

Individuality: The Meaning and Content of Individuality in Contemporary America

Henry Murray

1958

A year ago, in line with an ancient tactic, I planted “ individuality ” in the soil of the subconscious, trustful that after several months of incubation nature would supply me with abundant produce. But on finally returning to this plot of earth, I found, to my dismay, no vegetation that would bring a penny in the public market. Strange, because individuality — the myth, the concept, and the word itself —has been, for many cycles of thought and talk, a generating symbol compact with drawing power.

The prospect of arriving at the date line empty-handed gave rise to a discomfort bordering on panic, and instead of persisting in my faith that the ground would render up the wanted stuff, I turned to friends. In doing so I demonstrated, as I see now, that in a crisis other-directedness can prevail even against a veteran resistance. At the moment of decision I was reminded that nowadays, if not always, everybody repeats with bantering minor variations what everybody repeats with bantering minor variations. Why be so proud as to refuse to join? Why not partake of this communion?

What I did was to transcribe and edit an evening’s conversation which I instigated and unintrusively attended to:

between three old friends, Dy, Mo, and Si,

Mo. Hasn’t David Riesman said already or won’t he say next month everything that is worth saying about individuality? Can we bring this drowned value back to life with a pulmotor of vocal air no matter how inspired? The day of individuality is done. I was a pallbearer at the funeral.

Dy. It isn’t like you — staunch advocate of the indomitable will of man — to admit defeat. According to my core of values, it is ill-bred to stop fighting when you see that your cause is going under.

Mo. You can’t strike your axe against the roots of a whole people. Accepting the obligatory is prophylaxis against the inroads of misanthropy.

Si. Are you two assuming that you know a *real* individual when you see one and would agree in all of your pickings? Highly improbable. I have studied personalities for years in great detail and in each case found uniqueness; but I have never had occasion to cry “ Eureka! *Here* is individuality.” It is all a matter of degree and emphasis. As Kluckhohn put it: Every man is in certain respects like all other men, in certain respects like some other men, and in certain respects like no other man. Since the truth of this statement is self-evident, we must agree that everybody has some measure of uniqueness, distinctiveness, individuality. The question is, how common in our country today, compared with yesterday, are those who are unique to a significant degree in several significant respects? But the rub is that the respects which are significant to P may not be significant to D. There are so many ways in which a man may differ from the general run! He may be queerly featured, wear queer clothes, or have a queer speech or accent —be born with a harelip and a cleft palate. Or, he may be out of the ordinary in his tastes and hobbies — smoke nothing but Mexican cheroots and collect only pewter soup tureens. Or, he may cleave to very odd convictions — affirm that the world can be improved only by S-R conditionings of young children, having them taught to be nice with electric shocks in place of Hell and cheese in place of the

milk and honeydew of Paradise. Or, a man may be unique in latching on to a peculiar anatomy of values or in feeling differently than others do when face to face with the totality of things. I could go on and on in this vein, but you already see my point. The issue is, what are the most relevant criteria and standards of individuality?

Mo. We can't waste time with surfaces and shows of individuality. There is only too much of those around. We must look for something deep, solid, and unobstrusive — the real McCoy. And that, I say, is gone.

Si. So *you* say. But first tell me whether you insist that individuality be taken as a good thing and that we must therefore disregard uniqueness among criminals, delinquents, neurotics, and psychotics? I have a cabinet full of case histories of unusual deviants and abnormal. The topic of the coming seminar, however, suggests that individuality is an acknowledged value, a value we are losing or in danger of losing. As you know, according to evolutionary theorists numberless variations, perhaps the majority of variations, are deleterious to the organism, the society, or the species in which they first appear. We see this on all sides. In an average community of honest, intelligent, and friendly citizens, say, it will be the most dishonest, stupid, and unfriendly person who will vary most. Here will be your individual par excellence if degree of variation is your yardstick. The other day when I asked a superbly conventional old friend of mine to name twelve persons with decided individuality, everyone he mentioned was characterized by defects rather than by virtues. It seems that individuality in the opinion of a representative member of our culture consists of such traits as egotism, selfishness, eccentricity, exhibitionism, irrationality, irresponsibility, and downright cussedness, all adding up to a high nuisance quotient. What do you two mean by individuality?

Dy. I suggest that we exclude lower order variations from our definition of individuality. These appear to be increasing steadily.

Mo. And I suggest that we suspend the rule that discussants should define their terms. It is not possible to catch the crux of individuality, you must agree, in an agreeable net of words. But we have none the less been urged to talk about it, and since it is pleasanter to talk than to remain mute, we might as well come out with what comes up. Here is one version. An individual is self-substantial, a man who builds on his own genes for better or for worse, a man who would hate to be anybody but himself, a man who likes the flesh that sticks to his own ribs, a man who shows his natural face and does not care too much how others like it. An individual consults himself, waits for the inner lift or fall of feeling, the daemon's voice, the touch of ages, the dependable intimation, the vital omen, and consults others only at the end of his own wits. He is apt to find that an idea ceases to be interesting as soon as it is generally accepted. He is a man who expands with joy in the heart of an enchanted isolation. He is a hive of surprising thoughts and judgments; it is not easy to predict what he will say. He cuts through a lot of chatter and gets down to fundamentals quickly. And when it comes to the last ditch, he may, thinking of William Lloyd Garrison, proclaim, "I will be heard," or say "No in thunder," as Herman Melville put it. By the way, have you got the works of Thoreau in this library of yours?

(At this point I led Mo to my Thoreau shelf and then rejoined the others while he looked for some passage he but half recalled.)

