

INDIVIDUALITY IN A RELATIONAL CULTURE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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The "modern" notion of a unitary individual self has been heavily criticized over the past decades in the West, and while these studies have offered us insight, it may be helpful to expand our philosophical approach by examining non-Western conceptions of self. In this paper I will offer a comparative analysis of the traditional Western view of the self on the one hand, and two more relational views of self found in the Balinese and the Australian Aboriginal cultures.

I believe this approach is wise for two reasons. The first is that I am interested in getting a clearer picture of the classical Western understanding of self, and while it is possible to make progress in this task by looking at empirical data, by conceptual analysis, and by the study of the historical development of concepts of self and personhood (and I will be using those terms interchangeably in this paper), I think that it is possible to get a better perspective on our concept of self by juxtaposing it to other such concepts. But the second reason is that if we want to broaden and expand our notion of self, and I believe that our Western conception of self is too narrow, then it is helpful for us, in developing other possible concepts of the self and other vocabularies, to look at non-Western cultures.

The main conclusion of this paper is that the Australian Aboriginal concept, as opposed to the atomistic Western notions of self, is a profoundly relational view. This point should come as no surprise to anyone, but a more careful analysis will yield, however, some surprising conclusions. Perhaps counter-intuitively to our own view of (and fear of) collectivist cultures, I will show that the Australian Aboriginal values autonomy, and at least conceptually, values individuality in a deeper sense than does Western individualism. In my argument, I will point

out that there are different kinds of collectivisms, and our Western view of collectivist cultures tends not only to be monochrome, but to take an extreme position as paradigmatic. Indeed, it probably is inappropriate to call the Aboriginal culture collectivist.

Let me begin, however, by outlining what I take to be two basic concepts in the Western view of personhood.

MODERN WESTERN NOTION OF SELF

The modern Western notion of self is complex, with many nuances, and it is undoubtedly possible to analyze it in numerous ways. For the purposes of this paper, however, I think that we can analyze two concepts that have combined to give the Western notion of self its unique flavor: atomism and an essential human nature (Edge).

Atomism in one form or another was adopted in "the new science" as a reaction to Aristotelian teleology, and it became a general approach to explanation in areas far beyond the physical sciences, including our concept of self. There are three aspects to the version of atomism that became the dominant interpretation. The first asserts that reality is ultimately composed of independent, indivisible, self-sufficient units. Therefore, whatever aspect of reality is being described should be broken down and analyzed in terms of these basic building blocks.

The second aspect of atomism asserts that these atoms are in "space" or a void. The function of this notion is to reinforce the independence and self-sufficiency of the atoms. Space essentially separates the atoms, and since there is no action at a distance, the only connection or relationship that can exist becomes a combining of these atoms to build up larger units, or the agency of one atom "bumping" another. Since no connection is thus inherent, each atom is

sufficient in itself and has no essential relationship to another atom. Connections and relationships are only external and contingent.

The third aspect of atomism indicates that the job of scientific explanation is to develop the laws governing these connections. Since the world consists of complex units built out of the connection among atoms--molecules are collections of atoms--the job of science is to explain their association or relationship. Thus the job of chemistry in an atomistic framework is to explain how one atom affects the other and develop the laws of how they associate or combine to build larger units.

The Cartesian notion of substance is, of course, a prime example of this view applied to an understanding of the self (with less stress on the second aspect, the void, than English versions, following Newtonian atomism). Descartes' idea of the mind as a simple substance, as an indivisible, self-sufficient unit, is an exact description of what an atom is. The philosophical problems of the connection between mind and body, as well as between other minds (or whether other minds exist) arise from his atomistic standpoint. In Locke and Hume's associationist description of mind, with the mind being a blank tablet or void, ideas become the atomic units. The job of Empiricist associationism, just as in Skinnerian behaviorism which is simply 17th century associationism applied to behavior, is to describe how these simple units combine and arrange themselves in larger units, in memory, in thinking or in behavior.

Atomism applied to the social and political realm results in a social contract which views, quite clearly in the Lockean version, the individual as the primary political unit, and in the state of nature (the "void") these units are without association. The function of the social contract is to give an explanation of how contingent, non-essential relationships develop between these independent, self-sufficient atoms.

