boétie was the only man Montaigne fully trusted as witness to his life. With him dead, The Essays must serve instead.” Frame theorizes that if La Boétie had lived, Montaigne would probably have written letters to express himself, like other humanists had done, particularly Petrarch (Frame 1965, 82-83). It is in the third phase of his life that Montaigne searched within himself to achieve what Richard Blum calls his authentic ego, as opposed to a preconceived image, and it is outlined in the third book of his Essays.

had many relatives who also served and his wife was a daughter and granddaughter of presidents in the Parlement, making it a family affair (Frame 1965, 48-50).

Montaigne’s attempt at full retirement was never successful. He was elected Mayor of Bordeaux in 1581 and filled the position until 1585. He also endured very hard years during the last decade of his life. In addition to continuing health issues with kidney stones, his house was pillaged during the civil uprisings, a pestilence ravaged the whole Bordeaux region and, he was held up by bandits while traveling to Paris. Nevertheless, he continued work on Books I and 2, expanding them with new essays and then added the third book, publishing the entire work in Paris in 1588 (Weintraub 1982,169).
THE ESSAYS

To express himself, Montaigne invented a new form and style of writing that suited his emphasis on the individual and the particular: the essay format. *Essais* in French means trials, or tests, or attempts, which describes this new literary genre aptly. The form, which Montaigne once claimed as the most notable aspect of his essays, is a combination of a story told with commentary and observations, arranged by various topical subjects (Kraye 2011, 96). There is significance in the title, as Montaigne wanted to present “attempts” at answers to his questions, rather than assured knowledge. He was much too much of a skeptic, as will be discussed later, to believe he could know anything definitively.

Montaigne’s writings are deeply infused by classical philosophical thought, and he utilized his fluent Latin throughout the *Essays*, with numerous quotations from classical authors as well as drawing on his rich background in French and Italian history. One verse out of sixteen in Lucretius’ *De natura rerum* is quoted in the *Essays* (Foglia 2014, plato.stanford.edu). Another of his favorite authors was Seneca, the ancient he quotes most often in the first essays before he moves on to Plutarch, causing many to view him as an Epicurean in the last phase of his life (Blum 2010, 195).

Montaigne embodies Edmund Husserl’s famous dictum that philosophy is a shared endeavor, since his work extensively alludes to classical works and quotes from others.¹¹ He internalized a huge breadth of reading from his humanist education but

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¹¹ Most modern versions of the complete works of Montaigne are around 1,000 pages. In those 1,000 pages, there are in excess of 2,500 references to more than 500 figures drawn from classical literature, with over 1,000 direct quotations (Vázquez 2015, 13). As M.A. Screech observes in his introduction to the *Essays*, Montaigne never names or cites these classical authors when borrowing from them. He was delighted to know that critics would be condemning an idea of Plato, Aristotle, or Seneca, when they thought they were attacking merely an opinion of his own unimportant self (Screech 2003, xiv).
wrote in an earthy style that is most appealing and deeply rooted in the language of classical poets, historians, and philosophers. His self-reflective essays are not systematic in any way, and some chapters have almost nothing to do with the chapters before or after them.\footnote{For example, the essay \textit{On the uncertainty of our judgment} is followed by \textit{On war-horses}, indicative of a restless mind. Further, he inserts 29 sonnets of La Boëtie in the middle of Book I in the early editions, and then struck them out in a later edition he revised.}

Montaigne’s stated purpose for his books, in his introduction to the reader, is that his essays are for the benefit of those that have lost him, so they can find some traits of his character and humors and keep their knowledge of him more full, more alive, after he is gone (Montaigne 2003,1). This goal is certainly accomplished; one can get to know the man very well through his essays. In addition to leaving a legacy of himself, however, it is apparent Montaigne wanted to pass on his judgments of his experience of living. The focus in these essays is on several recurring themes: the influence of nature, where the emphasis is on the natural, not the supernatural; the limitations of our reason; living and dying; and most importantly how to consciously construct one’s own self.

Montaigne knew he was communicating with people through his writing and was attempting to change the discourse as when he states:

\begin{quote}
Authors communicate with people through some particular separate mark; I am the first to do it through my universal being, as Michel de Montaigne, not as grammarian or poet or jurist. If people complain that I talk too much of myself, I complain that they do not even think about themselves. (Montaigne 2012, 186)
\end{quote}

Manuel Vázquez describes it as, “The place of the self in the world is the matter of Montaigne’s book. The world is the matter of Montaigne’s book” (Vázquez 2015, xvi).

Book One, which was written between 1572-73 contains 57 essays, about a third of the work, and most of these are relatively short, though many are sobering and focus
on death such as: *That we should not be deemed happy till after our death* and, *To philosophize is to learn how to die.* This should not be surprising given the recent emotional loss of his dear friend and his father, as well as numerous deaths from the civil war that erupted in 1572. This was written during Montaigne’s stoic-self period and portrays a respect for man’s power of reason and control over his passions. Like the stoics, he discusses virtue, fortune, duty and moderation. Over time, Montaigne realized that the stoic ideal was unsuited to him, as it did not suit his real introspective nature.

Book Two is the longest and was written between 1577-78; it reveals Montaigne’s move into skepticism with his longest essay, *The Apology of Raymond Sebond.* The *Apology* opens with Montaigne agreeing with Sebond’s stated position to “establish against the atheist and to show by human, natural reasons the truth of all the articles of the Christian religion” (Montaigne 2003, 491).

Montaigne shifts his position through the essay towards an attack upon man’s reason and presumptive nature with assertions such as:

> Man is the most vain; that a man who dares to presume that he knows anything, does not even know what knowledge is; that man, who is nothing yet thinks he is something. (Montaigne 2003, 502)

Here he echoes his predecessor the great humanist Francesco Petrarch, who had also written about his observation that the more he gained in knowledge and experience, the less certain he became of his own judgments. Petrarch recorded his thoughts in a letter of

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13 Raymond Sebond was a Spaniard who published a book on *Natural Theology,* which maintains all the articles of the Christian religion, can be proven by natural reason. Two main objections were raised against it, one arguing that Christianity should be based on faith, not reason and the second that Sebond’s reasons were not very sound. Montaigne translated the work for his father and then wrote an essay about it, defending Sebond in part on the skeptical basis that since all reasoning is unsound, so Sebond could not be blamed for his errors (Popkin 2003, 47). Montaigne also conceded that natural theology raised a thorny philosophical issue, since it relied on evidence of the human sense, which could easily be misled (Greengrass 2014, 209).
1336 called *On His Own Ignorance And That Of Many Others*, which was an early precursor to Montaigne’s candid and blunt essay style. Petrarch observes:

> To sum up: Whoever calls me ignorant shares my own opinion. Sorrowfully and tacitly I recognize my ignorance, when I consider how much I lack of what my mind in its craving for knowledge is sighing for … I console myself with the consideration that this belongs to our common nature. I suppose it happens to all good and modest minds that they learn to know themselves and then find just this same consolation. (Petrarca 1948, 66)

Montaigne’s final book, Book III in the *Essays* has 13 essays, most rather substantial including one of his most individualistic, *On Experience*. While he talks extensively about himself, these essays are not autobiographical but a record of his self-examination of his own selfhood. As Raymond La Charité explains Montaigne’s approach in Book III:

> Montaigne senses his being by means of experience, of judgment, not by means of reason. Reason is an unchanging force. Its object or objects are immovable; as a spectator, it cannot act upon the objects which it scrutinizes; it can only theorize. Judgment or practical reason is an actor, a performer. Its objects can be altered; in other words, judgment concerns itself with everything affected and changed by human action and experience. Hence, judgment is the material experience of being, and to judge is to be in perpetual, "experimental" contact with oneself. Self-knowledge is experience of self… (La Charité 1970, 33)

Reason would not apply to such a changeable, amorphous, constantly changing subject as oneself. This is the part of the *Essays* where Montaigne is the most individualistic as he eschews reason for experience as a guide to understanding, as he says, “Experience is a weaker and less dignified means [to gain knowledge] but truth is so great a matter that we must not disdain any method which leads us to it” (Montaigne 2003, 1207).
This is in sharp contrast to the autobiographies of his contemporaries like Benvenuto Cellini’s (1500-1571), which is a vivid portrait of a notorious braggart but lacks any introspection. Cellini was a colorful artist and writer who defined himself through his profession and his fame, similar to the modern West perspective. Unlike Pico or Montaigne, Cellini is not concerned with a deeper understanding of himself; he is solely concerned with providence as it affects his own life and being (Weintraub 1978, 132). For Cellini, contentment came from words of praise from the various nobles or Popes for whom he crafted fine jewelry, and he related despair when he was not the topic of discussion and praise (Cellini 1998, 400-401).

In contrast, Montaigne breaks through the role-playing of the previous humanists to arrive at the realization of his own authentic self by the end of his third book in The Essays. For example, on the title pages of the first two editions of the Essays, he lists all his titles: order of chivalry, chamberlain, mayor etc. On the title page of the last edition his name stands on its own, without any further appellation (Blum 2010, 194, 197).

**HUMANISM EVOLVES**

As Donald Kelley points out, Montaigne is a transitional figure at the high point of French humanism right before it was overshadowed by the scientific revolution (Kelley 1991, 63). He took a different approach, especially when attempting to answer the question, what is man and how is he to live? While Pico della Mirandola and his colleagues focused on the dignity of man and man’s ability to make himself what he will, Montaigne focused on the subjective self. He individuated a new sense of self that not
only depended upon recognizing the place of the individual within a complex whole, but a complex whole within the individual (Keohane 1977, 367).

Montaigne had a saying of the Roman playwright Terrence (185 -159 B.C.) carved in the ceiling beam right above his writing desk that said, “nothing human is alien to me,” emphasizing the nature of his introspective humanism. As Montaigne says himself in his essay On Repenting:

Others form a man, I describe (or expose) him, and am portraying one quite ill-formed individual, one that I would truly make quite different than he is, if I could fashion him anew. But as of now, it is done. (Montaigne 2012, 186)

In this respect Montaigne was at odds with Pico, who was just as much of an individualist but with a different meme. His aim is not only to seek knowledge from the classics as a guide to living, as with Ficino and Pico, but also rather to seek to understand the fundamental truths of humanity through understanding himself. Montaigne would have none of Pico’s ladder by which man can climb up to the divine. He admonishes us with an Athenian saying:

You are a god just insofar as
You recognize you are a man.

He goes on to say:

We seek other conditions because we do not understand how to use our own, and we go outside ourselves because we do not know what goes on inside. And so it is no use for us to get up on stilts, for on stilts we still have to walk with our legs. And on the highest throne in the world, we are still just sitting on our ass. (Montaigne 2012, 283)

Like Augustine, Montaigne’s conception of ‘truth’ begins internally, but where Augustine found God inside himself, Montaigne finds just a particular human ego.
Montaigne’s is a gradual look at the self though, not a sudden conversion or illumination. He states in his Essay *On Solitude*:

> We must untie these strong knots and henceforth love this or that, but wed nothing but ourselves… the greatest thing in the world is to know how to belong to oneself. (Montaigne, 2012, 106)

His biographer Donald Frame calls him an “apprehensive humanist” and says “he was a humanist in one of the few clear and accepted senses of the term – a lover of Greek and Roman antiquity and of humane letters, eager to learn the wisdom of the ancient masters” (Frame 1955, 36). Montaigne had a deep distrust of rhetoric, however, a form privileged by the ancients and the Italian humanists. According to George M. Logan, Montaigne believed that the eloquence of Ciceronean rhetoric was a style that makes it hard to tell the truth because his mind worked associatively, not logically, thus a logically patterned, elevated style appeared false to him (Logan 1975, 622).

Montaigne’s humanism is thus more akin to Petrarch’s, in that he views rigorous introspection as the best source of information about man, and the best check for the individual on himself. As Montaigne expresses it:

> I, who make no other profession, find in me such infinite depth and variety, that what I have learned bears no other fruit than to make me realize how much I still have to learn…It is from my experience that I affirm human ignorance, this is, in my opinion, the most certain fact in the school of the world. (Montaigne 1943, 306-307)

Both Petrarch and Montaigne felt that individual character is the most important aspect of understanding historical events and both were well aware of the limitations of one man’s knowledge (Logan 1975, 619, 621). They also both display a form of cultural relativism, though more so Montaigne, especially in his essay *On Cannibals*, by being aware of other cultures and comparing them to their own.
Montaigne states:

There is more activity interpreting interpretations than interpreting things themselves, and more books about books than about the other subjects; we do nothing but comment on one another. (Montaigne 2012, 232)

In his last essay *On Experience*, Montaigne turns against the humanist idea of seeking guidance for modern behavior in classical texts, as it rips the supposed authorities out of time and context. Individual lives and situations, societies and religions differed so radically that one could not reasonably hope to make the past shed light on the present in his opinion (Kraye 2011, 205). As Montaigne states:

I would rather have a good understanding of myself than of Cicero. I find enough to make me wise in the experience I have of myself…The life of Caesar has no more relevance for us than does our own; whether an emperor’s or a commoner’s, it is still a life that all human contingencies touch. Let us just listen to it: we tell ourselves everything we really need. (Montaigne 2012, 237)

Montaigne also shows an ability to argue both sides of an issue, making himself, and his readers aware that whatever attribute belongs to culture, not nature, is within the power of humans to change (Kraye 2011, 128). Thus, many of the things that concerned the earlier humanists, such as the proper conduct of a prince’s counselor, or the ideal pattern for the state are of no great concern to Montaigne. Like Machiavelli, he wants to understand human nature, but not with an eye towards a prescription for how to attain and hold power, but simply how best to live and how best to die. Montaigne says:

…all the wisdom and reason in the world comes back down to this conclusion: teaching us not to fear to die.” (Montaigne 2012, 11)

While the Italian humanists were particularly focused on civic humanism, Montaigne, with his retreat to his tower in seclusion and his effort to give up all public life, though not always successfully, became more of an un-civic humanist. His focus
was on himself. Like Machiavelli, Montaigne lived in violent and turbulent times but he did not crave a return to government, rather he sought retreat and contemplation. In contrast to Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, Montaigne advises, “He is most powerful who has power over himself” (Montaigne 2012, 209).

Montaigne’s independent attitude toward the classical authors separates him from the previous humanist tradition. As Frame said of him:

> But humanism is eclectic, as so was Montaigne. What he admired then and attacked later was not only stoicism, nor even stoicism plus Epicureanism; it was all dogmatic rational philosophy and its sweeping faith in the power of reason to guide our life well and happily. (Frame 1955, 37)

Montaigne did not hesitate to criticize the classical writers and did not think they had any greater venerability because of their antiquity (Logan 1975, 618). This represents a significant break from prior developments in Western Christendom, which relied heavily on the authority of the Greek philosophers, classical Latin writers, and the early Church fathers. Montaigne on the other hand, repeatedly emphasizes his reliance on only his own judgment in dealing with all sorts of matters, and questions the value of reason and a surfeit of knowledge. He chides us not to attach more importance to how we are perceived externally than to how things are within our own self as when he says:

> This commonly approved practice of looking elsewhere than at our own self has served our affairs well! Our self is an object full of dissatisfaction: we can see nothing there but wretchedness and vanity. So as not to dishearten us, Nature has very conveniently cast the action of our sight outwards… Look back into your self: get to know your self; hold on to your self. Bring back to your self your mind and your will which are being squandered elsewhere; you are draining and frittering your self away. (Montaigne 2003, 1132)

His words are so modern they could be taken from a television self-help show or book.

Yet, they are also reminiscent of the much earlier Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), who
counseled that humility is truth, and the first degree of truth is truth of oneself. Bernard wrote as humans we tend to overvalue or undervalue ourselves by either thinking we are the center of the universe or despicable creatures; however, he counseled we must look at all these dimensions of ourselves since self-knowledge is the road to compassion and understanding others (Imperato 2002, 51-52).

**FRIENDSHIP AND THE RELATIONAL SELF**

Montaigne also explored the relational self that ensues from a deep friendship, such as the one he shared with La Boétie. La Boétie was a close friend and colleague whom he did not know long but shared such a deep personal bond with that he said if he was “pressed to say why I loved him, I feel that it can be expressed only by replying, ‘Because it was he, because it was I’” (Montaigne 2012, 79).

The self is developed through language and explored with words, just as in Montaigne’s essays and so it is easy to see how friendship, where words are spoken in dialogue can be a useful method of self-exploration and development. Here Montaigne was emulating Aristotle’s ideal of perfect friendship as an enterprise between excellent and virtuous men. He sought to examine the penetrating grasp of the particular, which can arise spontaneously through a deep friendship; his dear friend, however, died young, most probably from the plague, and Montaigne retreated within himself. He said of La Boétie, “He alone partook of my true image and carried it off with him. That is why I so curiously decipher myself.” In other words, Montaigne studied himself alone as but a second best to participating in their friendship (Taylor 1989, 183). With this course of events, Montaigne turned from humanism as a basis for life, to the human values he found within and this is a mark of a more modern individuality.
One of the most important aspects of understanding the cultural evolution of a new meme is the environmental background that enabled the adaptation to survive and to thrive. Charles Taylor asks the question in his book, *A Secular Age*, “Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?” (Taylor 2007, 25). Understanding this question is essential to understanding Montaigne and his worldview and Taylor gives three answers.