Dy. No in thunder. Sounds a little childish. In some infants “ No ” is the first understandable word to be pronounced. Negativism is social suggestibility in reverse.

Si. Which reminds me, *Dy.* Several studies have shown that college men of our day are much more inclined to say “Yes” than to say “No” to statements on a questionnaire, regardless of the content of the statements. And as a result of this great predominance of yea-sayers, many positive correlations among variables have been reported which, it now appears, do not indicate the relationships they first appeared to indicate. The determining factor is yea- saying or nay-saying. Now, according to recent results obtained by Couch and Keniston, the small minority of consistent naysayers are men of moderation, men who cannot subscribe to any extravagant or enthusiastic statement. Not one of them says No in thunder.

Mo. Excuse me, I didn’t hear what you said. But let me interrupt a moment to read a couple of quotations from Thoreau which express, as in a parable, the essence of individuality as I envisage it. Listen to this: “ The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behavior. What daemon possessed me that I behaved so well?” Thus speaks the author of Gandhi’s special inspiration, *Civil Disobedience*. The next one is even better: “ In proportion as our inward life fails, we go more constantly and desperately to the post-office. You may depend on it, that poor fellow who walks away with the greatest number of letters, proud of his extensive correspondence, has not heard from himself this long while.”

Si. Good enough. But we’ve been asked to talk about the individuality of our own time, to say whether we think it has been going up or going down these last decades.

Mo. Going, going, gone. That’s my point. There are no Thoreaus today. No one enjoys hearing from himself in solitude.

Si. Come now, *Mo.* You admitted that there is no generally agreeable definition of individuality, and so, since we don’t know what it is exactly, we can’t measure its decline or be sure of its decease. Conceivably we might examine samples of the population of the United States and attempt to measure, in a multiplicity of ways, the range or spread of differences in respect to certain selected variables. Then we might compare our findings with the results obtained in 1900 and in 1925 and come to some tentative conclusions about recent trends. But no such estimates exist for 1900 or 1925, and the merit of a procedure of this sort is very dubious. Anyhow, it has not been undertaken in a systematic manner, and, so far as I know, no social scientist is contemplating such a study. In short, it is quite impossible to say anything on this issue that deserves serious attention. Whoever speaks on it must base his opinion on an extremely small sample of impressions, most of them secondhand, and ten to one he will be telling you more about himself — his predilections, the people that he sees, and the books that he has read — than he will about the health of individuality in these United States.

Mo. Oh, that wet blanket of social science, methodology, damping the fires of good talk! Glad I abandoned chemistry. Glad I'm now an architect suckled in a creed outworn. But, then, when you come right down to it, what is more fun than airing one's half-suffocated predilections? I'm game. Aren't you?

Si. Sure. But I would like to know, first of all, why you think individuality is declining in America. What do you think, Dy?

Dy. Declining, because David Riesman says so. The killers of individuality have already been convicted. They have made *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune*. Do you want the textbook inventory? Urbanization, mechanization, structuralization, bureaucratization, departmentalization, specialization, system —

Mo. Skip it. All that is accepted. But dig down a bit, go back to the plain language of Charles Peirce, language that is intolerable to most people of our time. He said what we are too ashamed or too polite to say, namely, that greed is the taproot from which this society gains its huge momentum. Charles Peirce, by the way, was an individualist of the first magnitude. Combined with greed, it seems to me, is the suspicion, despite contrary secret hopes and pious sentences, that there is no higher life in store for us in heaven, and, consequently, all desired upward locomotion must be achieved before death closes the account, some years before, in fact, so as to allow time for the enjoyment of whatever elevation a man has been able to attain. Thus speed is of the essence. The result is hectic greed embracing the machine as the quickest and surest means to a secular beatitude, a villa in Florida, let us say. The objects of greed's craving being imbedded in the earth — fertilities of all kinds, coal, oil, and minerals — this good earth, great Mother of us all, ground of our very being, becomes the target of our importunate and aggressive zeal. We level her forests, despoil her soil of its fecundities, assail her abdomen with our bulldozers, tear her womb apart, and seize with frantic lustful hands her stores and stores of substance, draw off her fluid energies, and then leave, in place of her fair skin, a covering of dust, ashes, slag, and devastation. Finally, in blasphemy, we cancel her incomparable beauty with the most hideous advertisements of her products fashioned to the public taste.

Si. Greed is not limited to Americans. It is as old as the human race. And in this country it is balanced by an extraordinary generosity. But what has all this got to do with individuality?

Mo. I'm coming to that and it's nothing new to you. For everyone can see that in the course of this partnership between machines and men, the two become mutually influential and dependent: Machines produce men in their own image and men produce machines in *their* own image, and pretty soon it is difficult to decide Who's Who in America, who deserves credit for the work and who deserves credit for the thinking in this great web of humanized mechanics and mechanized humanics. Anyhow, a requirement for this speed of greed is frictionless co-operation, co-operation which approaches the perfection of a fine engine. Hence individuality is out of place — sand in the ball bearings — and we get the sapless men whose souls and wives are bought and paid for by the giant corporation, and when the successful pair eventually reaches Florida

or California, it finds another giant mechanism arranged to deal out pleasure with merry-go-rounds of gaudy, barren entertainment. Being too tired and too automatized to find their own ways to joy, the two of them turn for stimulation to these paltry and expensive shows of culture. That's the gist of it.

Si. Personally I think you're way off base, dreaming a dream of a dream of a distemper. Is it the bourbon or have you become inebriated by your own mixed and blended metaphors?