The second key component of the modern Western notion of self is the idea of an essential human nature, even if this idea has been a fundamental part of the philosophical arsenal since Plato. The reason it is important and worth mentioning in this context is that one could theoretically have an atomistic view which viewed each atom as fundamentally unique and different. However, the thrust of modern philosophy until recently has been to assume essentialism, and the urge has been to understand "human nature." Different descriptions of human nature have been urged, but by far the most philosophically influential one has been the view that reason defines our unique humanness. However one analyzes reason, the important point remains the same: atoms are not unique units, but rather they share a common essence; all atoms are fundamentally alike in their essential nature. Reason is universal and describes the fundamental nature of each atom; sameness, not diversity, characterizes our essential nature as human beings.

One implication of defining human nature as rational is the central place that individual autonomy is given in this system. Each atomic unit is autonomous, making free, rational decisions, although, as I will describe later, given the universality of reason, all rational creatures should come basically to the same conclusions.

This modern Western notion of self has had an extraordinarily positive influence in the West, and even in other cultures. The American Revolution, as well as virtually all liberation movements in our culture, have assumed this view of self, that since we are all independent due to our atomism, and since we have ultimate value due to our universal human nature, ultimate respect is due each individual, and the equality of these atomic persons is fundamental. The respect that accrues to every person is typically folded into our notion of autonomy, and since Westerners are profoundly suspicious that organic views of social arrangements undercuts

autonomy, it is assumed that such respect is lost in collectivist cultures. I will argue that this is not the case, at least in some relational cultures, and I would agree that any adequate notion of personhood should emphasize respect for all persons.

RELATIONAL VIEWS OF THE SELF

Anthropologists and cross-cultural psychologists often make the distinction between individualistic and collectivist cultures (Triandis, et al; Hui and Triandis). I will not employ this terminology but will use the terms "relational culture" or "holistic culture" (Shweder and Bourne) rather than "collectivism." The term "collectivism" implies, at least to me, a unit, where the emphasis is on the whole in which the individual parts are radically subsumed. Indeed, Triandis defines collectivism in this way. Such a definition does not fit Australian Aboriginal cultures, however, but it seems to describe the two modern attempts at more relational social arrangements in Europe: communism and fascism. These approaches subsume the individual to the greater whole in a radical way, with political power vested in the whole and flowing from the top down; the individual seems to lose autonomy and fundamental freedoms. Such an organic view implies that the whole supersedes the individual in a way that the individual could be sacrificed readily for the good of the whole: e.g. the finger being chopped off for the good of the hand.

In the broad spectrum of relational views, such an organicism lies at one extreme. It may well be that the Central Desert Aboriginal view lies at the other conceptual extreme, but it probably better exemplifies relational cultures in general than these examples of modern Western organicism.

The Balinese relational culture lies conceptually between these two positions. Let me now turn to a short description of the Balinese notion of self. A relatively extensive literature on

the Balinese conception of self exists (Geertz; Hobart) but for our quick overview, it will be useful to take a concept focused on by Stephen Lansing. In his *Evil in the Morning of the World* he explicates Balinese culture in terms of *kaikêt*, which literally means "to be tied." Although Lansing's interests are more social, economic, and religious, we can use the idea that the person is defined in terms of the ways in which he or she is "tied," tied to social, religious, and political organizations, organizational structure being highly developed in Bali. It is these relationships which define who the individual is rather than any common human nature.

Geertz (388-9) makes a similar point when he suggests that the Balinese concept of person is best understood by looking at the concept of their gods. These entities come to the annual three-day religious ceremony, and they achieve individuality and specificity by descending to a particular temple in a particular location; otherwise, they are perceived as amorphous and in an important sense not completely formed. In other words, it is only by assuming a particular locus in the social network at a particular time in Balinese society that the divinities are formed. In an analogous fashion, it is only through relationships defined by membership in the village political unit, in specific temples, in clubs or craft organizations, and through kinship relationships, that the individual becomes formed and assumes a particular identity. The person is defined by the particular relationships that the individual has assumed, and since individuals tend to be differently tied, being members of different but overlapping organizational units, the people are defined individually by their unique set of relationships. I will return to this idea later.