The first is that the natural world in 1500 was understood though a divine framework, not a scientific one. They understood the world and natural events as acts of God, a term we still use in today’s legal jargon. Second, God was implicated in the underpinning of society. Kingdoms and churches were conceived and grounded in something higher than human action and secular time. Thirdly, and most important, people lived in an enchanted world – a world full of spirits and demons in which the Christian savior was the ultimate guarantor that good would triumph over evil in the long run (Taylor 2007, 26).

Disenchantment began after the Reformation and led to a different type of self in Taylor’s view. Unlike the porous self, as he calls it, which is vulnerable to a world of spirits and demonic powers, the buffered self emerges. This buffered self, as he coins it, is shielded from outside supernatural forces and is a self with confidence in its own power of moral ordering. The crucial difference here is how one views meanings. In a disenchanted world, meanings are in the mind and only have meanings in that they create a certain response in us that we become aware of, whereas in the pre-modern or
enchanted world, meanings were in the things themselves and come to us from the outside, i.e. objective vs. subjective (Taylor 2007, 32-34). From the subjective standpoint the self can now see itself as its own master of the meanings of things, for it has the ability to give an autonomous order to its life, building on the autonomous-self meme introduced with Martin Luther and the Reformation. The absence of fear of spirits and demonic forces (or heavenly forces) creates an opportunity of self-control and self-direction that is an entirely new meme.

Montaigne embodied this autonomous self and his popular *Essays* gave a voice to it that resonated as he advocated taking control of oneself. As he expressed it:

> How rare the life that keeps even its inner self in order! Anyone can take part in the show, and play an honest character on the trestles. But internally – in our hearts, where everything is possible, where everything is hidden – the point is to have everything in order. The closest thing is to be that way at home, in one’s everyday actions, for which we owe no one an accounting – where there is no calculation, no pretense. … one whose master was the same inside his house, by himself, as he was outside… (Montaigne 2012, 189)

Thus, the power to pursue human flourishing and authenticity is no longer something we must receive from God, but is emerging as a human capacity (Taylor 2007, 86). Despite the fierce religiosity that still pervades Montaigne’s era, and the emergence of extreme reformers like John Calvin (1509-1564), the secular self of the disenchanted world was starting to emerge. The Reformation engendered by Luther not only disenchanted the black magic, but also undercut the “white” magic of the church and the

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14 Secular here connotes worldly and/or temporal, as in the state of being separate from the religious self.
shame culture, although this transition was not immediate, and witchcraft trials persisted in some areas into the late 17th century and sporadically into the 18th century.15

Montaigne embodies this more secular side when he speaks of death. He does not describe a vision of an immortal life with Christ; rather, he speaks more pragmatically on how to accept the inevitable. He rejects the pathos of the Stoics in accepting death, but he also cannot accept the Epicurean view that death should not concern us. Having had a near death experience himself, which he recounted as not unpleasant, it is prominent in his mind and also of concern. As he says of death:

Let us rid it of its strangeness, get to know it, become accustomed to it.
Let us have nothing so often in our minds as death. (Montaigne 2012, 17)

And he adds:

It is certain that to most people, preparation for death has given greater torment that the actual event has. (Montaigne 2012, 213)

And of life he says:

Soon it will be past; never can it be called back …I have half said my farewells to everyone, except myself. (Montaigne 2012, 18-19)

As Reto Fetz says in Blum’s book Philosophers of the Renaissance, what Montaigne calls “nature” has several facets and one is the principle of organization of one’s own individuality – a deep stratum antecedent to the consciousness and the will in which Montaigne entrusts himself to pass the test of death.

Thus, the conundrum with Montaigne is that, while he is a professed Catholic, he touches lightly on Christian salvation and does not discuss the hope of a life beyond death in any detail, leaving one to wonder how deeply he internalized it. He does show a strong attachment to basic Christian morality, however, especially individual responsibility, freedom, and mercy. His religious attitude is a mixture of fideism,

15 The most notorious of these trials was the Salem, Massachusetts witchcraft trial of 1692.
maintaining that skepticism about human knowledge is the securest basis for religious
faith and conventional doctrine, but it has none of the passion of Augustine or Dante or
Luther. As Vázquez points out, the problem of Montaigne’s belief has been the subject
of controversy for centuries (Vázquez 2015, 67).

His religious faith seems compartmentalized and he often refers to Nature as
much as God. Yet Montaigne clearly segregated the Divinity of God, and his eternal and
absolute being, as something not able to be understood by men. He remained a steadfast
Catholic throughout his life, although he believed that God could only be known through
faith, not reason. He states:

We should freely admit that God alone tells us this, and faith. It is not a
lesson we have been taught by Nature or Reason…Would the Stoic
philosopher not be better advised to owe to God what he said he owed to
the chance agreement of the Voice of the People? (Montaigne 2003, 623)

While the faith alone argument is reminiscent of Luther, this fideism of Montaigne,
which is no longer orthodox Catholic doctrine, was based on skepticism and was
acceptable at the time as a weapon against the Protestants (Frame 1955, 9).¹⁶ The
contention simply maintained that since skepticism undermines any reason for
becoming a Protestant, one should remain a Catholic on the basis of faith alone (Popkin
1992, 122–123). Thus Montaigne’s faith was another reflection of his skeptical self.

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¹⁶ When Catholic doctrine changed with regard to fideism, Montaigne’s Essays were in fact put on
the Index of banned books in 1676 (Frame 1955, 58). The Church sees a fideistic attitude of mind as the
basis for agnosticism, whereby even the authority and existence of God could be doubted. The Church
maintains that we can know with certainty that God exists through reason and thus reason cannot be
discounted, because denying intellectual knowledge ruins faith. The term itself derives from fides, the
Latin word for faith, and can be rendered literally as faith-ism. “Fideism” is thus to be understood not as a
synonym for “religious belief,” but as denoting a particular philosophical account of faith’s appropriate
jurisdiction vis-a-vis that of reason (Amesbury 2016, stanford.edu).
MONTAIGNE’S SKEPTICAL SELF

Another one of the sayings from great classical philosophers Montaigne had carved into the wood beams of his library tower quoted Pliny the Elder saying, “only one thing is certain: that nothing is certain, and nothing is more wretched or arrogant than man” (Bakewell 2010, 29) revealing Montaigne’s skeptical side. The constant warfare engendered by the Reformation helped fuel this skepticism and was in part the environmental change that provided the evolutionary driver for his introspective self-examination.

Montaigne’s skepticism is mostly contained in his longest essay, the *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, in which he explores cultural relativism, skepticism about man’s knowledge of the natural world, and the problem of competing religious claims. Ironically the Counter Reformation in Europe coincided with the re-discovery of the ancient skeptical arguments of Sextus Empiricus, Cicero, and Diogenes Laertius, and many of these arguments were quickly appropriated by 16th Catholic philosophers and theologians in the religious controversies of the period. Utilizing his classical education, Montaigne drew on Sextus Empiricus, who was a Pyrrhonian skeptic living about the second or third century A.D., to attack both the religious and philosophical dogmatism of the time (Kraye 2011, 155). As Richard Popkin explains, Pyrrhonism was employed both as a means of destroying the theological opponent and as a defense of one’s own faith by the advocates of the Counter Reformation (Popkin 2003, 66).

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17 The first Latin version of Sextus was printed in 1562 when Henri Estienne published a translation of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, the best and fullest account of Pyrrhonian skepticism, named for the ancient Pyrrho. Pyrrhonian skepticism involves having no beliefs about philosophical, scientific, or theoretical matters (Morison 2014, plato.stanford.edu).
Montaigne follows Petrarch and foreshadows René Descartes (1596-1650) with his skepticism in *The Essays*. This manner of skepticism was what also led Descartes to his famous assertion of knowing himself by doubting everything but the one thing he could not, his own mind thinking. Descartes asserts, *Cogito ergo Sum*, “I think, therefore I am,” while Montaigne asks, “What do I know”? The influence of Montaigne upon Descartes has been commented upon by many writers who note that while both men called into question the natural link between the mind and things outside it, Descartes cannot be called a disciple of Montaigne in the sense that he incorporated his conceptions; although Descartes did emulate his way of educating himself from scratch, following the path indicated by Montaigne to achieve independence and firmness of judgment. 18

Montaigne’s skepticism works not through Cartesian disengagement, but through radical attention to one’s own individual particularity and unrepeatable differences. He eschews the concept of an eternal, unchangeable reality and celebrates the particular and the subjective. Montaigne reasoned that there were two ways of obtaining knowledge: reason and experience. As he says in his essay *Of Experience*:

> There is no desire more natural than that of knowledge. We try all means that can lead us to it. When reason fails, we make use of experience. (Montaigne 2012, 228)

Reason represents abstract theorizing, while experience constitutes first-hand practical knowledge of physical, intellectual, psychological and moral phenomena. In Montaigne’s mind such phenomenological sources of knowledge were more real and

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18 Descartes’ *Cogito* argument depends on two main points: that the self takes direct cognizance of its own activity, and also the discernment of a necessary connection between thought or awareness, and existence (Weinberg 1977, 89). Montaigne however, does not try and prove we exist, he knows he does through feeling his experiences.
were the actual modalities by which he experienced his being (La Charité 1970, 32-33).

As Montaigne states it:

> Just take a look at what our own experience shows. Provided that he listen
to himself there is no one who does not discover in himself a form entirely
his own, a master-form which struggles against his education as against
the storm of emotions which would gainsay it. (Montaigne 2003, 914)

Descartes is often cited as the founder of modern individualism (even Charles
Taylor accords him this title) because he requires the individual thinker to assume his
own responsibility and his own order of thought, and he requires him to do it in the first-
person singular following universal criteria (Taylor 1989, 182). Montaigne, on the other
hand developed the self-exploration of the particular individual’s originality. He eschews
looking for the universal terms to classify humans and generally rejects universals or
essences. Montaigne builds from the bottom up, looking at the particular in depth and
from that, deriving broad observations. As Taylor says:

> At bottom the stance towards the self is flatly opposed in these two enterprises. The Cartesian calls for a radical disengagement from
ordinary experience; Montaigne requires a deeper engagement in our particularity. These two facets of modern individuality have been at odds up to this day. (Taylor 1989, 182)

Montaigne rejected the theoretical or speculative way of philosophizing favored
by the Scholastics and is one of the first modern authors to show the inner depth which
one can explore in oneself. He is skeptical of our rationality and our ability to really
ever understand the broader universe, or what he calls the Heavens, and questions the
prideful nature of man. He asks in the *Apology*:

> The natural, original distemper of Man is presumption…When I play
with my cat, how do I know that she is not passing time with me rather
than I with her? … If we are dependent upon the disposition of the
heavens for such little rationality as we have, how can our reason make
us equal to the Heavens?
And,

Shall we say that we have seen no other creature but Man possessed of a rational soul? What do we mean: Have we ever seen anything like the Sun? And just because we have seen nothing like it, does it cease to be; or, since we have seen nothing like its movements, shall they too, cease to be? If things we have not actually seen do not exist, then our knowledge is wondrously diminished. (Montaigne 2003, 504-505)

Descartes would have disagreed with him intensely about his cat, maintaining that all animals were essentially automatons. Montaigne however, looked at it from the aspect of experience, something animals have as well. He was thoroughly modern because of his intense awareness of his own individual experiences, and his appreciation that other humans, and animals, have experience as well. This meme of respect for individuals in both humans and non-humans was a radical paradigmatic shift at the time although not one picked up by Descartes.

Montaigne took this focus on experience to the extreme. Victoria Kahn opines in her book, *Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism in the Renaissance*, that "Montaigne can be read as a kind of secularization of Luther," noting that Montaigne, operating without Luther's religious framework, also depicted our world as created by the falsity of the human mind based in large part on Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. On this basis, Montaigne attacked all forms of essentialism and argued humans never see the world or its objects independently of the self.\(^\text{19}\) He thereby challenged any claim to know the objective nature or essence of external reality and embraced subjectivism (Schreiner 2003, 357-358). Montaigne presents the skeptical case that

\(^{19}\) Essentialism maintains that things have a set of characteristics that are essential to what they are, and that the task of science and philosophy is their discovery; the doctrine that essence is prior to existence. An essential property of an object is a property that it must have, while an accidental property of an object is one that it happens to have but that it could lack (Robertson and Atkins 2016, plato.stanford.edu).
each individual’s experiences differ under different conditions, our senses differ with each other and with those of other people and thus we are easily led to false conclusions (Popkin 2003, 53). We are totally subjective individuals shaping our sensory data inside our own minds. Montaigne presents it in the *Apology* as:

> Now, if we, for our part, could receive anything without changing it, if our human grasp were firm and capable of seizing hold of truth by our means, then truth could be passed on from hand to hand, from person to person … But the fact that there is no single proposition which is not subject to debate or controversy among us, or which cannot be so, proves that our natural judgement does not grasp very clearly even what it does grasp, since my judgement cannot bring a fellow-man’s judgement to accept it, which is a sure sign that I did not myself reach it by means of a natural power common to myself and to all men. (Montaigne 2003, 634)

Montaigne’s skepticism then is in relation to the presumption of knowing something definitively through reason. He is very modern in questioning our ability to know anything for certain outside our own self. Clearly the religious wars within Christendom heavily influenced his thinking and his doubt.

In his essay *On Custom* he dismisses many of our beliefs as the product of custom, and speculates that universal “reason”, “truth”, or “justice” can be dismissed as illusions. In this sense the terms “relativity” and “relativism”, are useful terms since Montaigne acknowledges that no universal reason presides over the birth of our beliefs. As he states:

> But the principal activity of custom is so to seize us and to grip us in her claws so that it is hardly in our power to struggle free and to come back into ourselves, where we can reason and argue about her ordinances…peoples nurtured on freedom and self-government judge any other form of polity to be deformed and unnatural. Those who are used to monarchy do the same… (Montaigne 2003, 130)
For Montaigne, skepticism and the pursuit of self-knowledge emphasized a turn away from an essentialist stoic nature to a cultural relativism associated with the subjective self that laid the foundation for the modern science of humanity where “the true science and study of man is man himself” (Kelley 1991, 119). It is what Thomas Kuhn described some 500 years later in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* as, “What a man sees depends both upon what he looks at and also upon what his previous visual-conceptual experience has taught him to see,” in other words his subjective cultural world-view (Kuhn 1970, 93).

The above thought embodies Montaigne’s experience that his own being was revealed to him not through discursive thinking, but by a more or less accidental, but immediate, perception of himself in the authentic acts of his life (Blum 2010, 203) such as when he says:

… where I seek myself I cannot find myself: I discover myself more by accident than by inquiring into my judgment. (Montaigne 2003, 40)

Thus, he trusts individual experience above reason, since it deals simply with what happens and not with why it happens. Our knowledge cannot be perfect but it can still be useful. As Frame says, the *Apology* is Montaigne’s declaration of independence from the humanists and he looks within his own particular self for instruction (Frame 1955, 77). Montaigne was not seeking perfect truth; he was content with a measure of self-knowledge and a happy life.

*SUBJECTIVE INDIVIDUALISM*

As quoted earlier in this thesis, Kristeller describes individualism, as “…the tendency to express, and to consider worth expressing, the concrete uniqueness of one’s feelings, opinions, experiences, and surroundings” (Kristeller, 1979, 30). Certainly
nothing pertains more to Montaigne, as he is the subject of many of his own writings. His aim is to study man and human nature, and being the only subject whose thoughts he can completely know, he makes himself the subject of his inquiry. As Donald Frame says in his introduction to *The Essays*:

> The reason for his contentment was his detachment, which allowed him to consider himself as what he was – a man: the center of his own universe, but no more *the* center of the universe than any other of the billions of humans alive. (Frame 1943, xxv)

Charles Taylor maintains that when Montaigne embarked on his reflections he was of the mind that he would find the stable, permanent unchanging core of being inherent in everyone, for this was the basis of ancient thought. It asserted that beneath the shifting desires of the untamed soul, and over the oscillations of fortune, our true nature was based on reason provides a foundation for our being. Montaigne was trained in this thought but Taylor contends, with good evidence, that when he sat down to write, he experienced a terrifying inner instability he expressed as, “my spirit … playing the skittish and loose-broken jade… begets in me so many extravagant Chimeras, and fanatical monsters, so orderless and without any reason…I have begun to keep a register of them” (Taylor 1989, 178). Consequently, Montaigne started keeping track of the patterns and fluctuations in himself that represented his own particular being, while at the same time recognizing that he was searching to describe the greater humanity as well as a unique individual. As he aptly wrote, “There is no description that equals in difficulty – and certainly in usefulness – the description of oneself” (Montaigne 2012, xxx).