Mo. It's your serious behavioral-science face which instigates my thalamus to hop, skip, and jump this way. But don't be so stodgy as to think that your ponderous jargon can convey the palpable realities any better than my outdated rhetoric. Anyhow didn't you rule that we should air our personal bents and biases?

Si. Sure. It's okay by me. But I think we should discuss how it comes about that the giant corporations find so many docile candidates for automation. How can we explain the susceptibility to regimentation which results in the Organization Man as William Whyte describes him — the sincere tie and the bribed wife? Most of my colleagues believe that the preparation process starts in infancy. Mrs. Snooks is assured that a solitary child is an unpromising child. If he is not encouraged to be sociable he may fail to get along and get ahead. At the worst he may be heading for schizophrenia, or, if not that, alienation and a marginal existence. Kindergarten teachers are of the same mind. They take hold of Sammy Snooks, and, after a season of tears and nay-saying, induce him to participate day after day in peer activity. Everything he does is judged in terms of its effect on the mood and harmony of the All. Pretty soon Sammy will be announcing to his parents that *all* the boys are allowed to do this or that and so he should be allowed to do it too. Few parents have anything that will stand pat when faced by this announcement, false though it may be. Do they want to have their children suffer ostracism because of being different from their playmates? Are they equipped as parents to shoulder the responsibility for that amount of young humiliation? No. And so emancipation occurs much earlier than it did, say, fifty years ago. It occurs before the child has been able to establish a steady character of his own, and what he does with all the others of his age is to form a kind of personality which is responsive to every current of collective feeling, emanating, in most cases, from the more spontaneous, confident, and aggressive members of the gang. Lacking an inner guiding conscience, each becomes fearfully dependent on the All for direction, justification, and security; and when, later on, after school and college, one of the more ambitious ones — possibly just married and in need of cash — goes to some corporation for a job, he has nothing in himself alone which is solid enough to keep him true when he meets the prescribed formulas and rituals. He succumbs step by step, as Marquand has so accurately portrayed for us, and in due course wakes up one morning to the fact that he has reached the point of no return. This, in brief, is the conclusion of the social scientists who go along with Riesman. But, as I see it, the majority are conformists, by definition; and where, pray, are conformists better placed than in giant corporations?

Mo. Si, I believe I can convert you to my opinion. You have already indicated that there are no real individuals today because parents make their babies play with other babies as soon as they can toddle. Growing up in company, at school and after school outside their homes, they remain amorphous — like interpenetrating colloids without membranes —no one knowing exactly where his self begins or ends and other selves leave off or start. No shells are built and so the heat of life becomes dispersed and, in accordance with the Second Law, as I recall, entropy increases; and eventually everyone begins to feel lukewarm and lonely and hurries here and there in quest of warmth through social contacts. But there is no real warmth available, only bright shows of warmth —a hearty greeting, a synthetic smile, and a heartier farewell, with some talk of contacts in the future. Today the strategy of sociability is that of hit and run, a transit of rapid interactions. Differentiation is impossible without privacy, without solitude, without a heat-and- thought-retaining shell. One has to learn to stoke his own furnace, to keep the home fires burning, in cycles of excitement and quiescence, if individuality and creativity are to flourish. Colloidal men are running things today — a lot of good guys talking and laughing with each other, in factories, in lunchrooms, in committee rooms, round the cabinet table — everyone in conference with everyone but himself. These conferences are jolly because everyone has learned the art of reaching pseudoagreements by avoiding basic issues. But all that is distinctive, sensitive, and excellent is leveled down and cheapened, and mediocrity takes over more oppressively than a tyrant, because it's everywhere at once and therefore cannot be attacked and because it operates, as termites do, by gnawing away at one's foundations. I don't except myself. I engage in endless rounds of trivial exchanges. Indeed I relish them and like to see and to be seen, to hear and to be heard, through any medium. I suspect I am already more than half corroded and am very near to being a superfluous, dispensable, and unnecessary duplicate. Most of us prefer large plate glass windows, open doors, and open faces, partly because we are half hollow and have so little in our depths to cherish and keep secret. Please stop me! So much catharsis may be enervating.

Si. Let me speak! I've listened long enough. Mo, you're getting further and further from reality. I wholly disagree with you. Who is blind around here? Don't you see what I see, a tremendous output of really vital variation in this country? like Darwin's formula for evolution: "Multiply, vary, and be strong." Has any state or nation, weighed in these scales, ever equaled the United States of America today? We have an unprecedented rate of reproduction, unprecedented industrial and military strength, and, to my eyes, an unprecedented degree of variation. The never-equalled mixture of peoples in this country assures us of the maximal amount of genetical variation, the greatest differences, one might say, among the potential selves to be evolved and actualized. Also our culture permits a rare degree of freedom of choice in respect to place of residence, marriage, vocation, clothes, mode of speech, and so forth, and our unprecedented level of family economics makes it possible for individuals in great numbers to take advantage of these opportunities. Finally, every American youth is presented

with individuality as an ideal. He is both expected and encouraged to become self-reliant, self-sufficient, independent — to act on his own and take responsibility for the consequences. Thus genes, ideal, and opportunity all are favorable to the development of individual variations.

Mo. May I break in?

Si. If you have to. But it seems to me you have been ticking quite a bit this evening.