What is important in our discussion of the Balinese are two points: that individuals are defined and assume their identity through relationships, and that these relationships are primarily to organizations--political, religious, social.

AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL CONCEPT OF SELF

Again let me re-emphasize the complexity of dealing with any culture's concept of self, and this is also true for the Australian Aboriginal view, but we can approach the issue from the context of the previous discussion: the Aboriginal view rejects atomism and it de-emphasizes the notion of an essentialist human nature. Let us examine first the anti-atomistic, relational view of the Aborigines.

As befits a great mythic tradition, the creation story of the Australian Aboriginals is profound. If we distill general features of various myths, the creation story begins when Australia was a featureless plane. The ancestral spirits began to awake and come up from out of the ground, or out of the sky, or from the ocean, depending upon the particular stories, and in their wanderings across Australia, as they hunt and gather (and sometimes fight), their actions form the geographical features of the land, e.g. the great serpent slithers across the land and forms the bed of the Murray River, or the great emu lays an egg which becomes a mountain; in this way, virtually every geographical feature in Australia has a story about its creation.

At various locations, the ancestors' appearance left part of their essence in the form of spirit children. At the end of their journeys the ancestor spirits went back into the ground or the ocean or the sky. Today, as women go about their daily tasks, they may walk near one of these special areas where the animal spirit enters into her body, completing impregnation; thus, the child who is born is of the essence of the ancestor spirit--the emu, the crocodile, the mosquito, etc. This conception totem, as the anthropologists have called it, not only connects in an essential way the person to the spiritual world, in the form of a particular totem, but also to the land, since the land also is an instantiation of the spiritual essence.

For our purposes, however, it is even more important to note that the conception totems also connect people, since other members of the linguistic group will share the same conception totem. While it is perhaps easiest to explain how one gets a conception totem, we must note that there are a number of ways to become associated with an ancestral being, and any individual may have half a dozen or more totemic connections. Given that these totemic relationships define the person, one's identity is tied up with the particular set of totemic relationships that one is. A person is not an isolated unit, an independent, self-sufficient atom. Practically speaking, such self-sufficiency is inappropriate in a traditional hunter-gatherer society, but more basically, one's self concept is tied to and by these relationships.

The rejection of atomism is further illustrated by the fact that the idea of an accidental relationship, or an event happening accidentally, makes little sense to the Aborigines. The notion of such contingent relationships, of events happening by chance or randomly, is a Western notion. There are no blind forces of nature for the Aborigines, and any connection is rife with meaning. Therefore, the connections and relationships that one has are fundamental and say important things about the self; they are definitional, not contingent. I will come back to questions of relationship, but let me proceed to the second component of the Western notion of self, or essential human nature that defines who we are.

The Aborigines de-emphasize any notion of human nature. Deborah Rose, in her study of the Yarralin from the Central Desert, points out that they distinguish between aspects of the person which are common--denoted by blood--and aspects which are particularizing--denoted by skin and milk. In doing so, they de-emphasize any essentialist notion of human nature. In the Yarralin conception, skin and milk relate to mother. Skin places the person in a particular subsection, or totemic relationship. The body is grown from the mother's milk, which is

synonymous with her country or totem; therefore, the mother gives a particular life in nursing the child. Since mother's milk is common with the kin in the same totemic relationship, we partake of the essence of the mother and her brothers and their ancestry back to the Dreamtime. This relationship is specific and it relates the individual to a particular totem, to having specific relationships.

On the other hand, blood is more diffuse. All humans have blood and therefore it is not usually an identifier with any specificity; rather, it is used to emphasize that there is something common about humanity. This concept seems to be different from our traditional Western notion of human nature in two respects. The first is that while it brings together all humanity under one category, the category seems to be virtually empty. There is little specificity. All people share blood, which makes them all human, but unlike the Western notion of human nature, there is no essential quality attached to it. Therefore, and this is the second point, while they have a notion of human commonness, there is no essentialism. Further, as befits such a contentless category, the notion of commonness is de-emphasized in favor of particularity and relationship. Therefore, what defines us is not our commonness but our particularity.