His goal, and what he wanted for his readers, was to come to accept who we are, and in this regard, Taylor avers that Montaigne inaugurated one of the recurring themes of modern culture (Taylor 1989, 181). This self-knowledge is deeply personal, not the
impersonal nature of the Platonic tradition. He is not looking for a universal essence; he undertakes self-reflection with the aim of knowledge of his own particular self.\textsuperscript{20} He also recognizes through this process, there is neither a consistent nor permanent identity. The unpredictability of human nature simply does not allow it (Osterberg 2010, 126).

Montaigne presents an appealing picture of individualism – a life centered in reflection on oneself as a natural way of life. He is not focused on religious contemplation or objective knowledge, as his medieval and Italian humanist predecessors were; rather he has an end in mind: finding oneself. It is a practice so common today it is easy to miss the significance he brought to seeing oneself through one’s own subjective lens. He gives birth to the subjective-self meme as is argued herein by his insistence that truth is not something to be sought externally, or that can be received from other sources. As Montaigne states:

\begin{quote}
I do not think highly of my opinions, but I do not think any more highly of others. (Montaigne 2012, 195)
\end{quote}

Thus for Montaigne, truth must be conceived internally, and it will be different for everyone. As Niebuhr says:

\begin{quote}
Montaigne’s primary interest is in the endless variety and relativity of forms in which human life expresses itself. He is scornful of every effort to bring these multifarious forms under general categories, whether moral, legal or rational. Montaigne’s sense of individuality is partly an extension of this interest in variety. (Niebuhr 1996, 64)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{20} Montaigne also builds on the intentionalist meme of Abelard and Ockham with his rejection of universals and his focus on the individual. Both Abelard and Ockham rejected the notion that nothing is common to the many as a whole, simultaneously, and in such a way that it enters into the very structure of things. However, they differed in that, neither Abelard nor Ockham were subjectivists. That is, neither thought that what we know is based entirely on how we conceive things. For them, things exist independently of how we conceive them but are still particular (Courtenay 1983, 161).
Montaigne expresses the idea in his essay, *On the inequality there is between us*:

Plutarch says somewhere that he finds less distance between beast and beast than between man and man. He was talking of mental powers and inner qualities …I would go farther and say that there is a greater distance between this man and that one than between this man and that beast. (Montaigne 2003, 288)

**CONCLUSIONS**

It is evident that there were two main goals Montaigne sought in the *Essays*. He was exploring self-knowledge to make sense of his environment and the overall human condition in general, and also to understand his own self and his particularities and differences. He “attempted” answers by examining the beliefs, values, and truth claims in classical literary, historical, and philosophical texts, and in the end found solace by trusting his own judgment and experience. Thus, Montaigne gave birth to another cultural meme of individualism that developed and replicated and was engendered by Christianity, in this case the wars of competing Christian worldviews.

By the end of the 17th century the modern self was well along in the process of development, as Charles Taylor says, encompassing the inward turn and self-exploration of Augustine, an ideal of self-responsibility as articulated by Dante and Ockham, and a new sense of freedom and inherent dignity as engendered by Luther, Erasmus, Pico and other Renaissance and Reformation thinkers. There is a crucial turning point best represented by Montaigne, on this path to the modern identity (Taylor 1989, 177-178).

Montaigne was on the cusp of the scientific revolution, but in many ways, he presages the existentialists with his subjective emphasis on authentic selfhood. He was a product of religious conflict, competing worldviews, and the beginning of the end of the formerly “enchanted world” with its inherent capacity for intentional significance. No
doubt modernity markedly enhances the human individual’s freedom and autonomy, but at the cost of losing traditional structures that provide meaning. Clearly some of our deepest religious beliefs were shown to be incoherent with the modern view of the cosmos – we are not the absolute center of the universe, and we are probably not alone. Montaigne sensed this without any of the benefit of modern science.\textsuperscript{21} Ironically, modern science is pushing us back towards the subjective. Einstein would say we are indeed the center of our universe again, for everything is relative to where you are or what reference frame you are in; there is no fixed anchor point. Consequently, what we interpret as cause and effect may be only an illusion based on our frame of reference in the universe.

Nietzsche, who abhorred professional philosophers as a class, adored Montaigne and called him “this freest and mightiest of souls.” And he added, “That such a man wrote has truly augmented the joy of living on this earth” (Bakewell 2010, 151). Montaigne embodied what Nietzsche had set out as an ultimate goal: question everything, accept everything as it is, and live your life such that if you had a chance to live again you would do exactly the same. Montaigne’s remark that, “If I were to live life over again, I would live it as I have” (Montaigne 2012, 197); the heroic life was Nietzsche’s goal. He echoed Montaigne when he said in the very beginning of \textit{On the Genealogy of Morals}, “We are unknown to ourselves, we knowers: and for a good reason. We have

\textsuperscript{21} Nicholas of Cusa also postulated the possibility of other inhabited worlds in Book II of \textit{On Learned Ignorance} in 1440, where he stated that the exact center and circumference of the created universe are to be found only in God and what \textit{we} take to be the center and outer limits depends on our viewpoint. If we change perspectives, say to that from another planet (which he also surmised might indeed be inhabited) and take it to be center, then earth might be zenith (Miller 2017, plato.stanford.edu/cusanus). In this way he foreshadowed some aspects of Einstein’s theory of special relativity.
never sought ourselves – how then should it happen that we find ourselves one day?”  
(Nietzsche 1998,1).

Of the individualism markers laid out in Chapter 2, Montaigne exhibits the first-person standpoint most clearly. He lays out clearly a being conscious of its self talking to itself and also in relation to other beings. In fact he articulates a relational-self formed through a deep friendship that is also deeply moving.

Second, he clearly articulates the self-reflectiveness and self-sufficiency required to abstract two versions of himself, one as judger and one as examiner, and views human beings as having value in and of themselves, with no other reason required. Montaigne’s Essays were widely read on both sides of the English Channel before the French revolution, leading scholars to believe that his portrait of the individual as the rightful center of his own world contributed to the subsequent individualism that became pervasive in political philosophy, particularly in France and America in the beginning of the 17th century (Keohane 1977, 364).

The least visible marker in Montaigne is transcendence. He is not interested in looking beyond and finding a vision of what could be; he is too focused on what is, and how to enjoy what you have now, right now. Like Nietzsche, he urges us, as well as himself, to take life as it is, understand it, and enjoy it - stop trying to climb Pico’s ladder to the divine. Finally, he echoes the responsible-self meme of Dante. Over and over he urges us to take control of our own mind and ourselves. He is thoroughly modern in his use of the term and the admonition to clean up what is in our head, even though no one else can see it – for the subjective self can.
CHAPTER 9

JOHN LOCKE AND THE INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS MEME

The purpose of this chapter is to show how the long evolution of the memes of individualism culminated with the idea of inherent individual rights, one of the bulwarks of our modern Western society. This meme is often credited to John Locke (1632-1704); however, it is the intent of this chapter to show how this was the evolutionary product of a long line of thinkers, dating back to the medieval era. Further, this chapter will illuminate how as a philosopher and deeply religious man, Locke used Christian doctrine extensively and insisted that most men could not understand the requirements of the law of nature, upon which his theories of government are based, without the assistance of the teachings and examples of Jesus Christ (Waldon 2002, 26).

Locke clearly built upon the work and memes of others in putting forth his pivotal ideas regarding natural law and individual rights. His concept of epistemological individualism, a concept that Descartes embodied as well (although he was a rationalist while Locke was an empiricist) was a crucial step towards our modern concept of individualism. This meme of political individualism is now thoroughly woven into the structure of the American democratic system. Some argue, as will be discussed herein, that this was not his intent at all and in fact Locke’s individualism was always subordinate to communitarianism, under which the rights of the individual in the state of nature were but facets of humankind’s collective ideals and purposes (Kramer 1997, 3). There are many good points that support Locke’s communitarianism yet, as with other memes, the original intent of the developer is often lost once the meme starts adapting and replicating in the next generation.
Locke’s concept of individual rights, while not new, introduced a pivotal facet based on his deep Christian belief in a basic principle of equality of all humans. In the very beginning of his *Second Treatise on Government*, Locke makes the assertion that all creatures of the same species should be equal to one another without subordination or subjection (Locke 1980, 8). Natural law to him is God’s law, and his concept of equality, which was based on theological grounds, undercut the foundation of the hierarchal society Europe was built on. Today the concept of equality is the underpinning of our Western democratic ethos, if not yet fully implemented.

The key points this chapter will elucidate are the influence Locke had on eliciting a meme that individuals had the freedom and the capacity for “figuring it out on their own” so to speak, using their own mind, which he redefined as consciousness, breaking the tie to ancient sources of wisdom. It is what Lee Ward terms as “the democratization of mind,” displaying Locke’s confidence in individuals’ ability to acquire knowledge and construct meaningful identities from the intellectual materials made available to the mind through sensation and reflection (Ward 2010, 4).

Locke also gave rise to a sense of entitlement that each and every individual is endowed by the creator with certain inalienable rights (as Thomas Jefferson paraphrased in the beginning of the American Declaration of Independence) including property, which figures prominently in Locke’s political theory.1 This meme, which is now part of the underpinning of the Western conception of freedom and human rights, has evolved from

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1 Jefferson changed Locke’s trinity of “life, liberty and property (or estate)” to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” He never explicitly said why he changed it but some surmise that it was to make the declaration broader than just appealing to land owners. The phrase, “The necessity of pursuing happiness [is] the foundation of liberty” is also from Locke and appears in his *Essay on Human Understanding*, which Jefferson most likely had read (Hamilton 2007, historynewnetwork.org).
previous incarnations of individualism memes that preceded it and are reflective of a Christian worldview.

BACKGROUND

Not quite a century after Luther died, Locke was born in Wrington, England in 1632 to Protestant Puritan parents of modest means. He received an excellent education and attended Christ Church, Oxford, at the age of twenty. Education at Oxford however, was still taught in the scholastic tradition. Locke, like Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), who influenced him, found that the Aristotelian philosophy he was taught at Oxford was of little use and he chose to apply himself to medicine over studying for holy orders in the Anglican church (Uzgalis 2017, plato.stanford.edu).

The century since the death of Luther had been epochal in setting the framework for Locke’s writings. Freedom of conscience as a natural right, the importance of sincerity in religious belief, and the individual’s responsibility for his own soul were memes that were stressed repeatedly in the Protestant literature of the period (Loconte 2014, 45). While the Reformation Luther began had upended the superstructure of the Catholic Church, the new science was further shaking the foundations of the Christian worldview. Starting with Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543), who was a contemporary of Luther’s, and his theory of a heliocentric solar system, which was further refined by Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) through his laws of planetary motion, and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), who characterized the universe as matter in motion, and Francis Bacon (1561-1626), who championed the modern scientific method, the table was set for the work of René Descartes (1596-1650). Descartes utterly rejected the teleological mode of thinking in his Discourse on Method (1637), which sought an axiomatic method of
inquiry analogous to mathematics, in which he also made important contributions. He was followed by Isaac Newton (1642-1726), who concurrently with Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) invented the calculus, all of whom set the stage for Locke.

Newton’s methods, like Descartes, were secular and analytically rigorous but this is not to conjecture that the age, as is often presumed, suddenly became more secular. Christianity was a driving force in much of their work. Newton was a lifelong student of the Bible and saw the laws of motion and gravity he discovered as evidence of God’s plan in the universe (Robinson 2004, 131). Descartes and Locke also made the assumption of God’s existence in their work, and Newton thought matter could not be explained on its own terms but necessitated a prime mover. As Richard Tarnas states:

Thus, arose the psychological necessity of a double-truth universe… perceiving no genuine integration between the scientific reality and the religious reality. Joined together in the high Middle Ages by Scholastics culminating in Aquinas, then severed in the late medieval period by Ockham and nominalism, faith had moved in one direction with the Reformation, Luther, literal Scripture, fundamentalist Protestantism and Counter-Reformational Catholicism, while reason had moved in another direction with Bacon, Descartes, Locke, Hume, empirical science, rational philosophy, and the Enlightenment. (Tarnas 1991, 302)

Like Montaigne, Locke was heavily influenced by religious wars and civil uprisings during his lifetime. He was 16 when Charles I (r. 1625-1649) was beheaded, 27 at the Restoration of the monarchy in England, and 56 when William of Orange (r. 1689-1702) and his wife Mary II (1662-1694) became joint monarchs of England in 1689. In 1675, Locke went to France for three years and saw first-hand the conflict between the Catholics and the Protestant Huguenots; and in 1683, Locke fled to Holland for over five years after the death of Lord Shaftsbury and the discovery of the Rye House plot against
the King and his brother, where he encountered many Huguenots in exile. This breakdown in the traditional order highlighted growing issues and questions about the foundation of social life and the nature of political obligation that had been taken for granted and continued throughout the greater part of Locke’s life until the Glorious Revolution of 1688 (Seigel 2005, 87).

Similar to Montaigne, Locke also traveled in political circles, starting as personal physician and secretary to Anthony Ashley Cooper (1621-1683), who was the first Earl of Shaftsbury and Lord High Chancellor, and ending by being on the Board of Trade late in his life. In fact, most of Locke’s best-known works, his *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689/1690), his *Essay on Human Understanding* (1689) and his *Two Treatises on Government* (1690) were published at the conclusion of this period, although most were written earlier. Locke follows Montaigne in studying the self as an examination of human understanding and focuses on experience as an essential element of the self, but unlike Montaigne he is searching for the objective and the empirical, not the subjective. He also calls his epistemological work an *essay*, adopting Montaigne’s use of the term as an “attempt” at knowledge, albeit with a different aim in mind – understanding the subjective aspects of the mind versus the objective aspects derived from sensory experience.

Additionally, Locke built on the work of Francis Bacon (1561-1626) the so-called father of Empiricism, with his analysis that all knowledge an individual has of the world

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2 Shaftsbury was implicated in a plot to overthrow King Charles II and fled to Holland where he died, implicating Locke by association although there was no evidence of his involvement.

3 He began work on the *Essays* and most likely the *Two Treatises* earlier and revised them many times finally publishing them simultaneous with his return to England from exile in Holland.
is built on one’s sensory experience. Roger Woolhouse cautions however, that in his introduction to An Essay on Human Understanding, Locke’s views take for granted there is a grand scheme of things and that we have been put here by a good and wise God, with the hope of an afterlife (Woolhouse 2004, xi). Locke wanted to employ the scientific method in his analysis by assuming a human mind that through its rational faculties, explores the laws of nature and seeks to understand the order of nature.

Locke was also deeply influenced by the new experimental science of philosopher and chemist Robert Boyle (1627-1691), his assistant Robert Hooke (1635-1703), and physicist and mathematician Isaac Newton, all of whom he personally knew. By the time Newton completed the Principia Mathematica (1687), which Locke considered a major breakthrough in science, Locke and Newton had had many discussions on scientific and religious matters (Popkin 2003, 258). Locke read Boyle before he read Descartes and when he did finally read Descartes, he saw the French philosopher as providing another alternative to the sterile Aristotelianism he had been taught at Oxford (Uzgalis 2017, plato.stanford.edu).

Descartes’ method of objectifying the world, including our own bodies, was to look at it from a mechanistic standpoint, which obviously influenced Locke. As Charles Taylor says, “The Cartesian soul frees itself not by turning away but by objectifying embodied experience” (Taylor 1989, 146). It was not modern embodiment theory however, Descartes’ dualism was radically different than Plato’s. Cartesian dualism needs the body, whereas the Platonic model looked towards ethereal non-physical ideas or essences which were outside of nature. For Locke, the last of the meme developers surveyed in this thesis, consciousness was the essential qualia of the mind. He reified the
concept of “mind” by transforming the term from the old English *mynde* meaning memory, to a full encompassment of the organic, thinking object inside our head.\(^4\)

**INDIVIDUAL KNOWLEDGE**

Locke had a fundamental disagreement with Descartes’ view of knowledge however, this is the heart of the rationalist-empiricist debate, which sought to explain the ideas that we have, particularly ones that seemingly could not come from experience, such as infinity or perfection or eternity. While Descartes thought certain ideas and concepts were innate, Locke concluded ideas and knowledge could be acquired only through sensory experience, thus his analogy of the mind as a *tabula rasa* upon which experience writes.