Mo. I just felt compelled to say before you went on further that if too much freedom, too much opportunity come too young, children blow off steam in noisy futile ways, and this short-circuits or cuts out the salty inner growth which is the very bone of individuation. Americans run after every opportunity to spend and to be spent; they are eager to go everywhere and see everything; they want to meet and get along with everybody and to know what everybody is doing or about to do. They are as keen to see the worst as they are to see the best — more drawn to the worst, in fact. The result is an hypertrophy of tolerance, loss of the ability to identify the meretricious, and, finally, the movement of all high and low values to a common level. If individuality means anything, it means the discovery of one's own peculiar, rooted preferences, the acceptance of the best of these, and enough aplomb to say: *That* thing, *that* person, *that* book, *that* play, *that* idea — whatever it may be — is not within my pale. Americans are defective in their power to refuse, to refuse the second-rate. They want everything and as much as they can get of it and so come out with thousands of little bits and pieces out of which no coherent picture can be made. Also, as Charles Morris has shown, Americans are not disposed to select for themselves any one of several self-consistent philosophies of life. They want to include in their careers something from every one of them, no matter how disparate. In short, what I am saying here is that numerous opportunities for free choice provided at a very early age, combined with the ideal of independence, encourage superficial exhibitions of individuality and thereby check the evolution of more significant variation. Now I'll shut up.

Si. *Mo.*, your eye is in your mind, and so it fails to catch and hold what's going on around you. I am less introverted, and as I look about these days, my eyes inform me of originality bubbling and brimming over from a thousand springs. It is most evident, of course, in science, technology, and business. In fact, the enormous acceleration of inventiveness presents a problem of the first order: our physical and material environment is being changed so rapidly that our natural capacity for adjustment is already seriously overstrained. If a social philosopher were asked to judge, he would have to say that today there is too much rather than too little creativity.

Mo. Come now, you can't rest your case for individuality on the march of techniques, the triumphs of mass production. Give your awards to the machine, not to human personality. Individuality is the property of a few persons *qua* persons, but not of instruments. The question is: In your trips across the country, do you ever meet people who astonish you? People who give voice to tastes, ideas, beliefs that you have not heard a dozen times, a hundred times, before?

Si. Certainly I do. But now I am pointing to something else, individuality of thought running into science and its applications. Take man's new artificial organs, servomechanical systems, information systems, logical thinking systems, transmission systems, et cetera, et cetera — products of a veritable epidemic of creativeness. The outcome is not a new biological man or a new social man, but a multiplicity of new sociomechanical units, each composed of a small group of specialists in harmony with a delicate and supremely intelligent, handsome instrument. These astonishing emergents are resultants of numerous individual flights of thought, more particularly of the mental processes that produced the science of cybernetics, and these particular mental processes, you can't deny, are part and parcel of a highly distinctive personality. Let us say that we have reached an era when man's formative powers are going into works rather than into self. People seem to feel that each self must be trained and ready to respond from moment to moment, like a servomechanism, to the novel situations that result from all these novel works.

Mo. Si, you are painting a picture that is more appalling than anything I have read in the Apocalypse. You are telling us that the agent of creative evolution is no longer a man of extraordinary worth, but a superb instrument serviced by a team of robots. May the best team win, and may the nation with the best mechanism of best teams win! This time I surrender unconditionally. Not to a band wagon but to a sociomech. I'm going to buy myself a trailer capable of spontaneous locomotion, fill it with a complete complement of artificial organs — everything but heart and sex glands — and then teach my wife to implant purposes, both immediate and ultimate, into the assemblage of organs and see if we, as an emergent unity, cannot go places and see things in Tierra del Fuego. But where is individuality in all this? In the servomechanism with its distinctive final purpose?

Si. Mo, you remind me of Miniver Cheevy, child of scorn, who loved the days of old and sighed for what was not. In your case it is a Walden Pond complex that engenders detestation of every technical invention since the steam engine. Your genes arranged themselves for living in another age. Bad timing, old boy. You were born too late, not made to appreciate the marvels of physical science. But how about the social sciences, psychology and sociology? Do you deny that creativity of a profound and revolutionary sort occurred in the minds of such individuals as Freud and Jung? Would you not admit that their thoughts and writings have radically changed our views of man and of society? I have often heard you use words that signify things which were undreamed of before their day.

Mo. I suppose I must admit all that. But I notice that you went to Europe for your illustrations of profound revolutionary thought. Can you imagine Freud in Pittsburgh or Jung in a suburb of St. Louis? I don't know much more than what I have picked up from you; but the impression I have gained is that the social sciences in America are bent on obliterating the individual. What would you say, Dy?

Dy. I see what you mean. Social science looks for uniformities in order to arrive at laws or general statements, each of which is more or less true or probable. Thus, in the

last analysis it is a matter for statistics to decide. The biggest part an individual can play is to count one, either in confirming or in disconfirming some hypothesis to be tested. A disconfirmist is an annoyance, sometimes a severe frustration, to a behavioral scientist, the success of whose endeavor depends on the discovery of regularity. One might say that an unaccountable disconfirmist is to science what an unmanageable nonconformist is to Mrs. Grundy or to government. Laws in both cases are constructed to apply to all, but only a majority abide by them. The illegal minorities are excluded from science as well as from society. Anyhow, the march of the behavioral sciences in America seems to be away from studies of differentiated individuals and toward the discovery of majority trends, dominant patterns, cultural norms, et cetera, et cetera. Numerous variant patterns are inevitably disregarded, and this means that excellence is disregarded, since this, by definition, is too rare to add up to an impressive figure. Thus quality disappears as quantity takes over. Furthermore, the publication of these findings, with their emphatic expositions of confirmist patterns, results in still more confirmity, because there are always so many people who want to go along with the majority. It is even conceivable that the mere announcement of a fictitious social law would be enough to make it true in a few years. Having never thought of this before, I am reminded of the young girl who said: "How do I know what I think until I have heard what I have said?" Anyhow, the sheer flow of words seems to have brought me to the notion that the social sciences may be one determinant of the decay of individuality.