Fred Myers studied the Pintupi, another Central Desert group. Myers's analysis implies that the Lockean question of the relationship between the individual and the "state" is not what one might be led to expect in a relational society. A collectivist society is normally described as one where the individual is subsumed within the group--where the group has priority over the individual, as Aristotle (509) describes it, deriving from the self-sufficiency of the community. Such is not the case among the Pintupi. Relationships are more fundamentally dyadic. In other words, the Pintupi do not identify in any strong sense with a community or organization, as do the Balinese, but relationships take place on an individual level through negotiation.

As such the mobility of traditional Aboriginal society is fundamental. If an individual finds that group consensus is going in the direction opposed to his own views, he can leave. Therefore, there is no real sense of the collective, and hence the idea of collectivism, or even of a community "unit," is foreign to them. Collectivism is only one type of relational society, and may not be representative of the majority of relational cultures. At least Australian Aboriginal groups, who never had a chief or a boss--at best a group of elders who were viewed as having special knowledge--cannot be viewed as a collective. In fact, the emphasis on individual relationships is so strong that fostering community presents a problem for them (Myers 258-261); ritual tries to ameliorate this problem, but this is not a subject which can be approached in this paper.

I asserted earlier that individuality is valued more in relational societies than in Western individualism. Having offered the appropriate background, I can now offer an argument to that effect. As I pointed out previously, Western individualism is based on atomism, combined with the notion of an essential human nature, and thus the Western notion of self de-emphasizes the individual in favor of a common essential nature. Each of us, as an atom, has a particular personality, but what is valuable about us and what is definitive about us is not our individuality but our commonness, the essential nature that all of us share, and which in turn must be respected by all people. Rationality has often been thought to define this nature, and rationality is universal; hence, what is most special about us as humans and what is most valuable about us as humans is a universal capacity. It is ironic that Western individualism values most something that is completely universal and common, and any behavior that deviates from what might be expected of essential nature is often highly suspect.

On the other hand, in a relational culture, at least in the Aboriginal culture, in which persons are defined by their relationships--and it may be that each individual even in a family has a unique set of relationships--each person will be viewed as unique. Since it is expected that one's view of the world will be formed by these defining relationships, each person will be expected not only to be different but to take a different perspective on the world. Difference is expected and approved; that's "his own business," the Pintupi say (Myers 124). Hence, individuality is expected and valued more in such relational societies, at least theoretically, than in Western individualism.

This analysis gives a new twist to the notion of autonomy. As in the West, autonomy among the Aborigines is a fundamental trait of humans and therefore is valued absolutely, but the Aboriginal form of autonomy does not result from a universal capacity of reason and atomism, but it stems from one's individuality and relationships. One does not have autonomy as part of one's basic nature, but one grows into autonomy by developing the uniqueness and particularity found in a set of totemic relationships. Autonomy is not a capacity, but rather it is a project that one achieves through growth, which is basically spiritual.

CONCLUSION

While it is no surprise that I should argue that certain non-Western views of self are different from the modern Western notion of self, I have tried to deepen that discussion by suggesting that there are different versions of relational societies and therefore differing concepts of a relational self. The Balinese and the Australian Aboriginal concepts of self are both relational but fundamentally different (indeed, the value of autonomy among the Balinese is questionable). The Australian Aboriginal concept of self is radically particular and depends on

one's relationships. Thus, the emphasis on the uniqueness of the individual and on the value of autonomy, individual differences--even aberrations--are more acceptable in Aboriginal society than in Western individualism.

END NOTES

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1. If anything, shape separates humans from other animals, not rationality or speech.

 1. "There is no self-conscious collective representation of the 'common welfare.' What is interesting for the Pintupi is that sociality is constituted largely out of dyadic relations . . .", (Myers 124).

 1. Hence, negotiation among the group is necessarily continual. The epistemological consequences are great when such "perspectivism" is assumed. How the Aborigines combine perspectivism with the view of the Dreaming as the Law deserves further attention.