George Makari maintains that Locke’s *Essay on Human Understanding* attached a new conception to an old term: the mind (Makari 2015, 109, 115). It was intended both as a theory of how the mind works based on atomistic principles and a theory of epistemology; or how we come to know the truth based on reasoning from our experiential inputs. Locke’s starting point is his concept of a blank slate. Thus, Locke rejects the claim that there are innate principles or morals and thereby repudiates arguments of universal consent to certain truths, which all mankind agree upon by arguing that if they existed, even children and idiots would be aware of such truths. He argues they cannot be innate since they “have not the least apprehension or thought of

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\(^4\) The Old English term *mynde* first referred to memory alone and during the Elizabethan period was widely employed to denote inner experience. Even before Locke, the term started to evolve, and a meme of mind as separate from soul began to appear. From at least the 14th century onward it was referred to as a possession that could be lost as in a man losing his mind (Makari 2015, 115).
them” and there is a “great part of mankind, to whom they are not so much as known” (Locke 2004, 60).

This suggestion that we come into the world without any innate ideas, has a profound effect in a Christian context as well, for if true, it could be interpreted as necessarily eliminating original sin, as well as a hereditary aristocracy, since his theory would belie their claims of innate wisdom or merit (Pinker 2016, 5). Thus, the whole meme, of everyone being one another’s equal, which our Western notion of human rights is based upon, can be seen as having evolved from Locke’s challenge to Descartes.5

Inspired by Newton and his seminal achievement with the *Principia*, Locke wanted to formulate a modern empirical theory of knowledge in his *Essay on Human Understanding*, in explicit contrast to the rationalism of Descartes’ *Meditations* (Goldman 2006, 28). In Book I of the *Essays*, Locke began with a fundamental assertion that man is set above the rest of sensible beings. His stated goal was to delve into the extent of individual human knowledge: to inquire where our original ideas come from, to search the bounds between opinion and knowledge and test the certainty of knowledge, and to understand the nature and grounds of faith (Locke 2004, 56).6 Locke then used the rest of Book I to attack previous positions, such as those of Plato and Descartes, which are premised upon *a priori*, or innate knowledge and goes on to say that even if there were certain truths that all mankind agreed on, that still would not prove them innate (Locke 2004, 60).

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5 John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) adopted Locke’s blank-slate meme to justify political concerns such as women’s suffrage, compulsory education for all, and improvement of the working conditions for the lower classes (Pinker 2016, 18).

6 As with the *Reasonableness of Christianity*, we see the certainty of Christian faith as one of Locke’s fundamental aims and pivotal to his work.
Locke asserted that there are three types of knowledge: intuitive, demonstrative and sensitive, which arise from three different modes of acquiring the knowledge. Intuitive knowledge, which he called the most certain, being what we are immediately aware of when we have an idea or when we compare two ideas (Popkin 2003, 259). Locke, while skeptical of innate knowledge, does not maintain a strict empirical perspective that all knowledge comes to us through our senses, allowing some knowledge from intuition and demonstration, which arise via proof, are degrees of our knowledge as well. He states:

There can be nothing more certain, than that the idea we receive from an external object is in our minds; this is intuitive knowledge. But whether there be anything more than barely that idea in our minds, whether we can thence certainly infer the existence of anything without us, which corresponds to that idea, is that, whereof some men think there may be a question made, because men may have such ideas in their minds, when no such thing exists, no such object affects their senses. (Locke 2004, 477)

He contends that we cannot have intuitive knowledge that extends to all our ideas because we cannot perceive all the relations and comparisons between them. For Locke, knowledge extends no further than the perception of the agreement or disagreement between our ideas. We cannot have knowledge of all the relations of our ideas or rational knowledge of the necessary relations between many of our ideas. We can however, perceive that one thing is not the other, but we cannot know, whether they are equal or not, without using intervening quantities through demonstration or rational knowledge. Thus, our intuitive knowledge is not extensible; and narrowly limits sensitive knowledge as “reaching no further than the existence of things actually present to our senses” (Locke 2004, 479). He concludes that “the extent of our knowledge comes not only short of the reality of things, but even of the extent of our ideas” (Locke 2004, 479). This definition
makes our knowledge profoundly individualistic, since presumably no one could have exactly the same set of sensory input, and process them in the same way, making the same connections between the panoply of ideas.

Locke started, similar to Descartes, with the premise that, “every man being conscious to himself, that he thinks, and that which his mind is applied about, whilst thinking, being the ideas that are there…” (Locke 2004, 109). This implies intuitively we can only know the real existence of ourselves, and demonstratively we can only know the real existence of God, and by sensitive knowledge we can only know the real existence of something at the time that we experience it. Richard Popkin terms this a sort of semi-skepticism that Locke used to justify empirical science, which was later attacked as a denial of the doctrine of the Trinity, because there could be no certain knowledge of it (Popkin 2003, 260). The implication is clear: our knowledge of the world is always probable and based on our individual experience; or as Popkin says, “these three kinds of knowledge tell us fairly little about the real existence of things.”

Locke further broke down the different types of ideas in his model; those ideas formed by sensation, or when the mind experiences substances in the outside world through the senses, and those that are formed through reflection, or from the operation of our own mind, such as ideas about the mind’s own functions, such as thinking, willing, believing, and doubting (Locke 2004, 276). In modern parlance Locke’s ideas have been replaced by “stimuli” and “responses” but his laws of association have survived as the laws of conditioning (Pinker 2016, 19). From there, he makes the case that knowledge is built up from ideas, either simple or complex, and the combination of simple ideas, which
are based on our experience, form more complex ideas and it is the combination of these ideas and the mind’s reflection on them that generates understanding (Locke 2004, 112).

Locke’s formulation of knowledge was based on the idea that all knowledge of the world came via the senses and that these sensations were of two classes, primary and secondary. The key problem Locke was trying to address was the age-old conflict in Western culture; the conflict between the universal, the necessary and the certain, as opposed to, the particular, the contingent, and the probable as conceptions of knowledge, truth, reason and reality (Goldman 2006, 7). Because we cannot possibly experience everything that exists in the world, our knowledge is necessarily compromised, since our knowledge is restricted to an individual mind’s experiences and ideas. However, like Descartes, Locke asserts there is real knowledge we can still be certain of, such as our own existence and the existence of God (Newman 2007, 333).

Locke went back to basics and asked the fundamental epistemological question: what can the mind know, and how does it know it? He postulated that we receive simple, indivisible ideas from sensation and reflection. We start as a child in an empty room and slowly furnish it with ideas from our perceptions, and then combine those ideas into knowledge (Locke 2004, 111). Ideas received through sensation correspond to qualities in objects having the power to cause the ideas, as he avers, “I see no reason therefore to believe, that the soul thinks before the senses have furnished it with ideas to think on…” (Locke 2004, 119). Thus, as much as he admires the new science, Locke’s work, like

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7 This idea was challenged by Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) who replied to Locke saying, “There is nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses, except the intellect itself.” His point was something has to be innate in the mind, even if it is just the mechanisms to do the learning. This is still a debate in cognitive science today, but most agree that there is something innate that allows us to learn language and recognize faces etc. (Pinker 2016, 35).
Augustine’s, is introspective, not experimental. He also looks within himself for answers, but instead of finding God he finds a blank slate.

Locke asserted matter was capable of thought and, unlike Descartes who held a dualistic concept of a material body and an immaterial thinking soul, he thought to preordain dualism was to limit God’s omnipotence. He states:

We have the ideas of matter and thinking but possibly shall never be able to know, whether any mere material being thinks, or no; it being impossible for us, by the contemplation of our own ideas, without revelation, to discover, whether Omnipotency has not given to some systems of matter fitly disposed, a power to perceive and think… (Locke 2004, 480)

This seemingly simple assertion was actually revolutionary because it assumed the metaphysical truth of the atomic theory. His theory was influenced by Newton and Boyle’s corpuscular theory as it assumes all material substances in the world, including our brains, are comprised of tiny, insensible atoms (Cahoone 2010, 14). Locke states:

Hence may be conjectured, that created spirits are not separate from matter, because they are both active and passive. (Locke 2004, 282)

The arrangement of these invisible particles of matter gives an object of perception both its primary and secondary qualities. In a startlingly modern insight, he proposed that an individual, and all the perceptions that the individual senses, could be made up of invisible atoms. Locke’s skepticism concerning our true knowledge of reality leads to a

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8 The Corpuscular Hypothesis of Robert Boyle was a physical theory that supposes all matter to be composed of minute particles which are too small to see and are colorless, soundless, and odorless, just as Newton had proposed a corpuscular theory of light. Corpuscularianism is similar to the theory of atomism except that corpuscles were presumed to be divisible and it became a widespread meme in the 17th century among philosophers and scientists. It is also suggestive of the atomic theory put forward by the Roman Lucretius, around 50 BCE, who suggested physical bodies are made up of minute and physically indivisible atoms, and it is by their combination into complex structures that all phenomenal beings are generated.

9 An object’s primary qualities include its size, shape, and movement – its extension. Locke considered primary those qualities that exist regardless of whether anyone perceives them or not. Secondary qualities include color, odor, and taste, and they are secondary since they depend on how the observer perceives them, and are not inherent in the object.
limitation of what every individual truly knows. Locke thought we can never know enough about the fundamental nature of matter to tell whether it is capable of thinking nor can we know enough about the mind to tell whether it might be extended (Popkin 2003, 258). Yet, he had definitive ideas on what constitutes identity and self.

IDENTITY, SELF AND SOUL

Locke wrote his essay on “Of Identity and Diversity” to address the relation of a thing to itself, particularly with respect to different times and places. Locke first makes a sharp distinction between man and person, defining person as “a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, can consider itself as itself…” (Locke 2004, 302). This is a definition that agrees with our modern notion of the reflective self. Further, Locke bases identity and selfhood in human consciousness, with particular regard to participation in the same continued life. Where Descartes had placed human identity in the soul, Locke insisted we simply do not know what a soul really is and he wanted to confine his argument so as to take account of the limits of human knowledge (Seigel 2005, 93). He makes the argument against the soul as the criterion of identity stating:

For if the identity of the soul alone makes the same man, and there be nothing in the nature of matter, why the same individual spirit may not be united to different bodies, it will be possible, that those men, living in distant ages, and of different tempers, may have been the same man … (Locke 2004, 299)

Thus, Locke made the supposition that personal identity must consist in consciousness (Locke 2004, 309) since it is actively self-referential. As he stated:

…when considering anything as existing at any determined time and place, we compare it with itself existing at another time, and thereon form the ideas of identity and diversity. When we see anything to be in any place in any instant of time, we are sure, (be it what it will) that it is that very thing,
and not another, which at that same time exists in another place, how like and undistinguishable soever it may be in all other respects: and in this consists identity, when the ideas it is attributed to, vary not at all from what they were that moment, wherein we consider their former existence, and to which we compare the present. (Locke 2004, 296)

Locke stated identity in scientific and physical terms as incumbent upon “participation of the same continued life, by constantly fleeting particles of matter, in succession vitally united to the same organized body” (Locke 2004, 299). This identity model puts an undue burden on memory though, since for Locke, identity is what we consciously remember. He states:

…’tis plain consciousness, as far as ever it can be extended, should it be to ages past, unites existences and actions, very remote in time, into the same person, as well as it does the existence and actions of the immediately preceding moment: so that whatever has the consciousness of present and past actions, is the same person to whom they both belong. (Locke 2004, 307)

This burden will be evident later in the discussion of individual rights for it could imply that if an individual does not remember something it is not part of their identity and they therefore are not responsible. Locke is less ambiguous when he states:

Person, as I take it, is the name for this self. Wherever a man finds what he calls himself, there I think another may say is the same person. It is a forensic term appropriating actions and their merit; and so, belongs only to intelligent agents capable of a law, and happiness and misery. This personality extends itself beyond present existence to what is past, only by consciousness, whereby it becomes concerned and accountable, owns and imputes to itself past actions, just upon the same ground, and for the same reason that it does the present. (Locke 2004, 312)

This definition of personhood has a deep Christian moral root, making clear every individual is answerable for his or her life before the proper authorities, human and divine. As Jerrold Seigel says of Locke’s model, “consciousness was not a matter of knowledge so much as accountability” (Seigel 2005, 95,101).
While not denying we have a soul, Locke carefully sets that aside and focuses on the experiential aspects inside our mind as that which defines our individuality. He defines the self as:

that conscious thinking thing, (whatever substance, made up of whether spiritual, or material, simple, or compounded, it matters not) which is sensible, or conscious of pleasure and pain, capable of happiness or misery, and so is concerned for itself, as far as that consciousness extends. (Locke 2004, 307)

Furthermore, he states:

So that self is not determined by identity or diversity of substance, which it cannot be sure of, but only by identity of consciousness. (Locke 2004, 311)

This is in sharp contrast to Descartes who saw the mind as totally distinct from the body with the nature of the mind as a thinking, non-extended entity totally distinct from the body which is extended but not thinking, and thus in his mind-body dualism it is possible for one to exist without the other. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes derides anyone who comes to the conclusion that the mind perishes with the body, or the distinctness of the human soul from the body on the basis of it not being demonstrable, as “irreligious” (Descartes 2015, 8-9).

The notion of an ethereal immortal soul was a meme that had endured from ancient times. The meme of thinking matter, introduced by the English doctor and founding member of the Royal Society Thomas Willis (1621-1675), was revolutionary in its time and extremely influential on Locke. The French skeptical philosopher Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655), although little known today, was also influential on Locke. In its time, Gassendism rivaled Cartesianism as an alternative to Scholasticism. Gassendi, in his challenge to Descartes’ conclusions, said there is a possibility that all knowledge, even if it were clear and distinct, might not be about anything outside of our minds.
(Edwards 1967, 271). He went further and also asserted that brain matter could perform cognitive functions. Willis, who was a mentor and in a circle of colleagues with Locke, had finessed it by calling it “thinking matter,” which God had bestowed into humans. Locke adopted this paradoxical term and began redefining the soul so as remove any contradictions. He separated the soul so it no longer had dominion over cognition, reflection, free will or personal identity (Makari 2015, 105). Locke states:

> We know from experience that we sometimes think and thus know that there is something in us that has the power to think, but cannot know if that substance perpetually thinks. (Locke 2004, 113)

Not content with Descartes’s *cogitio* or Pierre Gassendi’s partial preservation of the soul, Locke sought to create a new definition for the intellect and consciousness that allowed for matter as capable of thought. When he was challenged on how matter could produce the human spirit he simply replied that an omnipotent God had made it so since he can “superadd” capabilities like thought to matter as he wished (Makari 2015, 114), which is reminiscent of the absolute power of Ockham’s omnipotent God. This is a meme that endures to this day in the theory of “intelligent design.” Nevertheless, Locke did not think substance, whether it was spiritual or material, was the crucial aspect of self, for him, self was realized “only by identity of consciousness” (Locke 2004, 311). Thus, the role of consciousness is making the self be “self to itself” or actively self-referential, a key marker of modern individualism.

There are many weaknesses in Locke’s argument, particularly his reliance on memory of experiences as constituting personal identity. However, his thinking about the self highlights key points in modern selfhood: the distinction between “man” and “person”; the rejection of substance as a criterion of identity; and the central place of self-
referential consciousness in establishing both personal continuity and separation from others (Seigel 2005, 95).

Seigel sums up Locke’s idea of self with three important aspects: We are selves to others by virtue of what they know about our mental and moral life; we are selves to ourselves, through the imperfect consciousness we have of our lives and deeds in the here and now; and we can imagine and hope to be complete selves in light of the transparency that God can and will open up for us (Seigel 2005, 103). Locke addressed all these various aspects of individualism in his writings on property, government and religious toleration.

**INDIVIDUALISM AND RELIGION**

The debate over free will and human freedom engendered by Martin Luther was still raging in the 17th century. Unlike Luther, Locke firmly believed that all individuals have the ability to find the correct moral path and are rational enough to be trusted to make decisions that are in both their own and other’s best interests. He also viewed God as a “tender Father” as he calls him repeatedly in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, rather than the fearsome god of Luther.\(^\text{10}\)

In 1695, he published *The Reasonableness of Christianity* with the aim to separate the essential articles of faith from the plethora of dogmas and rites with which “writers and wranglers in religion have filled it” and to indicate the reasonableness of Christ’s credentials as the instrument of God’s revelation (Livingston 2006, 20). Living in a post-Reformation culture where Catholics and a large variety of Protestants sects advocated

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\(^{10}\) This is perhaps the emergence of another meme of modern individualism wherein God is portrayed as a father figure, and Jesus as a “personal” savior, with whom one can have a private individual relationship. This model appears to become more prevalent in Christianity as individualism increased.
prison, death or exile for anyone not sharing their belief, Locke asked the question of what is reasonable to believe? Like Luther, he thought belief must be an individual endeavor and should be based proportionally on the evidentiary truth in the Gospels, thus adapting a scientific method to belief (Cary 1999, 89).