Si. I see that both of you have missed the point. My contention is that there is more variation and originality, more individuality, than there ever has been in this country, but that many fail to recognize it because it is appearing in new and unfamiliar guises. In the first place, as I said before, it takes the form of creativity, inventiveness, ingenuity, going into works rather than into self. In the second place, it occurs frequently in groups, small congenial groups. For example, not only have scientists learned that cooperation is required for the solution of most problems, but they have come upon a way of thinking fruitfully in company. There is still a great deal of individual, solitary contemplation; yet it might be said that within the last twenty years the group has become the carrier of life, the unit of variation, the spearhead of evolution.

A group can have individuality. In the third place, today uniqueness is not limited to a few outstanding persons; it is more evenly distributed. Instead of a dozen isolated peaks rising from a flat plain of commonplaceness, we see a great number of hills and a few mountains, a thrilling range of heights, something like the Alleghenies. When people recall the American past in this connection they are apt to think of a few rare wonders — Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Whitman — and such tough veterans of selfassertion as John Brown of Osawatimie. But they forget the enormous incubus of conventionality that burdened the contemporaries of these men. Today we may have fewer snow-capped Matterhorns of individuation, but we have a multitude of Snowdons and Mt. Washingtons. Have either of you ever tried to push your way through the magazines and secondary literature of America from the Revolution to World War I? There is not one distinctive taste or scent from start to finish. Style is the acid test. For

it is among writers that one expects to find the clearest symptoms of individuality, men who are free agents by profession, men whose very livelihood depends on originality. And if you say that nineteenth century authors of the second and third order curbed their imaginative powers because they knew that originality would not bring in bread, then my point is proved. In the nineteenth century even appreciators of individuality were scarce as black swans. Today, on the other hand, there are countless books, plays, magazines — even newspapers — in which one finds fresh, animating phrases and novel ways and modes of thought that are as wine to the spirit. Indeed, they come in such abundance that we forget they were not there from the beginning. But now I think I have some data, a few twigs of evidence to support my argument. Excuse me while I get my brief case. I left it with my coat and hat.

Mo. There is one image of individuality which comes to mind quite often. I received it from Samuel Butler, an individual in his own right: “Life is like playing a solo in public and making up the music as you go along.”

Dy. Yes, I like that one. Three or four centuries before Butler a man did not have to piece together his own music. He was content, yes, proud, to play as one member of an orchestra the sublimest music of the West, the music of the celestial choir transmitted to him by pope, priest, or pastor. But after the Age of reason and revolutions, a man of stature felt that it was up to him to make up something for a solo. Today he is not called upon to make this effort. It is done by little groups in a condition of *participation mystique*, swaying as one body to the music of the mass media. By the way, when we were talking about groupism and peerism a little while back, we should have stressed the fact that most of our teen-age aggregates are, in large part, bound together by an antiauthoritarian, antifather compact, like the GI culture of World War II. This, I believe, is of profound significance. After World War I, in conjunction with antiauthoritarian and antifather sentiments, came strong currents of antipathy against puritan and Victorian morality, against God the Father, especially the Father-Son motif, and, indeed, against the expression of any of our world’s once elevating and inspiring ideals. Within a few years scores of slang words were born — eyewash, boloney, and many cruder ones — which voiced the contempt of the younger generation of those days for all the shining statements which had heartened the endeavors of Americans since the founding of this country. The GIs would not say they were fighting to make the world safe for democracy or anything of the sort. To them, that was nothing but boloney. They fought because they were drafted and they fought for self-respect and for the respect of their company of buddies and, generally speaking, with the minimum of manifest respect for the whole tribe of officers. Perhaps this may be attributed, in part, to the fact that first-generation children have had to repudiate, so far as possible, the authority — the old ways, modes of speech, discipline, religion, and so forth — of their non-American fathers in order to get along and get ahead in school. Anyhow, we have today a population of young people who are solidly individualistic in at least one sense: They are not disposed to see anything that deserves reverence or to feel that there is anything higher than their own interests or to respond to any statement which

seems to call for selfless effort. Anaerobic organisms, I would say, for whom the oxygen of age-old inspiration is of no avail. But enough of that. Here is Si with an armful of granite data.

Si. Not much in the way of evidence, merely a few pebbles. But, as Dy knows, I have been reading the autobiographies of college men for almost thirty years, more than a thousand of them. And I have gained the impression that individuality is more evident than it used to be at this age. I happened to be carrying home a few autobiographies which were handed to me today, and glancing at the section in which the student gives some account of his philosophy of life, I noted a good many statements that accord with my previous impression. Let me see now. O Lord, the first one illustrates the opposite, groupism, I suppose.

The greatest joy and the greatest meaning seem to be the results of interaction with other people — this existence in the group is the realest thing we know.

But that one is exceptional. Let me read a few others at random, each from a different student:

Real freedom only comes in divorcing oneself from others. In the group the individual tends to become an amalgam of many people, beliefs, wants.

There is no philosophy worth having save that which one arrives at himself.

The vilest thing that can happen to a person is the subjugation of his will to another person.

I do not consider my state of happiness, real or imagined, to be in any way dependent on or related to what I think of other people or what they think of me.

Whether I ever go to Alaska or not depends on whether or not I feel the Southwest has become too tame. Wherever I live, though, I shall always stand for complete freedom and self-sufficiency of the individual.

My philosophy of life, in general, is live and let live. That is, I'll do what I want and other people can do what they want, and neither of us should give unwanted interference to the other.

Independence shows that one has sufficient knowledge to pick with discrimination. Of course, I mean unpretentious independence, for it reflects imagination.

The only meaning that an individual can find in life is the meaning that he creates in his own separate existence.

There must be a solemn trust with the will, that no backsliding into outwardly determined values will occur.

I want to touch the solid ground of unvarnished reality and sheer stark existence, instead of wasting time on the tinny superstructure of society, and perhaps adding an ornament to it.

The doctrine that I preach is of independence, independence from other people, places, institutions.

Mo. Of course your samples are not representative of the country at large. All of them are written by Harvard undergraduates. Furthermore, they are avowals of an ideal, part of a philosophy of life, and, as I have often heard you say, sentiment

and action may be exactly opposite. In the United States we have had the myth *Qi* individuality from away back and also, in some measure, individuality in practice. But now only the myth remains, so far as I can see.

Si. You seem intent on reminding us that you were a pallbearer at a funeral, despite the fact that we have pretty much agreed that the features of individuality are not readily distinguishable. I suspect that the body you interred was that of your singularly favored type, the I-am-the-captain-of-my-soul type, and that you have overlooked other types, the types which are prevalent today. For example, one uniformity running through this last collection of autobiographies and philosophies is a high degree of self-centeredness. One can find no intimations of the prospect of deriving happiness through self-forgetful work or through dedication to a cause. Each writer is for himself, first and foremost, although a large proportion say that the greatest satisfactions come from interacting with their fellows. They do not think of themselves as citizens, as parts of a larger whole, as members of a world community, or as carriers of culture. Effort, as they see it, will be devoted to the satisfaction of their private needs. Isn't this one type or one index of individuality? All of them implicitly or explicitly affirm that the self, every self, is of supreme worth and that each person is wholly responsible for his own self and only for his own.

Mo. That fits in quite well with what Dy was saying while you were looking for your papers. He called them anaerobic because they lived and preferred to live without the oxygen of edifying words and poetry, words implying reverence or sacrifice. But I wouldn't favor correlating individuality with egotism. Self-love is universal. Its great strength is taken for granted in the second of the two great commandments: Love thy neighbor as thyself. This would be a mean injunction if self-love were feeble or inconstant. But, anyhow, individuality is not mere self-centeredness in my books. It is not the insubordination of a child or the hell-raising of an adolescent. That would be individuality of a lower order, the species we are disregarding. Higher-order individuality is a veritable accomplishment, closely related to the development of identity as Erikson describes it in his incomparable manner. Dy, what is your audit?

Dy. To tell the truth, individuality as a value, as a boast, as a stead for pride, strikes me, in certain moods, as naive, shallow, and pretentious. It lacks the depth dimension. As an ideal it plays a strategic role, no doubt, during those years in a young man's life when he must discover his own nature, select a vocation appropriate to his talents, and, in so doing, grow in a differentiated way out of the family husk in which he was imbedded and out of the colloidal matrix, as Mo calls it, of his adolescent peer group. But, beyond that, it is too apt to lead on to illusory self-inflations, false poses, and counterfeit aggrandizements, tumors of the ego. The individualist says " I " with a special stress and accent. " *I* did this. *I* did that," always as if he had never come upon the fact that he could not do any of these things without the participation of nature and also, in most cases, of other people. It does not seem that he has ever humbly acknowledged that he is pretty nearly powerless vis-a-vis his own body and vis-a-vis the greater part of his personality and mind. He is not able to decide that the heart

shall keep on beating. He is not able to decide that a plentiful supply of energy and enthusiasm will be available next morning. He is not able to decide to fall in love. He is not able to decide that fresh and significant ideas shall spring to mind to enliven his conversation or to advance his thought. He cannot choose to choose what he will choose. From first to last he is utterly dependent for his being, for the capacity to sense, feel, think, and act, for the delight of living, upon the perfect orchestration of billions of uncontrollable, irreversible, and inscrutable goings on within him. And yet his objective knowledge of these facts does not bring him round to wisdom. He takes it all for granted: accepts it without reverence, without gratitude, and without grace. The fault, as I see it, lies in a kind of hydrocephalus of the ego. The ego shouts, “ I am the master of my fate! ” and a minute later one tiny embolus slits the thinspun life and puts an end to all that nonsense.

Si. I don't get the stroke of your thought. Are you saying anything less trite than the fact that the mind is dependent on the body: no brain, no consciousness?

Dy. You blunt my point. I am saying, or trying to say, that one necessary experience on the path to a mature felicity is full acknowledgment of our utter and unutterable dependence upon nature, within us and without, the sun, the earth and all that it contains, and upon each other. Acknowledgment of this in one's very marrow gives rise to that cluster of feelings — wonder, awe, reverence, gratitude, prayerfulness, and hope —which constitute the passioncenter of religion, the passion-center, I would say, of the best lives in their profounder workings. Here the myth of individuality is a hindrance. Its high place in the American scale of values may, indeed, be one determinant of our emotional retardation, our perpetual juvenility, and, more recently, of our deficiency of first- order admirations, our incapacity for high seriousness.

Mo. It seems to me we've gone around the clock with our conception of individuality. All the individuals in my hall of fame were marked by an unusual capacity for reverence, for first-order admirations, and for high seriousness. This was the very thing which brought them forth. It was in the name of their admirations that they spoke out and held their ground against hell and high water. Now you are telling us that the ideal of individuality is an impediment to such loyalties.