Locke accepted the explanation of divine inspiration of the Bible, but still held that even revelation must be tested by reason. His view of individual human nature and natural law was always Christian at the core and different than Luther’s, as he states:

God, out of the infiniteness of his mercy, has dealt with man as a compassionate and tender father. He gave him reason, and with it a law, that could not be otherwise than what reason should dictate, unless we should think, that a reasonable creature, should have an unreasonable law. (Locke 1958, 75).

Locke found the miracles of the Gospels to be evidentiary truth and this Christian outlook shaped his thinking on individualism. He, like Luther, was profoundly aware that our individual conscience was responsible for ourselves and must ultimately answer to God, wherein we will be a full self. Locke thought only on “the Great Day, wherein the secrets of all hearts shall be laid open, it may be reasonable to think, no one shall be made to answer what he knows nothing of: but shall receive his doom, his conscience accusing or excusing him.” Our knowledge of the self then, is knowledge of its responsibility and of the fate such responsibility entails (Seigel 2005, 102).

Like Newton, Locke was an avid student of Scripture, and using the scientific method he rejected much of traditional belief he found contrary to reason. He wanted to apply the scientific method to Christianity. Unlike Luther, Locke wanted to use reason to provide a basis for belief, though he also still shared the longstanding Christian concern
about the weakness of reason as the basis for morality in light of human nature. For him, like other writers of the Enlightenment, the great enemy was not religion but dogmatism and intolerance. As the French Philosopher Pierre Bayle (1647-1706) said, “the obstacles to a good examination do not come so much from the fact the mind is void of knowledge as it is full of prejudice” (Livingston 2006, 10, 18).11

Locke became one of the first advocates of religious toleration with his Letters Concerning Toleration, the second of which he sent to Newton for comment (Herman 2013, 360).12 These embodied years of thinking and writing about religious toleration over four decades and his views changed markedly between 1660 to 1690. In the early 1660’s, he was an orthodox Anglican and supported the concept of a state religion, writing in defense of the civil magistrate’s authority to impose a uniform public worship. This was a reflection of a Locke who was deeply fearful of civil anarchy driven by religious fanaticism. In 1669, he wrote religious toleration into the constitution for Carolina, and he wrote his third Letter on Toleration in Latin in 1685 while in exile in Holland, having been influenced by seeing Protestant refugees pouring over the borders from France where Louis XIV had just revoked the Edict of Nantes (Uzgalis 2017, plato.stanford.edu).

11 Bayle was one of a number of the intellectual refugees in Locke’s immediate circle, most of whom shared some personal experience with religious persecution. This circle of contemporaries met together with Locke when he was in France, and corresponded regularly to create an informal network of pro-toleration voices (Loconte 2014, 122-123).

12 Here again Locke shows a double standard that many criticize as hypocritical. As with his owning stock in slave trading companies while advocating natural rights, Locke’s letters do not extend toleration to Catholics or Atheists. He also rationalized we should not tolerate the intolerant, those who would seek to forcibly impose their religious views on others. Similarly, any religious group who posed a threat to political stability or public safety should not be tolerated, including Roman Catholics since they had a fundamental allegiance to the Pope, a foreign prince who did not recognize the sovereignty of English law. Locke also believed that atheists should not be tolerated because since they did not believe in an afterlife, they could not be trusted to behave morally in this life.
Locke’s fourth *Letter on Toleration* showcases an authentic Christianity based on the individual living the morality of the gospels. Like Luther, he disdains the idea of force as a means of conversion and assails the corrupt motives of the defenders of persecution. As he says, “For no man can, if he would, conform his faith to the dictates of another” (Locke 1990, 19). Instead, Locke echoes Erasmus and the other Christian humanists in his defense of religious toleration by following the moral life of Jesus, whom he calls “the Captain of our salvation” (Loconte 2014, 177). He affirms the individual right to practice religion and to follow the dictates of one’s own conscience in doing so, rather than blindly resigning oneself to the will of the governor, or the religion which had chanced to establish itself in the country where one happens to be born. Otherwise, one would owe their eternal salvation or damnation to the place of their nativity, not their individual conscience (Locke 1990, 21).

Like Bayle, Locke advocates that in order to be tolerated by others, one must tolerate others as well. Neither had any toleration for intolerants, a key component of individual rights in the modern West and also of the gospels as Locke saw it. In America today, we would express it as; “I may hate what you are saying but I will defend your right to say it.” Or as Locke said it, “…everyone is orthodox to himself” (Locke 1990, 13).

Finally, a key aspect of his philosophy for the future America was the separation of church and state. He stated, “For the civil government can give no new right to the church, nor the church to the civil government,” while also affirming that the church remains a “voluntary society,” acknowledging a key right of freedom of religion for the individual (Locke 1990, 28).
INDIVIDUALISM AND PROPERTY

Locke’s assertion that every individual has a right to private property is one of the cornerstones of his political theory, and outlines how each individual relates to God and to other men. Drawing on Scripture, Locke avers in his Second Treatise on Government that the earth and its fruits were originally given to humanity in common, for their collective use and benefit, as man needed to answer only to the laws of nature. In this state of nature, men are in a “state of perfect freedom” and “a state also of equality” unless God should declare one above another (Locke 1980, 8).

Once again, we see in Locke’s purpose a Christian root which is to explain how, although God had given the earth and its fruits in common, there could be a natural individual right to private property, including individual effort and labor. At the next level of individual ownership, Locke defines property not only as things such as meat and drink and other things nature affords, but also as “a property in his own person: this nobody has any right to but himself. The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his” (Locke 1980, 18-19).\(^\text{13}\) Locke had a broad interpretation of property, including life, liberty as well as possessions. People acquire property by “mixing their labour” with it. Thus, one’s individual labor becomes the determining factor of value in society with money eventually becoming the basis for the measure of worth of that labor.

Crawford Macpherson suggests English thought from the 17\(^{\text{th}}\) to the 19\(^{\text{th}}\) centuries had an underlying unifying assumption he terms “possessive individualism,” which was driven by the transition in to a capitalistic society (Macpherson 2011, xii). Along with

\(^{13}\) Interestingly, Locke was opposed to serfdom but oddly not against slavery.
Locke’s assertion that there is a natural individual right to private property however, there is a social and relational component, the community of nature. As he states:

The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges everyone: and reason, which that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions… (Locke 1980, 9)

Like Thomas Hobbes, Locke uses a social contract theory that maintains that rational self-interest will lead individuals to give up their power (which is limited by natural law) to the community and the government they choose, whether it be a monarchy, an oligarchy or a republic, but not ceding all power to a sovereign. Locke implicitly trusts in the moral law of nature, the Christian golden rule, as he stated above, “no one ought to harm another.” Paramount in his model is the idea that individuals participate in making the laws that they voluntarily obey, as evidenced by his description of the legislative power of government as one being limited to act only for certain ends. He allows that the government must have the power to make laws for the regulating of property between subjects, yet cannot use that power to take property without the consent of the people (Locke 1980, 74).

Thus, the core of Locke’s individualism is the assertion that every man is naturally the sole proprietor of his own person and his own capacities – the absolute proprietor in the sense that he owes nothing to society for them – and especially the absolute proprietor of his capacity to labor (Macpherson 2011, 231). As Macpherson points out however, if individualism can solely be realized in accumulating property, it can be realized only by some and requires a political authority to be supreme over individuals to protect the institutions. Locke had no hesitation in allowing individuals to hand over some of their natural rights in order to form a stable political force that could
protect property since he was part of that wealthy propertied elite who would be in control of the government.  

Property as the sole identifier of individualism does not seem to be Locke’s intent though, as he gave a broad interpretation to the word. Macpherson does point out the problem that comes with the priority Locke assigns to real estate as property; once the land is all taken up, equal individuals under natural law, become two different classes of individuals with very different rights, those who own property, and those who do not. Locke only partially solved this problem by noting how money fulfills the need for a non-perishable valuation of worth, that is used in exchange by the mutual consent of men (Locke 1980, 28). Money however, which is necessary to properly value the differential increase in property, inevitably results in economic inequalities.

Further, the political system was still rooted in land ownership and voting rights were based on land ownership in England as well as in early America, having been put forward by Locke himself in the 1669 Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina.  

In fact, Locke initially proposed a constitution that allowed for a hereditary aristocracy and a hierarchical society in the Americas, though this clause was largely ignored by the colonists; they did however, adopt his link between political representation and property ownership (Ferguson 2011, 110).

14 Locke was quite wealthy and owned stock in companies including in those involved in slave trading. He was also secretary of the Lords Proprietors of the Carolinas, where slavery was constitutionally permitted. Locke put forward two notions of slavery in his Treatises: legitimate slavery was captivity with forced labor imposed by the just winning side in a war and illegitimate slavery was an authoritarian deprivation of natural rights. This dichotomy between his principles elucidated in his writings and his practice has earned him much criticism in modern times, just as it has for Thomas Jefferson who penned the words on equality in the American Declaration of Independence, while being a slaveholder himself.

15 Locke was secretary to one of the eight ‘Lords Proprietor’, the Earl of Shaftesbury and as such wrote the initial draft of the constitution for Carolina.
The more important point, which Niall Ferguson makes in his book *Civilization, The West and the Rest*, is that Locke’s focus on property made a fundamental difference in North America versus South America. The headright system, introduced in Carolina as well as Virginia, Maryland, New Jersey and Pennsylvania allowed for free men to be given a plot of land to plant upon arrival in America and indentured servants, who had served out their time to be given land as well.\(^6\) Locke spelled it out in his *Second Treatise on Government*, “As much land as a man tills, plants, improves, cultivates, and can use the product of, so much is his property” (Locke 1980, 21). This made immense sense in a world that was short on labor and had huge amounts of land.\(^7\) More importantly, it invested citizens in the land and in the democratic process and engendered the rugged individualism that has become a central meme in American culture.

To return to Tocqueville’s point in Chapter 2, the quest for private property necessary to “make it on one’s own” in the brutal frontier, resulted in a rugged individualism we revere in the heroes of the American West. Tocqueville observed the fruits of the Lockean focus on property ownership not quite 200 years after it first began and characterized it as an isolationism that results in, “Each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own

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\(^6\) The headright system was created in 1618 in Jamestown, Virginia as a way to attract new settlers to the region and address the labor shortage in tobacco farming. New settlers who paid their way to Virginia received 50 acres of land.

\(^7\) The active planting of land by North American settlers not only denied the rights of the indigenous peoples as having any value at all; it was in fact a mechanism for clearing the land and barring its use by the native populations. In the colonies in South America, the Spanish crown retained most of the land for itself and granted rights to aristocrats to farm or mine huge estates of land using the labor of the indigenous people. Ferguson argues that this lack of ownership resulted in a lack of experience in democratic decision making, eventually resulting in centralized dictatorships and unequal rights. To this day, the rural property ownership rates in North America far exceed those in South America (Ferguson 2011, 122-125).
heart” (Tocqueville 2006, 508). Tocqueville equated individualism with isolationism and saw it as dangerous to society. This does not seem to be Locke’s intent however.

Henry Moulds opines that Locke is not a laissez-faire individualist as he is often characterized. He makes the point that Locke is certainly not one to despise wealth, and considers the incentive of private profit to be contributory to the public good; but, despite all such capitalistic-sounding views, examination of Locke's discourses on money and interest turns up several passages that throw considerable doubt on casting Locke in the role of a rugged individualist (Moulds 1965, 107). Locke saw the interests of private property owners as still governed by natural law and that society was dependent on Christian charity, a fundamental aspect of the Gospels.

Macpherson would agree somewhat, noting that Locke refused to reduce all social relations to market relations and all morality to market morality (Macpherson 2011, 269). Yet the possessive individualist worldview Macpherson sees however, does sound like the rugged individualist as he states:

The human essence is freedom from any relations other than those a man enters with a view to his own interest. The individual’s freedom is rightfully limited only by the requirements of others’ freedom. The individual is proprietor of his own person, for which he owes nothing to society. He is free to alienate his capacity to labour, but not his own person. Society is a series of relations between proprietors. Political society is a contractual device for the protection of proprietors and the orderly regulations of their relations. (Macpherson 2011, 269)

As with all memes, the original intent of the author is often forgotten as a meme goes viral and adapts and evolves on its own. The meme of the rugged individual making it on his own with his own property is thoroughly embedded into the modern American

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18 Tocqueville echoes his fellow countryman Rousseau who said the invention of private property was one of the greatest crimes against humanity (Solomon 1988, 20).
capitalist society, even though Locke did not treat humans as isolated individuals but always as members of a unified community. Ward concludes, “Locke’s theory of property was intended to reformulate the philosophic understanding of what it means to be a rights-bearing individual capable of conceiving of oneself as a self-owning being with property in one’s rights (Ward 2010, 11).

**INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS**

Locke explored the ideas of will, power and freedom in his essay “Of Power” which is all of Chapter XXI in *The Essay of Human Understanding*. He wanted to first understand how the human mind knows things since he inherently thought men capable of rational reason, which is the foundation of a political system based on individual rights. Thus, we see a shift from the Lutheran arguments of free will in a theological context to free will in a political context with Locke. The key was to maintain enough personal liberty while recognizing that some individual rights have to be given up in order to establish a state that will ensure protection and stability to all its members. Locke defines individual freedom as the absence of constraint, what he calls *liberty*:

> All the actions, that we have any idea of, reducing themselves, as has been said, to these two, thinking and motion, so far as man has a power to think, or not to think; to move, or not to move, according to the preference or direction of this own mind, so far is a man *free*...so that the idea of *liberty*, is the idea of a power in any agent to do or forbear any particular action, according to the determination or thought the mind, whereby either of them is preferred to the other; where either of them is not in the power of the agent to be produced by him according to his *volition*, there he is not at liberty, that agent is under *necessity*. (Locke 2004, 223)

Locke thereby connects liberty to power, power being a capacity to effect change, which is more a function of reflection than sensation (Ward 2010, 41).
It is the contention of this chapter that the modern Western concept of a democratic republic form of government, founded on a guarantee of individual rights for its citizens, fully emerged in 17th and 18th century England having evolved within a Christian culture that had confidence in the rational ability of human nature supplemented by the faith that humans were the children of a caring God. This meme was built on the meme of individual intent as realized by Abelard, the self-responsibility meme of Dante, the dignity of the individual meme brought out by Pico and the other humanists, and the autonomous-self meme of Luther, even though Luther had little regard for man’s rationality or free will. Many popular interpretations of the Enlightenment credit it with a sudden transformation, analogous to the popular view of the Italian Renaissance; however, the assertion herein is that most ‘new’ memes are simply adaptations of previously existing ideas that replicated quickly in new environments and conditions.

Locke’s work can trace a line back to Ockham’s argument on the origin of private property and also his argument of natural law and natural rights, which he pursued in the Franciscan poverty case.\footnote{Ockham distinguished three epochs of human history and argued that private property emerged in the third epoch when a series of voluntary arrangements among humans evolved, including compacts, customs, and laws whose foundations were legitimized by “the dictate of reason” (Tierney 1997, 166).} Ironically, Ockham was fighting for the Franciscan’s ability to renounce their natural right to own property, while Locke used natural law to build a case for individual property rights.

Locke’s views on natural law also built on the work of Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), who when discussing the origin of property combined a historical narrative with a theory of rational natural law, and influenced John Selden (1584-1654) and Thomas

> The Right Of Nature, which writers commonly call *jus natural*, is the liberty each man hath, to use his own power, as he will himself, for the preservation of his own nature: that is to say, of his own life; and consequently, of doing any thing, which in his own judgment, and reason, he shall conceive to be the aptest means thereunto…A Law of Nature, *lex naturalis*, is a precept or general rule found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to do that which is destructive of his life…law, and right, differ as much, as obligation and liberty; which in one and the same matter are inconsistent. (Hobbes 1962, 103)

As Steven Pinker says, it is no coincidence that the major theoreticians of the social contract, such as Hobbes and Locke were also armchair psychologists studying human nature (Pinker 2016, 296).