Dy. Yes. It seems that I have talked myself into a contradiction. How can we explain it? It might be due to the fact that in the old days individuality emerged as an ideal after a young man had acquired conscience, character, and the habits of reverence and seriousness; and so when he cried, “ I will be heard,” he was more likely to have something valuable to say and fight for. Nowadays, the idea of individuality comes up much earlier. It starts and gains momentum at the breakfast table when the boy of four, with nothing of great moment in his head, shouts, “I will be heard,” and his father pipes down and listens to him. Later, the boy's individuality includes resistance, sometimes apathy and affectless- ness, toward nearly everything parents or teachers may present to him as worthy of their devotion. Could we say, Mo, that in the past individuality was based on a commitment to an ideal bigger than itself, whereas today it is founded on the refusal to accept the yoke of any such commitment?

Mo. The distinction seems valid. But I would call today's thing "egotism," as I said earlier, rather than "individuality." I don't see anything commendable in apathy and listlessness, or in acts of arrogance and violence, or in boastful and boisterous displays. When the brash fellow finally gets the floor, nothing comes out of him that is worth attending to.

Si. I must interrupt here, if you don't mind, to tell you the story of an undergraduate which illustrates your point — someone speaking from an empty mind. He told me that for ten years he had enjoyed a recurrent fantasy of his standing on a high hill and addressing a multitude of people. When I asked him what he said to them, he was abashed and replied that this had never occurred to him. His fantasy did not include ideas or spoken words, but the multitude were spellbound none the less. But, *Dy.*, please go on with what you were saying a while back.

Dy. I was discussing the myth of individuality as a juvenile illusion which lacks the depth and time dimension, lacks imagination and perspective. Take, for example, the type of individualist who privately or publicly boasts of his maturity, his degree of selfdevelopment, much as if the newborn child, vaunting in its first thrill of dawning consciousness, cried, "Look at me! Look what I have done! Look at this body and this soul that I have formed and shaped!" I'll admit, of course, that every child and every adult is unique. But to a far greater extent he is acting out a part from birth to death which nature and society long ago composed for him. Probe down a layer. Is it not clear that in a very real sense the growth, continuation, and decline of every one of us is a recurrence, a recapitulation, a repeat performance, of a drama that is ancient as the hills, ancient in its concatenations of basic thematic patterns, despite innumerable variations in the expression and execution of these patterns? Seen in this light, the individualist's belief that his dispositions and decisions are his own and that the course of his life is determined largely by the knowledge he acquires and the choices he makes among alternatives — this belief eventually loses its sustaining power and one comes to the far richer conception of an underlying myth, full of warmth and wonder, which one is living out as part of the evolutionary process. This realization is very rare today for obvious reasons, one being the absence of fitting symbolic sagas exemplifying roles. How many of us are capable of making up a widely relevant form of music for ourselves in progress? There are scores of new old myths waiting impatiently for poet-authors, as Keats half knew when he spoke of soul-making and of Shakespeare's life as allegory; but, unhappily, our poets are all engaged with chaos. In the meanwhile, many of us are starving without knowing it, living on half a lung and half a heart.

Mo. Are you wavering? You seem to be describing my notion of individuality, not its opposite. I thought your intention was to point out the limitations of individuality as an ideal.

Dy. No and Yes. By my lights, individuality is something to be built for the sake of something else. It is a structure of potential energies for expenditure in the service of an idea, a cultural endeavor, the betterment of man, an emergent value. I am proposing that an individual self is made only to be lost —that is, only to pledge itself to some

enterprise that is in league with a good future, and thereby find itself once more, but this time as the actor of a living myth, an instrument of culture.

Si. You admit that the thing you're talking about is very rare. Shouldn't we, then, omit it from our present survey?

Dy. I suppose Yes. But I would like to register a protest against the exclusion of everything which does not sum up to a big figure. If we adopted that policy we would be restricting ourselves to the most commonplace phenomena. For example, a survey that left out the artists of America — and by artists, I mean poets, novelists, playwrights, painters, and musicians — would, in my opinion, be seriously unbalanced. Destiny has brought us to the position of top power among the free nations of the world, and heretofore top power has consisted not only of the greatest military strength and material resources, but of a high level of civilization, a center of humanistic and artistic excellence to which people have been drawn for refreshment, enchantment, and invigoration. The question is: where do we stand in these respects in the eyes of those nations of whose friendship and respect we are not unreasonably desirous? Way below normal expectations. In this country, I would say, one can discern two opposite yet interdependent currents of events. The first is the more obvious one described by *Si*: a tremendous amount of energy and creativeness engaged in science, in technology, in industry, and in business generally. In these spheres of activity, cooperation is essential, and the variant individual, qua individual, is very apt to be a misfit. There are, however, abundant opportunities in all parts of these enterprises for individual thought, especially when directed toward technical innovations and improvements. But all this massive material productivity is peripheral, as I view it, to the good life, and its tremendous rate of growth, accelerated by a cynical, nerve-wracking, and relentless barrage of advertising, its very success in supplying creature comforts, its penetration into every sphere of action, is canceling the possibilities of a good life. It is without heart and without taste. I call it peripheral, because it is concerned with means without definition of desirable final ends, with strategies in the absence of a vision, with tactics in a value-vacuum. At the center, in the hearts of men, things are going in the opposite direction, or what appears to be the opposite direction. Here one finds — in place of zest, integration, and construction — anxiety, neurosis, apathy, alienation, distrust, regression, and despair. As always, it is the artists and the poets who set forth most accurately the inner human situation, a condition of which the rest of us may not become aware for two or three decades. But by now we are all familiar with the thesis which the great majority of our better writers have been steadily representing to us, namely, that things fall apart, as Yeats expressed it; the center cannot hold. In other words, *Siva* is dancing in the phase of dissolution and destruction rather than in the formative phase, and artists in legions are devoting their talents to his service. And they are alone no longer. For nowadays pretty nearly everybody is consumed with interest in discord, violence, and deterioration — in the Blackboard Jungle, teen-age crimes, gangster warfare, psychopathic personalities, idiots, the Mad Bomber, polymorphous sexuality, rape, suicide, infantile complexes, schizophrenia, the Snake Pit, cacophony in music,

fragmentations of the human figure in painting, decorticated he-man heroes in works of fiction, four-letter words, alcoholics, dope fiends, and numberless other deviations from fruitful ways of life. And, peculiarly enough, physical scientists are concerned, in their own domain, with the decay of nuclei and elementary particles, nuclear fissions and explosions, asymmetry, and an endless succession of genocidal weapons.