Hobbes, however, had a much darker view of man’s nature than Locke and thought a powerful sovereign was required to keep society in check. For Hobbes, silence of the law was what was left as freedom. Locke appeared to be more optimistic about individuals in a communitarian environment being able to use reason to guide morality and the government. He argued that humans are born neither good or bad, but as blank slates upon which experience writes. As stated earlier, this presupposition could be seen as undercutting traditional Christian theology in which all human beings are born sinful, though based on Locke’s writing in The *Reasonableness of Christianity* this was probably not his intent. He accepted the supposition of the Gospels concerning Adam’s fall and

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20 Grotius and Selden were scholars in natural law theories and both wrote extensively on various political questions and contributed to the doctrines of political liberalism which were being formulated in the generations directly preceding Locke. Grotius, like Ockham before him, had the idea that individuals—both individual persons and individual groups of persons—are bearers of rights. And he vigorously defended rights to property (Miller 2014, plato.stanford.edu).
the need for a redeemer, however he did not agree with Luther and Hobbes that man was
innately evil and his guilt was inherited.\footnote{In the beginning of The Reasonableness of Christianity, Locke states, “Adam fell from perfect
obedience and lost bliss and immortality… Death, not guilt nor the necessity of sinning, came on all by
Adam’s sin” (Locke 1958, 21).}

The modern Western state emerges from Locke’s vision of an agreement of
individuals, who are assumed to have inherently equal rights, rather than a top down
hierarchy with presumed inequities. In his Second Treatise on Government Locke
observes:

> The natural liberty of man is to be free from any superior power on earth,
and not to be under the will or legislative authority of man, but to have
only the law of nature for his rule. The liberty of man, in society, is to be
under no other legislative power, but that established, by consent, in the
common-wealth; nor under the dominion of any will, or restraint of any
law, but what the legislative shall enact, according to the trust put in it.
(Locke 1980, 17)

While Hobbes had insisted on basic human equality through “equal subjection”, Locke
defended human freedom and gave it power through individual civil rights. Locke went
further by maintaining that natural liberty includes liberty of thought, since reason is
another of God’s gifts, our thoughts about religion must be free, not forced.

Tierney, who maintains that the whole idea of human rights is peculiar to Western
culture, states Locke’s exceptionalism well when he says, “All civilized societies have
cherished ideals of justice and right order, but they have not normally expressed those
ideas in terms of individual natural rights…” (Tierney 1997, 1). Locke was more of a
pragmatist with his view that individuals form governments to protect their lives, liberty
and property and if the government fails to do that, they can rescind the contract with the
rulers and lawfully depose them. This is a complete upset of the Great Chain of Being
idea, which was already weakened in the post-Renaissance era and represents the more contemporary view of individualism.

CONCLUSIONS

Locke built on the meme developers before him and went an extra step, displaying a confidence that human being are naturally rational. He took the various meanings of ‘mind’ and defined it into bodily matter that could think. His empiricism and emphasis on sensory experience as fundamental in shaping the mind’s tabula rasa was a key turning point toward a more scientific approach to the study of the human mind. As Steven Pinker says in his book The Blank Slate, “Locke was taking aim at theories of innate ideas in which people were thought to be born with mathematical ideals, eternal truths, and a notion of God. His alternative theory, empiricism, was intended both as a theory of psychology – how the mind works – and as a theory of epistemology – how we come to know the truth” (Pinker 2016, 5).

Further, Locke transformed dualism from meaning a body and separate mind that is not of the same substance, to the modern aspect we have today of a mind/body composed of matter and a God given eternal soul that is of a separate realm. Thus, he reified the concept of the separation of the mind from the soul, although in many places he uses the two interchangeably himself, as was the custom at that time. Locke refined what belonged to reason and the mind and what belonged to the realm of the soul and faith and as Makari says, “individual identity became a construct predicated on conscious experience in the mind (Makari 2015, 119). The inner experience that Augustine had
started evolved into the much broader concept of consciousness, which was the core of
the subjective selfhood that Montaigne had explored.

Locke clearly built on the previous memes of individualism and moved the
concept into the more modern understanding of the term. Beginning with an insistence
on equality of status, and moving on to the assertion of a range of basic human rights, and
concluding with the right to self-government, he embodies all the markers of modern
individualism (Siedentop 2014, 359). He also built on Luther’s concept of the “Two
Kingdoms” separating church from state, which leads to the concept of a social contract
which Locke delineated (as did Hobbes) in his Treatises on Government.

Of the markers laid out in Chapter Two, his Essay lays out a clear example of a
first-person standpoint, showing that consciousness of one’s self and the interaction of
the world around it is the essence of identity. Secondly, he has supreme confidence in
man’s rationality and ability for self-reflectiveness, trusting that man can be self-
governing and make equitable moral decisions based on reason, which connotes a self-
affirmation of the individual and the dignity of human beings in and of themselves. He
also displays transcendence with his vision of a corpuscular theory of how the mind
works and allowing for the possibility that matter can think, though he was not definitive
on this, he (and Descartes) show they are capable of disengagement and objectifying the
surrounding world as well as one’s own mind, to skeptically probe all possibilities.

Finally, he accepted personal identity as rooted in human freedom a freedom that
was enabled by individual rights. He saw autonomy, intentionality, and individual moral
agency as inherent human traits and allowed that individuals should have the
responsibility for their own actions and their own self-governance. Arguably Locke has
influenced the modern American mindset more than any of the other figures discussed in this thesis. We are the embodiment of his idea of classical liberal republicanism. Indeed, America was the perfect “blank slate” for implementing many of the ideas outlined in his *Second Treatise of Government*. The first settlers started in a true state of nature and mixed their labor with the land to claim property (Locke 1980, 19). The government framework was structured on individuals joining into communities and society to preserve those property rights, with an understanding that the government was instituted for the purpose of the common good. Its authority was derived from the people's reliance upon it to meet that end, with the understanding that if it betrayed the public trust, as the British monarchy did in the eyes of the American colonists, it could legitimately be overthrown and the people could reclaim the power they had put in the hands of the government and form a new legislature (Locke 1990, 11). Thus, Locke is thoroughly embedded in the idea of American individualism which will be discussed in the next chapter, though our modern focus on maximization of individual choice at the expense of the common good was probably not his intent.
CHAPTER 10

EPILOGUE

This thesis has been premised on the hypothesis of the evolution of individualism being inexorably driven by mutations in the cultural genome which arose through the Christian worldview. As has been shown, the Christian religion, with its focus on the inner person with an individual conscience and individual judgment, and its doctrine that men were equal in the sight of God, was a crucial factor in the rise and spread of the memes of individualism. As Louis Dumont said, individualism has “religious roots” (Morris 1996, 271).

Modern individualism has evolved out of centuries of struggle against oppressive authority, religious conflict, and wars over the various interpretations of Scripture, as well as the subsequent philosophical progression from the late Enlightenment period to the modern and post-modern period. Robert Bellah and his co-authors in Habits of Heart maintained that modern individualism has long co-existed with classical republicanism and biblical religion (Bellah et.al. 2008, 143). This thesis has sought to make the point that it was much more than co-existence, and that in fact, Christianity, with its emphasis on inner belief and faith instead of laws, has been the environmental driver of that evolution. Paradoxically however, despite our increasing secularism, the modern question has become, has individualism evolved too far? Has the balance tilted to the point that the self, as psychologist Robert Coles has written, “is the only or main form of reality?” Written in 1980, Coles lamented that the hallmark of our time seems to be groups with “lots of psychological chatter, lots of self-consciousness, lots of interpretations” (Coles 1980, 137). Arguably the advent of social media has only
exacerbated this trend of extreme individualism and divisiveness. As Francis Fukuyama said, “The tendency of contemporary liberal democracies to fall prey to excessive individualism is perhaps their greatest long-term vulnerability…” (Fukuyama 2000, 10).

This chapter will explore those issues and the modern view of individualism beginning with the philosophical developments in the late Enlightenment through Existentialism and Post Modernism, and ending by proffering some issues worthy of future exploration and study and conclusions.

THE LATE ENLIGHTENMENT

After Locke, the pace of the dialogue and meme development accelerated. The advancement of science continued to narrow the space for religion as it eliminated the need for divine revelation in explaining the world around us. As technology advanced, economics became more dominant in shaping values and the Western world became transactional rather than transcendent. As William Barrett framed it, man moved into a more secular phase of history, and science stripped nature of its anthropomorphisms and left us with a universe that was neutral and alien in its vastness and force and oblivious to human purpose (Barrett 1958, 35). The world was no longer an enchanted place and anxiety increased in the human search for meaning in an increasingly capitalistic society.

Science and economics both assumed much more powerful roles in shaping worldviews and ethics after the 18th century. Further, as science explained more, humanity’s faith in so-called “objective” facts increased, but science had nothing to say about values. Outside of religion, facts and values cleaved, leaving the individual feeling adrift as morals became subjectivized. Brad Gregory points out that this subjectivization
of morality has been centuries in the making, and remains underway, the inadvertent product of the Reformation leading to the uncoupling of natural rights from the teleological Christian ethics in which it had been born and embedded (Gregory 2015, 185).

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) recognized this and sought to justify science and the objectivity of knowledge and establish objective foundations of morality through his categorical imperative as explained in his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1781) and *Foundations of the Metaphysics for Morals* (1785). For Kant, there had to be a universal objective moral law or else the concept of morality was groundless (Bernstein 1988, 13). He built on the empiricism of Locke, as well as David Hume (1711-1776) and George Berkeley (1685-1753) with his “Copernican Revolution,” which revolutionized the explanation of how the human mind structures its experience. For Kant, the phenomenon of human experience depends on the way our mind actively processes and categorizes the data we receive passively through the senses. He rejected Locke’s blank slate and conjectured that our minds must supply the general framework in which the sensible world and all objects appear to us.

Likewise, Kant inverted the concepts of morality and religion by stating that morality is not based on knowledge of God and God’s law; in fact, we actually produce the concept of God by reasoning through moral principles (Livingston 2006, 63). He proceeded to peel back Christianity to its moral core, which he saw as the pursuit of virtue through a worldwide ethical commonwealth.

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1 Objectivism is defined here as being the conviction that there is some fixed, ahistorical framework to which we can ultimately appeal to determine the nature of knowledge, reality, truth and goodness (Bernstein 1988, 8).
Kant posited that freedom of moral choice must be exercised by the individual adopting a moral imperative to do good because it is reasonable and rewarding in and of itself. Moral law cannot be imposed from outside humanity but rather must be something we voluntarily obey as morally autonomous, individual operators. This could be viewed as a secular interpretation of Locke’s social contract theory and is a meme that underpins our modern Western states. We embrace this meme of objective right and wrong and have based our legal system upon it, separate and apart from religion.

The crux of Kant’s argument in his general observations is the ought inherent in every individual’s conscience. As he says in The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, “… the injunction that we ought to become better men resounds unabatedly in our souls….” Kant maintains that the call to duty and good is innate in all of us and that one should “act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” This is his famous categorical imperative – what all men ought to do without any qualifiers. As Kant wrote, “virtue here has as its steadfast maxim conduct conforming to law; …and one who knowing something to be his duty, requires no incentive other than this representation of duty itself…” (Kant 1993, 42-43). His concept instills confidence in the individual as a free and morally autonomous agent operating in a shared moral community independent of religious belief.

Further, Kant goes on to reason; “the moral law commands that we ought now to be better men, it follows inevitably that we must be able to be better men” (Kant 2008, 46). This concept of morality was both individualistic – be a law unto yourself – but also universal and communitarian, with everyone having a duty to further the good of others.

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2 This was also a concept put forth by Boethius in The Consolation of Philosophy in the 6th century. Lady Philosophy tells Boethius that the end and aim of the whole universe is “the good” and is desired by all (Boethius 2005, 70).
He states, “The principle of humanity and of every rational nature generally as an end in itself is the supreme limiting condition of every man’s freedom of action” (Kant 1993, 39).3 Humans are ends in themselves and cannot be used as means, thereby putting the dignity of the individual at the heart of a priori reason. Kant thus grounds individual freedom in reason; and he sees a special burden on us who possess reason, since we are able to choose our principles to guide our actions however, reason underlies our freedom and dignity as individuals only if we respect the same for others.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) followed Kant and was a pivotal transitional figure in continental philosophy and individualism. He rejected the traditional conception of epistemology assumed by Descartes, Locke, and Kant by refusing to accept a rigid distinction between consciousness and reality, and reintegrated Aristotelian teleology into his concept. Embodying the idea of teleological progress, Hegel viewed the development of human consciousness both as an historical process and a logical development (Morris 1996, 194). Hegel, like Locke, ruled out innate ideas, reasoning, “everything must come to us in an external way,” but he added everything that exists for consciousness is an objectification to consciousness, and truth, including God, and becomes essential for us only when processed through historical events (Crites 1966, 248-254). Hegel set aside the dualistic framework of phenomena and appearance in the arguments that raged from Abelard to Locke; rather, he maintained that human consciousness essentially comes to understand that there is no opposition between the particular and the universal, or between the empirical and conceptual. They are

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3 Contrast this with Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), who viewed the individual as driven by biological drives and in order to satisfy them must enter into relations with other “objects.” Other individuals then, are always a means to one’s end (Fromm 1969,10). This tension between respecting others and getting what we need from others is always present in the individual and society.
intelligible only in light of the other; and the reality postulated by science to explain phenomena is itself only a form of consciousness (Morris 1996, 195).

This sounds profoundly individualistic as self-consciousness then becomes self-certainty in an individual, but Hegel then argues that this individual cannot exist in isolation. As he states, “…self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged” (Hegel 1977, 111). As Brian Morris points out, Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit leaves us with two important points concerning the individual; first that the human mind is inherently social, and as a moment in the development of the world spirit (culture), it is also fundamentally historical (Morris 1996, 197). So, where Kant and Locke had regarded the human mind as the individual mind, and thought the categories used to catalog sensory data may be common, Hegel saw the human mind as a social product which is historically processed.

Thus, the self in Hegel’s model is a social consequence and without recognition from others, there is no self. Robert Solomon makes the point that until Hegel put forward his account, most other philosophers did not mention other people with respect to selves until they got to ethics. He notes that Hume surmised he could find no immediate self in his consciousness but as Solomon says, “the idea that he was looking for it in the wrong place – namely in his own consciousness – never occurs to him.” Solomon goes on to describe Hegel’s work as a “grand treatise on cosmic humanism” (Solomon 1983, 7, 49). And while Hegel goes to the extreme in describing individual consciousness as only existing with respect to others, he highlights the constant tension between man and men, between the individual and the society.
This is a crucial point for as Charles Taylor points out, the modern individual has been taken out of a rich community social life and now enters instead into a series of mobile, changing, revocable associations, often designed merely for highly specific ends; which are usually not commonly shared ends but ends for specific individuals. We end up relating to each other through a series of partial roles (Taylor 1989, 502). This process has accelerated in the digital age where individuals not only have many roles, but can even assume completely separate identities and appearances such as avatars on-line. Taylor also makes the point that modern social theory is still divided on this question; whether human good can be achieved as individuals acting separately for their own good within a societal structure they voluntarily join, as Locke envisioned it, or whether it can only be achieved by realizing it as some shared, common good, as Hegel envisioned it (Taylor 2007, 541).^4

With regard to Christianity, Hegel spoke of it as the “absolute religion,” due to the historical relationship that existed between Christian doctrine and the emergence of liberal democratic societies in Western Europe. As Francis Fukuyama points out, Hegel thought freedom received its penultimate form in Christianity because this religion was the first to establish the principle of the universal equality of all men in the sight of God, that is, man is morally free (Fukuyama 1992, 196). On the other hand, as the American pragmatist William James (1842-1910) pointed out, the Hegelian notion of God as the

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^4 The “common good” is an idea originating in classical thought. As *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Republic* points out, Roman republican rhetoric had stressed the importance of the common good, the authority of the senate, the balance of the constitution, and the sovereignty of the people and is legacy that contributed to the success of the American revolution and republican government (Flower 2014, 350).

^5 Liberalism as used here is defined as a rule of law that recognizes certain individual rights or freedoms from government control including, religious rights, political rights and civil rights. Democracy on the other hand, is the right of all citizens to share in political power (Fukuyama 1992, 42).
all-encompassing Absolute Spirit necessarily constrains the individual. As James put it in his *Lectures on Pragmatism*:

> The more absolutistic philosophers dwell on so high a level of abstraction that they never try to come down… What you want is a philosophy that will not only exercise your powers of intellectual abstraction but that will make some positive connexion (sic) with this actual world of finite human lives… For the philosophy which is so important in each of us is not a technical matter; it is our more or less dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means. (James 1921, 4, 25)

He concluded while Hegelianism may provide us with an optimistic, comforting assurance that everything will work out as it should; it also undermines our intellect and the values of human individuality, freedom, and responsibility.

**THE EXISTENTIALISTS**

In the modern era starting with the 20th century, existentialism and phenomenology had important influences on how we think of individualism. Existentialism came to prominence at the end of World War II, but it had its roots in the 19th century where it questioned the integrity of reason itself and the Enlightenment faith in science as always ensuring certain progress. It represented a fundamental shift in the philosophical view of man, embracing Montaigne’s subjective view of the individual and challenging Kant’s primacy of pure reason given man’s growing alienation and search for meaning.

Existentialism is concerned with the lives of particular individuals as a series of decisions and choices, rather than the concern of general humanity, and is a humanistic philosophy, concerned with human and personal values, not epistemology or knowledge of the natural world. It is focused on the human condition. As Morris points out, existentialism sees the self as an agent, and such themes as freedom, choice, and
responsibility are dominant in these writings, as the human subject is a psychosomatic unity, not simply a knower (Morris 1996, 361).

Instead of positing theories, the existentialists asked probing questions about knowledge, truth, ethics and Christianity with a focus on what it means to the self-conscious individual. William Barrett framed it well in his book *Irrational Man* saying, “Ideas are not even the real subject matter of these philosophers - and this in itself is something of a revolution in Western philosophy: their central subject is the unique experience of the single one, the individual, who chooses to place himself on trial before the gravest question of his civilization” (Barrett 1958, 13).

For both Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), philosophy was subjective and personal to the individual, but their approaches on becoming an authentic individual were radically different. Like Montaigne, and unlike Kant, Kierkegaard embraced the subjective, saying, “It is subjectivity that Christianity is concerned with, and it is only in subjectivity that truth exists, if it exists at all; objectively” (Gardiner 1988, 93). To Kierkegaard, the greater the emphasis on the objective, the greater the loss of self-awareness (Oaklander 1992, 14). He stressed that there is no way to directly communicate one’s own subjective inwardness, and focused instead on personal self-awareness through Christian faith. The individual must make a choice to accept the paradox and salvation, because faith is a happy passion, content to not understand a mystery that transcends human comprehension (Kierkegaard 2009, 46). According to his model, it is only by turning inward and having faith in the other that one becomes an authentic individual and not just a specimen of humankind.
Taken to the extreme in the Kierkegaardian sense of individualism, the crowd or public interest is untruth and represents ideas that any given age may take for granted without self-reflection. He thought if the crowd’s interest becomes insinuated into our own sense of who we are, they relieve us of the burden (and dignity) of defining our own identity. For Kierkegaard, being “authentic” clearly referred to making one’s life choices autonomously, passionately and without excuses. Being inauthentic then meant “going along with the crowd” and not making one’s own decisions, and not even facing up to the questions (Solomon 1988, 161). One can see how this evolved in modern America into “doing your own thing.”

Once again, we see Christianity as the basis for a far-reaching individualism. Christian faith is the only basis of Kierkegaard’s argument for self-awareness, since faith is something for which the individual is entirely responsible, and one is always alone with their faith. Like Luther and Locke, Kierkegaard maintained no dogma can force belief, and his focus on individual choice can be seen as liberating, being the true essence of our freedom.

Kierkegaard believed every individual suffers from anxiety and despair due to the universal fear that there really is nothing to human existence; and he found the meaning of existence through faith to overcome hopelessness. Friedrich Nietzsche, on the other hand, began his examination of the human condition by asserting in *The Gay Science* that, “God is dead” (Nietzsche 1974, 181). His proclamation was not to suggest there was a God who had actually died, rather that man’s need of one had died. The scientific revolution had put forth the idea of a universe that was governed only by physical laws and not divine providence, while philosophers such as Locke and others had proffered
that governments no longer needed the notion of the divine rights of kings to be legitimate, but only the consent of the individuals governed.

Thus, Nietzsche found Kierkegaard’s religious solution unacceptable and attacked the very basis of Christian morality; which was really an attack on Kant’s concept of universal objective, moral values. He disdained what he called the religion of pity and humility and instead sought for a return to the impersonalist noble values of the pagan world to underpin the dignity of the individual. As he put it in *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), the Renaissance was “the revaluation of Christian values, the attempt … to bring about the victory of the opposing values, the noble values” (Nietzsche 1990, 197). He blamed Luther for undermining this attempt with his reformation of the Christian religion. Nietzsche recognized that religion was more than dogma and ritual, and provided, as Barrett says, a solid psychological matrix surrounding an entire individual’s life from birth to death (Barrett 1958, 24). Indeed, that was his issue as he thought virtue should be self-generated and in Christianity, “the believer is not free to have a conscience at all over the question ‘true’ and ‘false’… Convictions are prisons” (Nietzsche 1990, 184-185).

Further, Nietzsche attacked Christian principles as constituting a slave morality. Slave mentality begins in negation and resentment of the heroic or impersonal virtues such as excellence, achievement, and power and instead regards these as evil and sinful. Nietzsche railed against Christian morality because in his view, it calls for humans to weaken themselves and makes it virtually impossible to be a truly autonomous individual (Oaklander 1992, 104-105). He labeled it as, “hatred of mind, of pride, courage, freedom, libertinage of mind is Christian…” (Nietzsche 1990,143).6

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6 Although Nietzsche railed against the Christian religion, he admired the historical figure of Jesus saying, he lived as he taught, endured his suffering, and still loved those who did him evil. He observed
Thus, Nietzsche totally rejected the Christian worldview and the idea of any fundamental universal moral principle, and declared that for an individual to simply live by what society has deemed moral or ethical was to avoid making the necessary hard choices. His idea was that the basis of existence is totally subjective and centered on the individual. He challenged that if we throw out the “thou shalt not” we have only ourselves to rely on, and each individual must decide for himself, what is good and evil, true and beautiful, calling it the “transvaluation of values” (Livingston 2006, 401). He advocated, “The noble type of person feels that he determines value, he does not need anyone’s approval,” he judges that “what is harmful to me is harmful in itself,” and he knows that he is the one who gives honor to things in the first place, “he creates values.” He honors everything he sees in himself: this sort of morality is self-glorifying (Nietzsche 2011, 154).

Nietzsche claimed to be an immoralist but not in the sense of having no morals. Rather, as he says, “That one has the will to assume responsibility for oneself” (Oaklander 1992, 112-113). Gregory calls Nietzsche’s alternative morality a hyper-Hobbesian valorization of the passions that despised the weak and loathed Christian compassion for the downtrodden. Further, as Gregory points out, Nietzsche despised the moral—philosophical residue of Christianity in Kantian ethics and Lockean liberalism, since he rightly saw that the belief in natural rights that sustained modern rationalistic ethics had been formed in and was dependent upon Christianity (Gregory 2016, 229).
Indeed, Nietzsche outlines the penultimate in individual freedom but it is dangerous territory for a civilized society as Nietzsche casts aside the second part of Kant’s categorical imperative not to impinge on the freedom of others and advocates different levels of morality based on the strength of the person and their rank in society. This form of individualism could be called moral relativism wherein, “The only reality that exists for an existing individual is his own ethical reality” (Oaklander 1988, 27-28); which implies the ethical is not the universal, but the ethical is the individual who asserts himself as being more important than the universal. Or in other words, no one has the right to tell me what to do or how to live, the ultimate in subjectivizing morality.

In one sense, Nietzsche echoed the mythic individualism, or rugged individualism and self-reliance that Americans have always idealized. For instance, the cowboy is the embodiment of the mythic American hero, the self-reliant loner, who steps in to save the society into which, he can never himself fit. He is valuable to society because he is a completely autonomous, self-reliant individual who stands outside society, not needing others, exhibiting a kind of heroic selflessness (Bellah 2008, 145-146).

Self-reliance is a 19th century term popularized by Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay of the same title, and it aptly describes this mythic individualism:

He who knows that power is in the soul, that he is weak only because he has looked for good out of him and elsewhere, and so perceiving, throws himself unhesitatingly on his thought, instantly rights himself, stands in the erect position, commands his limbs, works miracles; just as a man who stands on his feet is stronger than a man who stands on his head. (Emerson 1908, 58)

This and many other memes of Nietzschean philosophy persist in our modern culture, despite the troubled personal history of the man himself, most notably currently is Kelly
Clarkson’s 2011 song *Stronger*, with the refrain, “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger…,” which is also from Nietzsche’s *Twilight of the Idols* (Nietzsche 1990, 33).

In sum, his was a philosophy focused on the virtue of the character, not morality based on religion; his rationale being since we have lost our childlike dependency on God, we are now free to find the courage to become ourselves, and to become gods in ourselves. Resonating with Feuerbach’s views regarding man alienating himself from himself by projecting all his good qualities onto God, Nietzsche urged man to become the focus of himself and accept reality *as it is*. He sought to redirect people's attention to their inherent freedom in this world *as it is*, rather than an afterlife in heaven.

Nietzsche was a profound individualist, seeing only the subjective individual as determining values and morality, while casting aside Christianity; perhaps bringing the meme engendered by Christian thought full circle, and suggesting that individualism had evolved sufficiently far that it no longer needed Christianity as an environmental factor in its future development. Many see the death of God as the crisis of modernity, in which we have lost that matrix and our foundations for truth and value (Lavine 1989, 325). Indeed, science and religion now live in almost totally incommensurable realms.7

The existentialists that followed Nietzsche were also dominated by atheists, supremely individualistic, but cleaved from the faith that Kierkegaard found so necessary. Most notable in the modern era was Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980), who reversed Descartes’ formulation of “I think, therefore I am” to stress that existence is first. As

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7 A survey of scientists who are members of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press in 2009, finds that members of this group are, on the whole, much less religious than the general public. The survey found scientists are roughly half as likely as the general public to believe in God. By contrast, 95% of Americans believe in some form of deity or higher power, according to a 2006 survey of the general public (pewforum.org).
Sartre said in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, “If however, existence truly does precede essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is to make every man conscious of what he is, and to make him solely responsible for his own existence” (Sartre 2007, 23).

Sartre made individual agency the primary frame of reference, and stressed that the individual has not only the right of choice, but the duty to choose to define oneself. He was absolute in his belief in free will and man’s ability to use it as he stated:

…there is no determinism – man is free, man is freedom. If, however, God does not exist we will encounter no value or orders that can legitimize our conduct. Thus, we have neither behind us, nor before us, in the luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. We are left alone and without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. (Sartre 2007, 29)

Sartre’s image recalls Pico’s self-made man, albeit bereft of a heavenly anchor and the divine ladder. This man does not strive to become like the angels, but only to become his own authentic self, and that is the source of his individual dignity.

Like his slightly older contemporary Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Sartre stressed the authentic individualism Kierkegaard had so valued. In fact, Jerrold Seigel considers Heidegger the most influential figure in contemporary thinking about selfhood precisely because the goal in his book *Being and Time* (1927) was to displace the human subject from the primary position it had occupied in philosophy. Unlike the French existentialists, Heidegger was not a Cartesian dualist. He sought to undermine the dualistic and mechanistic approach to the world and to the self that Descartes had embedded into Western thinking, as well as the solipsistic and self-enclosed illusion of self he thought it fostered (Solomon 1988, 153).
Heidegger sought to replace it with a temporal and fluid understanding of the self rather than the Cartesian cogitio, which depicted the “I” as a self-positing subject, detached and independent from the world around it (Seigel 2005, 568). He argued a human being is structured by temporality, or the possibility for being, which he called Dasein (Heidegger 1962, 27).

In this sense, Heidegger presaged Charles Taylor’s radical reflexivity, which is the adoption of a first-person standpoint and recognition of the difference in the way I experience my activity, thoughts and feelings and the way everyone else does. It recognizes the world I know is a result of my being aware of my awareness, and this brings a kind of presence to oneself, which is inseparable from one’s being the agent of experience. It is not surprising then that Heidegger was also an influence on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who, as pointed out in Chapter 2, was an early proponent of embodiment theory.

Sartre and his life companion Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), and their friend Albert Camus (1913-1960), were all very popular and well-read in America. Beauvoir wrote The Second Sex in 1949, which became a foundational tract for modern feminism. She argued for women’s equality, while maintaining the reality of the sexual difference, attacking the idea of using sexual difference as an argument for women’s subordination. These are memes which are still evolving and gaining traction. Heidegger on the other hand, became quite controversial due to his affiliation with the Nazis, and outside philosophical circles his idea of Dasein is little known.

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8 Note the current #MeToo or #TimesUp memes which utilize social media to call out individuals guilty of sexual misconduct and sexual harassment, which is still rampant in the workplace in 2018, seventy years after Beauvoir wrote.
Sartre, like Nietzsche, does not see the objective moral facts of Kant or Dante, but only a multitude of values and demands that are before us. As Solomon points out, despite his different starting point Sartre insisted on the importance of individual freedom, and the recognition that it is good intentions, rather than results, that determine moral worth (Solomon 1988, 189). In this regard, he echoed Abelard and Heloise who introduced the intentional-self meme 800 years earlier.

While Christianity helped nurture the evolution of individualism into the modern era, it was an increasingly secular society that took it to an extreme. Emile Durkheim (1858 –1917), was a pioneer in early sociology and had a lifelong concern and intellectual interest in the relationship of the individual and society. He saw the evolutionary change in the nature of individualism that was brought on by increasing mechanization and the division of labor in society, other key environmental drivers in the modern era. Durkheim distinguished between two forms of individualism; the first associated with ‘crass commercialism’ which reduces society to nothing more than market exchanges, and the second associated with the moral philosophy of Kant, as discussed earlier and the political doctrines of Rousseau, which became embodied in the declaration of the Rights of Man (Morris 1996, 252).

In his book *The Division of Labor In Society*, Durkheim pointed to the growing focus on individualism versus the collective saying, “As all the other beliefs and practices assume less and less religious a character, the individual becomes the object of a sort of religion.⁹ We carry on the worship of the dignity of the human person, which, like all

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⁹ The idea of the division of labor and the distribution of occupations in society had been interpreted by Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century as flowing directly from the divine plan for the world and this was reinforced by Luther who saw it as a religious duty for the individual to persevere in the work assigned to him by God (Weber 1992, 145).
strong acts of worship, has already acquired its superstitions” (Durkheim 2014, 134).
Durkheim saw it as “the cult of the individual,” and as the replacement to the traditional
religions, which he felt were rapidly becoming outmoded in the modern world, thus
making individualism the core value of modern society (Marske 1987, 3). Durkheim
argued that this religion of humanity, of which the individualistic ethic is the rational
expression, is the only option for the modern era.

There can be little doubt that capitalism played a pivotal role in the modern
acceleration of individualism. As Fromm said it, “What Protestantism had started to do
in freeing man spiritually, capitalism continued to do mentally, socially, and politically”
(Fromm 1969, 106). What Max Weber (1864-1920) called the “spirit of capitalism”
also has its roots in Christianity, namely the Puritan asceticism of a “calling” and the
need to pursue activity to avoid sloth and relaxation, which could be hazardous to
maintaining a state of grace. To waste time was the worst of all sins, since life is short
and time is precious in ensuring one’s election as one of the saved (Weber 1978, 141).
So, where Dante and Luther saw salvation as the real business of life, now the economic
success of the individual became the real business of life.

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10 As Max Weber points out however, the impulse for the acquisition and pursuit of gain has been
common in most cultures and areas; and a capitalistic economic system, which rests on the expectation of
profit by the utilization of peaceful opportunities of exchange, is much older than the Protestant
reformation. He attributes the beginnings of Western capitalism in part to the rational organization of
apprenticeship in the handicrafts, such as that of the Middle Ages and points out capitalism flourished in
14th and 15th century Florence, albeit it was often considered ethically questionable by the Church as the sin
MODERN INDIVIDUALISM

Liberal democracies embody a constant tension between respecting the infinite dignity of each individual man and woman and preserving the society and a way of life as a whole. While Christianity established the principle of the universality of human dignity established on a divinely ordered cosmos, increasingly secularism has now put the burden of maintaining this principle of human equality strictly into the realm of government and politics (Fukuyama 1999, 279). Modern individualism has accelerated that trend as individuals acquired more rights and autonomy at an increasing pace. As Yuval Levin framed it in his essay Taking the Long Way:

The liberty we can truly recognize as liberty is achieved by the emancipation of the individual not just from coercion by others but also from the tyranny of his unrestrained desire … This older idea of liberty requires not only that people be free to choose but also that they be able to choose well. This liberty arises when we want to do more or less what we ought to do, so that the moral law, the civil law, and our own will are largely in alignment, and choice and obligation point in the same direction. (Levin 2014, www.firstthings.com)

There is however, no longer any one single grand narrative that describes our culture, or our people, or what Kant’s ought is; pluralism prevails. More than ever, there is not one reality but many different, often conflicting realities. Individuals can stay cocooned within their own personal worldview, watching news that fits their biases and beliefs, and belonging to social groups on-line that conform to their own values and lifestyles. Social fragmentation, enabled by social media and on-line networking, is increasingly causing individuals to become separate islands. We have come full circle, the individualism engendered by the Christian worldview has gone to an extreme and produced the opposite: anxiety, loneliness and alienation.
As a result, individualism, the bedrock of modern societies, as Fukuyama puts it, has begun to shade over from the proud self-sufficiency of a free people into a kind of closed selfishness, where maximizing personal freedom without regard for responsibilities to others becomes an end in itself (Fukuyama 2000, 48). Durkheim termed it “anomie” or normlessness due to the unrestricted play of individual or collective self-interest, working against the common good.\(^{11}\) He cautioned that our modern industrial society needs norms and sentiments that can be shared by everyone, not just by those in certain occupational or other specific groups (Durkheim 2014, 10). Fukuyama called this loss of norms the “Great Disruption” but he surmised in 1999 that it was beginning to wane and some of the cultural norms that had been swept away during the period during the 1960’s and 1970’s would be restored (Fukuyama 2000, 48). In retrospect, it seems he underestimated the power of excessive individualism.