Si. You sound like one of Jehovah's Witnesses relishing the prospect of Armageddon in the offing. Aren't you drifting away from our objective?

Dy. Possibly. But I am a physician, and physicians, by temperament and training, are perpetually alert to signs of present or potential illness. No matter how ruddy the patient's complexion, how bright the eyes, how supple the muscles, a physician never fails to put his stethoscope to heart and lungs. And so when I examine society I always listen to the sounds that art makes, and the sounds I have been hearing over the last years inform me of a state that is the exact opposite of the outward appearance of that robust energetic giant named American Materialism. It is a state of profound antipathy to the whole works, not to one or another aspect of the system, such as bureaucracy or regimentation, but to the basic assumptions and evaluations which underlie the entire show. One large determinant of the artist's repugnance and estrangement must be that the giant is oblivious of his existence and oblivious of his values and that the spread of the giant's tentacles and the spread of uglification go hand in hand. Anyhow, admiration, which, according to Thomas Mann, is art's most indispensable emotion, is all but absent in America. "Where it is not, where it withers, nothing more sprouts, all is arid and impoverished." And so our novelists and playwrights occupy themselves with exhibitions of derision and disgust or in skillfully portraying for us the most sordid conditions and the most debased expressions of human impulse. Endless demonstrations and analyses of social pathology coming from the most prosperous nation in the world: What can others think of us? Since there are similar resonating dispositions in large numbers of the reading and theater-going public, some of these writers, though profoundly at odds with their world, have been richly remunerated by their world and a very few, like T. S. Eliot, have won in their own lifetime a degree of esteem bordering on idolatry. What can we say about the kind of individuality that is manifested by these artists, as well as by many others of the same stamp, would-be artists or appreciators — the disinherited and alienated isolates, Ishmaels, and existentialists in our midst? This, I would judge, is a problem by itself, too intricate to be dealt with in this context.

Mo. Well, it seems that we've anatomized as much of this matter as we can tonight. But, Dy, I still can't understand why you dispraise my type of individuality.

Dy. Besides the reasons I have given, it is because your type of individuality on a national scale means either isolationism or imperialism or, if not these, a degree of nationalism which is too possessive and too proud to relinquish enough sovereignty to allow for the effective operation of world law, world government, and world police force — the only possible enduring safeguard against a holocaust of mutual extermination. Of course, the huge paranoid obstacle to world fellowship is Communism, with its

implacable ambitions and outrageous stratagems; but our cause is greatly weakened, I believe, by the absence of any announced plan of global unity. Furthermore, I conjecture that the next stage of spiritual development will be inaugurated by another trinity — the Holy Ghost uniting Man and Woman. Your type of individuality is an impediment to both of these saving consummations.

Si. On the tip of my tongue for the last ten minutes has been the observation that we have talked for a whole evening without once referring to the larger half of our population. Surely, you can't deny that individuality among women has increased by leaps and bounds since World War I. I could cite scores of notable examples and, if need be, rest my whole case there. But, before we break up, I would like to call attention to a little ground for Dy's surmise. We have collected hundreds of the wish-fulfilling fantasies of undergraduates in an unsystematic way for over twenty years and in a systematic way since 1953, and we have noted, first of all, a marked decline of economic success themes. Our returns show that the three most prevalent positive fantasies today are those of perfect marriage, children, and sexual conquests, in that order. Next come self-sufficiency, benevolent power, public display of intellectual eminence, and athletic glory. The Horatio Alger myth is below all of them in frequency. These results are in accord with Allport's studies of students' imaginary autobiographies from the present to the year 2000. In striking contrast to students in a dozen other countries, Americans at different colleges do not imagine themselves participating in great enterprises or devoting their energies to some superpersonal goal, either political or cultural. They dream of economic security, a house and a plot of land in the country, a happy family, and peace for a lifetime.

At this point it seemed to me that my friends had had enough and so I asked them for a summary.

Si. Although we have been talking in a vacuum of facts and definitions, my convictions remain unshaken, namely, that individuality among women is on the increase and that individuality of thought going into science, technology, and industry has never even approximated its present level. America is seething with creativity of many sorts.

Mo. Much of what Si is celebrating is not individuality in the proper sense. It is either intellectual originality, technical inventiveness, or blatant masquerades — a ceaseless flood of talk and clamor from a dozen media, a mammoth pageant of sensational performers, each with his novel stunt or offering. Men of sap and savor have gone out.

Dy. Individuality is not a problem area in America. It is approximately of the kind and of the degree that our situation warrants.

A critique of his ideas & actions.



Henry Murray

Individuality: The Meaning and Content of Individuality in Contemporary America
1958

Daedalus, Vol. 87, No. 2, The American National Style (Spring, 1958), pp. 25-47.

Published by: MIT Press on behalf of American Academy of Arts & Sciences.

Stable URL: jstor.org

www.thetedkarchive.com