The French philosopher and sociologist Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998) envisioned this emerging phenomenon in 1979, with the publication of *The Postmodern Condition*, wherein the term “postmodernism” first entered the philosophical lexicon. As early as 1974, Lyotard predicted that knowledge that cannot be translated into digital knowledge (bits and bytes) would not survive; and information will no longer depend on individuals, but on computers and information which can be bought and sold. Indeed,

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\(^{11}\) The notion of the common good has been a longstanding consistent theme in Western political philosophy, beginning with the Classical Greeks and Romans, and highlighted in Machiavelli’s *The Prince* during the Italian Renaissance and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *The Social Contract*, as well as John Locke’s works. The concept was most clearly developed in the political theory of republicanism, which contends that the common good is something that can only be achieved through political means and the collective action of citizens participating in their own self-government. It played an important role in the defense the U.S. Constitution in the *Federalist Papers*. It is mentioned herein as a contrast to hyper-individualism but deserves its own treatment, analogous to this treatment of individualism.
now we even speak of one’s identity being stolen and sold on line; and while it is not one’s conscious inner self, it is the exterior identity that we use to navigate in the world.

Further, Lyotard postulated that this would lead to an incredulity of meta-narratives or grand narratives which are comprehensive, large-scale theories and philosophies of the world, such as historical progress, the supremacy of science, and the possibility of absolute freedom. Lyotard argued that we no longer subscribe to these grand narratives because they no longer adequately characterize our diversity of aspirations, beliefs and perceived identities. Hence, postmodernity is characterized by an abundance of micronarratives or little narratives as he called them (Lyotard 1988, 60).

Are all these micro narratives makings us the “lost individuals” American social philosopher John Dewey wrote about in the 1930’s? Dewey, who was writing about our material and business culture, saw the lost individual as caught up in a vast complex of associations with no harmonious or coherent reflection of these connections on one’s outlook of life (Dewey 1999, 35, 41). The result is that in a society where individuals arguably enjoy more freedom of choice than at any other time in history, individuals resent the few remaining ligatures that bind them, yet feel isolated and unable to connect to real communities.

**AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM**

The concluding focus, as noted in the introduction, will be on modern American individualism and several effects that have become prevalent in society. The relative affluence of post-war America combined with the counter culture movement of the

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12 Though none of the meme developers discussed in previous chapters were American, they were all part of the Western Christian worldview which American has inherited and incorporated into its foundation, and arguably exemplifies today the most dominant and successful example in the Western tradition. It is certainly the most influential and pervasive in individual and societal meme development.
1960’s resulted in what Tom Wolfe termed in 1976 the “Me Culture” or the Third Great Awakening in America. He called it “the greatest age of individualism in American history” (Wolfe 1976, nymag.com). It was a far cry however, from the individualism Locke or Luther had in mind. Remember Alexis de Tocqueville’s caution that individualism is based on misguided judgment rather than depraved feelings. He warned correctly, it is due more to inadequate understanding than to perversity of heart; it is of democratic origin and threatens to grow as conditions get more equal (Tocqueville 2006, 507). As Bellah wrote:

We strongly assert the value of our self-reliance and autonomy. We deeply feel the emptiness of a life without sustaining social commitments. Yet we are hesitant to articulate our sense that we need one another as much as we need to stand alone, for fear that if we did we would lose our independence altogether. (Bellah 2008, 151)

This extreme individualism has engendered a subversive form of identity politics in our contemporary society, that some argue has devolved into tribalism. The harmony between the flourishing of the individual and the societal obligation to the good of others or the common good is in jeopardy. When Martin Luther King fought for civil rights he appealed to universal principles of our common humanity and Christian morality. As David Brooks points out however, we have gone from “an identity politics that emphasized our common humanity, … to an identity politics that emphasizes having a common enemy” (Brooks 2018, A15).

Bellah and his associates wrote in 1985 just as the power of the internet was emerging. Now, over 30 years later, we use social media instead of social commitments. Americans in particular, as Bellah points out, have a predilection for finding our true selves independent of any cultural or social influence, being responsible to that self alone,
and making its fulfilment the very meaning of our lives. Yet, we spend inordinate amounts of time navigating immense bureaucracies – manipulating and being manipulated by others – or what can be described as “bureaucratic individualism” (Bellah 2008, 150). Admittedly, since he wrote we have become the passive victims of relentless mass communications and the dangers of cyberspace. The internet has made it easier for extreme individualistic “Me” focused views to be voiced without having to endure the disapproving glance of society. Niall Ferguson characterized it by saying, “cyberspace has mutated into a nightmare realm of ideological polarization, extreme views, and fake news” (Ferguson 2018, C1). Indeed, much as the printing press was pivotal to making Luther’s meme successful and spreading the Reformation rapidly in the 16th century, the internet has allowed a multiplicity of memes to spawn and replicate, including many extreme ones that might have died out with the benefit of societal norms as moderating influences, and they have spread like viruses exploiting our vulnerable weak spots with pernicious effects.

As Levin emphasizes, the internet has evolved in our time to advance and profit off this increasing fragmentation and isolation. The Web is almost endlessly malleable, tailorable, and individualistic; supporting our previously chosen channels of information and reinforcing those with few mediating structures (Levin 2016, 151). This phenomenon feeds the cult of the individual while undermining the common experience upon which our social order and worldviews are based. Modern technology has allowed our culture and worldview to fragment into a set of subcultures and micro-views, each tailored to individuals. Greg Lukianoff, the president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education has coined the term “unlearning liberty” to express the situation in
the American higher education system. A survey showed that 58 percent of students said colleges should “forbid” speakers “who have a history of engaging in hate speech,” with hate speech defined as “anything one particular person believes is harmful, racist, or bigoted” (French 2018, nationalreview.com). Thus, a single individual can trump the ability of others to hear any alternate points of view.

The question remains, has the pendulum swung too far past the midpoint in the privileging of the individual above all and ignoring other fundamental values? As Bronowski said, society holds together by the respect man gives to man (Bronowski 1972, 44), whether it is based on a metaphysical cosmic order, or on shared egalitarianism and mutual regard for the dignity of the other. Ironically, in an ever more congested world, we value the individual more and more, perhaps to an extreme, at the expense of our mutual ties and common worldview. The narcissism of the “Me” generation has mutated an extreme meme. Hyper-individualism demands that truth claims can be anything one wants. Can the social organization adapt to this or resist this runaway individualism?

There is no doubt the social contract tradition evolved just as individualism has evolved. As Pinker points out, complex adaptations, including behavioral strategies evolved to benefit the individual, put pressure on the social organization models (Pinker 2016, 285). The character structure of the individual and the socio-economic structure of the society of which he or she is a part are interdependent. The socioeconomic structure

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13 In Freud’s terminology, the development of the individual can be defined as the evolution from absolute narcissism to a capacity for objective reasoning and object love. The normal or mature person is one whose narcissism has been reduced to the social accepted minimum without ever disappearing completely (Fromm 1964, 64).
of a society is meant to mold the social character of its members so that they wish to do what they have to do, as Fromm puts it (Fromm 2016, 115).

That interdependence is being challenged in contemporary America. When students want to carve out what pieces of history or philosophy they want to hear because some truths may be “triggers” they are asking the rest of society to conform to their subjective view of reality rather than asking society to respect everyone’s right to have their own subjective reality, but still conform to society as a whole. The Kantian ought incumbent upon the individual has given way to the individual who demands society conform to their demands. Sigmund Freud pointed out the issue in 1930 with his book Civilization and Its Discontents, wherein he stated:

A good part of the struggles of mankind centre around the single task of finding an expedient accommodation – one, that is, that will bring happiness – between this claim of the individual and the cultural claims of the group; and one of the problems that touches the fate of humanity is whether such an accommodation can be reached by means of some particular form of civilization or whether this conflict is irreconcilable. (Freud 1961, 50)

While Bellah pointed out the risk to American public life over 30 years ago in his Habits of the Heart, as Taylor says, he “writes as though there were not really an independent problem of the loss of meaning in our culture … of a disenchanted universe.” Taylor also points out that the primacy of self-fulfillment in our culture and a philosophy of “self-resonance” foster the self-fulfillment and lifestyle clusters that feed excessive individualism (Taylor 1989, 508). This implies secularism drove the meme to an extreme though we see many examples of excessive individualism in religious environs as well.
In parallel with the self-help and self-discovery movements of the 1960’s and 1970’s that Wolfe wrote about, there was a corresponding change in the religious character of the United States. Membership in mainline Protestant churches (Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopalian and Presbyterian) peaked in the late 1960’s and then sharply declined, as did Catholicism; evangelical Christianity supplanted some, but not all, of those congregations (Levin 2016, 66). This decentralized, evangelical Christianity is far more personalized and individualistic and focused on prosperity gospels or a do-it-yourself, what-can-Jesus-do-for-me, type of spirituality that is thriving today, and wielding considerable political influence as well. It is another example of Christianity fostering an individualism meme but in this case with an American capitalistic bent. David Brooks calls it the “Big Me” culture, noting a broad shift from a Christian culture of humility that encouraged people to think humbly of themselves, to one that encouraged people to see themselves as the center of the universe (Brooks 2015, 6).

Kant, who viewed morality as Christianity’s key attribute, put the transcendent aspects as secondary to the moral ones. He deemed religious orthodoxy as “fetish making,” bordering on idolatry, yet have we now put prosperity ahead of morality and transcendence? Like Nietzsche, Kant felt the Jesus of history deserved profound respect and, he interpreted the “religion of Christ” separately from the “Christian religion,” emphasizing the former’s thoroughly moral terms. He also disdained the notion that atonement can be rendered on our behalf and all we have to do is accept this sacrifice and our guilt is completely annihilated without the least pain; as he said, “No thoughtful person can bring himself to believe this…” (Kant 2008, 107). For him, conversion must
be a true inner moral turn-around of the individual, not simply the acquisition of grace or faith. Somehow this is lost in today’s “fast food” religion.

So, did the rise in secularism drive individualism into a cancerous mutation? To echo Kant, it is not the religion itself as much as the common cultural core and moral order – in short, the Christian worldview and shared values that shaped the liberal West. Brooks again put it well stating:

…the liberal democratic moral order stands for the idea that souls are formed in freedom and not in servility, in expansiveness, not stagnation. It stands for the idea that our covenantal institutions – like family, faith, tradition and community – orient us toward higher loves and common dreams that we then pursue in the great gymnasium of liberty. (Brooks 2018, A23)

The question becomes how do we realize Kant’s ideal of treating the human individual as an absolute value in and of themselves and simultaneously embrace his duty to society without a metaphysical underpinning?

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis has demonstrated the indubitable influence of Christianity on the long evolution of individualism in the West. It has also shown that paradoxically, as religiosity has decreased in the West, hyper-individualism has accelerated. As Seigel reminded us, the Christian worldview was premised on the belief that the world, and the self, is structured so as to fulfill intelligible moral ends. The modern self is devoted to its own “radical remaking” and finding its dignity and independence in the absence of any reliance on a cosmic order or source of values outside itself (Seigel 2005, 51, 92). Modern science contributes to this, as it finds no teleological meaning in the universe, leading to a rootlessness that has turned the individual focus upon itself.
Our modern metanarrative tells a story of constant progress through the rise of science, the secularization of society and the steady empowerment of the individual through democratic rights and liberties. And arguably it has produced one of the most classical liberal democratic societies in history with regard to the freedom of the individual. It validates the Western perspective that American anthropologist Clifford Geertz commented on when he wrote:

> The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes, and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible, it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world’s cultures (Bernstein 1988, 96).

Yet there is a danger in losing that generalized Christian worldview, which prioritized a common moral language based on *agape* love. David French framed it well recently in *The National Review* saying, “In short, America is in the process of replacing a general worldview that prioritized love, hope, and truth with an individualized moral buffet that prioritizes personal satisfaction. We’re giving man back to his human nature – a nature beset by original sin and prone to tribalism” (French 2017, nationalreview.com). Or as Darwin’s contemporary Thomas Henry Huxley observed, survival of the fittest is not necessarily is not necessarily survival of the ethically best (Hofstadter 1992, 139).

The anthropological argument would indicate the reality of human nature is such that it transcends periods, classes, circumstances, place and individuals – while simultaneously always and only existing in individuals. The objectivist notion is that human nature does not essentially change (however much customs and religions may vary), as evidenced by the enduring realities of human life that we recognize in the
continuing relevance of epic poetry, great literature and timeless myths from Homer to Plato to Shakespeare. Some call this the common mind or common sense (Gushurst-Moore 2013, 8-9). But in a post-modern world of disintegration, with no central meta-narrative, the common mind has given way to countless lifestyle and political correctness memes emphasizing the prioritization of the individual. As Gregory points out, in the absence of shared answers to the big Life Questions (as he calls them), there is a hyperpluralism of divergent secular and religious truth claims in the contemporary West. The hegemonic cultural glue comes from all-pervasive capitalism and consumerism. He asserts that Modernity is failing because of this, since there is no substantive common good in the absence of the Christian worldview. Many share his concern but not his pessimistic outlook.

The strength of the Christian worldview was in its philosophical core. It is fundamentally different than its two companion Abrahamic religious beliefs, Islam and Judaism, in that it is not founded on a set of laws that form the basis of worship, but on individual belief and faith. William Barrett disagrees on the notion of a philosophical Christianity, saying Christian faith falls outside of philosophy, and noting that the advent of this faith marked a revolutionary break with the pagan world (Barrett 1987, 123).

Fundamentally, the larger issue returns to the difference in worldviews as discussed in Chapter One. Christianity has a moral core that is fundamentally different and espouses a personalist worldview based on the value and dignity of every individual soul or self, that one can appreciate even without believing in the divinity of Christ. The

14 Indeed, Google ngrams, which measures word usage across media sources, has found a sharp rise in the usage of individualist words in the last few decades such as “self” and “personalized” and a corresponding decline in words like “character” and “conscience” and “virtue.” The very Christian words “humbleness” and “kindness” are reportedly down 52% and 56% respectively, indicating a real shift in our moral lexicon (Brooks 2015, 258).
fundamental memes it engendered still endure. At the same time, our society has gravitated to a more secular viewpoint, secular which properly understood ought to mean a principle that there is no single ideology, or single religious view endorsed by society or government, all are respected.

In reality, both the secular and the religious viewpoints have moved to extremes engendering the “culture wars” we have seen in the last several decades. Neither side has been able to come up with neutral language that affirms the dignity of man (which was fundamental to the Christian worldview and the evolution of individualism in the first place) that is not dependent on a divinity, yet simultaneously does not exclude the possibility of a divine being or God. Secular humanists extol the dignity of man based on reason alone, which denies the possibility of a deity. Fundamentalist Christians however, see reason as part of God’s plan to set man above the other creatures of the world and deny any dignity of man outside of his divine creation. Many view the Christian religion as the only “right” religion and thus are not open to other views which are held in tandem with their own.

The metaphors the Judeo-Christian culture used to explain metaphysical reality are often at odds with science and nature, even though evolution itself is a transcendent process that transforms nature. This impasse at times seems irresolvable as two incommensurable worldviews clash again. We cannot forget our long legacy through the roots of the Christian worldview. Indeed, the subjects covered in this thesis have spanned some 1300 years and in that time line we have seen a steady progression in the evolution of individualism with an increasing emphasis on inwardness, intentionality, responsibility, subjectivity and autonomy, culminating in the modern notion of individual
rights. All of these were inextricably tied to a Christian outlook, either explicitly as in the case of Augustine and Luther or intrinsically, as with Montaigne and Locke. At the same time, we cannot deny the success of secular government and of modern science.

The fundamental value claims that premised this thesis, as outlined in Chapter One, were freedom and responsibility. We are still challenged to explain personhood in neutral terms that affirm these values and the absolute dignity of humans that satisfies both the secular, or naturalistic understanding of the universe, and the religious worldview. The extreme secular or impersonalist view sees no meaning and little freedom in a deterministic universe. The religious view sees meaning only through accepting the convictions of the Christian story of redemption through Jesus Christ. The recently deceased physicist Stephen Hawking once said, “My goal is simple. It is a complete understanding of the universe, why it is as it is and why it exists at all” (nytimes.com, 3/14/18). This seems wildly presumptuous, whether asserting one can know why God created a universe with morally deficient humans, or what precipitated the Big Bang and what came before that. Many questions are simply beyond the ken of the ability man to know now or perhaps ever.

The larger unanswered questions are how to balance the rights of the individual that we have spent the better part of two millennia building up with the responsibility to maintain a cohesive, open and balanced society.

Moreover, how do we affirm the dignity of humans outside a metaphysical framework, and respect their freedom, confirm their responsibility, while accepting the mystery of the unknown and the unknowable?

These Big Life questions are at the heart of our modern culture.
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