

THE INDIVIDUAL  
IN A  
REVOLUTIONARY  
WORLD

HERBERT J. MULLER

THE RYERSON PRESS - TORONTO

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*by*

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am pleased to express my gratitude to Queen's University for the invitation to give the Chancellor Dunning Trust Lectures. In particular I wish to thank Principal and Mrs. Corry, the faculty, and the students for their most gracious and considerate hospitality.

I have made only minor changes in the lectures as I delivered them. Inasmuch as I attempted a very broad discussion in general terms, I feel no need of equipping it with the usual scholarly apparatus. In a few scattered passages I have drawn on remarks I made at a Symposium on American Values at Central Washington State College, and at an International Design Conference at Aspen, Colorado.

HERBERT J. MULLER

*University of Indiana,  
Bloomington, Indiana,  
March, 1964*



## FOREWORD

The lectures printed here were given early in 1964 in the fourteenth series of Dunning Trust lectures by Herbert J. Muller, Distinguished Service Professor of English and Government at the University of Indiana. His topic, and the title of this book, *The Individual in a Revolutionary World*, bears very directly on the purpose of the Trust, founded in 1948 in honour of the late Honourable Charles A. Dunning, Chancellor of Queen's University from 1940 to 1958, "to promote understanding and appreciation of the supreme importance of the dignity, freedom and responsibility of the individual person in human society."

In his three lectures Professor Muller examined in turn, "The Basic Problems of Individuality," "The Pressures Against Individuality," and "The Prospects of the Individual."

Professor Muller is concerned not with abstract notions of political freedom so much as with the "real" freedom which can be measured only in the quality of the life which modern man finds it possible to lead. He refuses to oversimplify the pressures towards conformity and collectivism, or the opposing dangers of political extremism. While he is critically and often pessimistically observant about the detail of life in the western world today, he comes firmly and without qualification to the conclusion that his country remains a free country. He affirms that continuing freedom for the individual is one of the choices open to the western world as we face an admittedly uncertain future.

Professor Muller's vision is wide, his insight deep, his wit sharp, his style lucid. Queen's University is happy to share with readers of this book part of the experience of having Professor Muller with us last winter.

J. A. CORRY, *Principal.*

*Queen's University at Kingston,  
April 30, 1964*

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# I

## THE BASIC PROBLEMS OF INDIVIDUALITY

Because I feel deeply honored by the invitation to give the Dunning Trust Lectures, I feel obliged to begin with apologies. I can hardly hope to say anything new about a topic that has been so thoroughly canvassed as the problem of personal freedom in the modern world. I have nevertheless been talking and writing about it for a long time, cannot help repeating some ideas I have already expressed, and though I may safely assume that most of you belong to the very large and eminent company that have not read my works, I have grown a little weary of the sound of my own voice. It is more depressing because I feel obliged to make some quite elementary observations, in a loud voice, for reasons I shall mention shortly. And I owe a particular apology to this audience; for most of my illustrative material on the state of the individual today will be drawn from the United States. It may or may not apply to Canada, about which I know too little.

However, I am at least not indulging the national conceit it is possible to detect in Americans. I am concerned primarily with developments due to the peculiar nature of modern Western civilization, and these are most pronounced in the United States. Although it still prides itself on being a youthful country, Gertrude Stein once explained to her French friends that it is the oldest country in the world, because it was the first to enter the twentieth century. It is the most advanced industrial country, notoriously the most affluent. It therefore offers the best laboratory in which to study the problems created by modern technology and increasing affluence, extraordinary collective power and wealth: problems that are now growing



more apparent in western Europe, that I think will become plainer in the Soviet too if or as it continues to prosper, and that may be anticipated by the countries of the non-Western world in so far as they succeed in modernizing their economy and their polity.

Another modest disclaimer is still more pertinent. Although I have some general knowledge of what is going on in Europe, I cannot pretend to speak confidently of the prevailing attitudes in all the various countries; but I cannot speak with entire assurance about the United States either. Here a horde of social scientists have dug up a wealth of evidence by attitude research, public opinion polls, personality tests, and the like, usually dressed up in statistics, the best scientific clothes. Yet all this information does not add up to a clear picture of the national character or mentality, even apart from the jargon that often blurs it, or perhaps conceals ignorance. The specialists make out many conflicting tendencies, often disagree in their conclusions, and apparently are only beginning to realize that their revolutionary society is not really set or fixed. Some years ago, for example, there came out an excellent clinical study, *The Authoritarian Personality*, with much illuminating, troubling evidence of incipient fascist tendencies in the United States; but other troubles were that this authoritarian personality looks much like the old Puritan personality, which had helped to establish democracy. One could not be sure anyway how deep, strong, or widespread these tendencies were, and already there is reason to believe that the study is somewhat outdated. Similarly critics who used to complain about the excessive competitiveness or rugged individualism in American life are now worrying chiefly over the conformism, groupism, and togetherness; it appears that Americans are sheep in wolves' clothing. What I make out, accordingly, is a remarkably complex, fluid situation in which there are marked trends, some-

times anomalous, usually ambiguous, and always to some unknown extent opposed or confused by different tendencies. One has to keep generalizing, of course, simply to make sense; but I believe there is too much high, wide, unhand-some generalization which implies that we actually know what is going on in the heads of a hundred million ordinary Americans, or even that they are all thinking and feeling alike.

Here, then, is my excuse for the many elementary observations I shall make. The heart of our matter is a striking paradox. The free, open societies of the modern world have given the ordinary man extraordinary rights and opportunities, such as free public education, which common people never enjoyed in the past, and have encouraged him to believe that the future was going to be still better, nothing was impossible. At the same time, they have been generating massive pressures against the individual person, in an ever more mechanized, organized society, and many men appear to be seeking an "escape from freedom," recoiling from the boundless future. Nothing would seem plainer than these conflicting tendencies to encourage, exalt, harass, regiment, and scare the individual. Only nothing seems harder to keep clearly, steadily in mind. On the one hand, many popular writers keep chanting the old slogans about individualism, freedom, and progress, waving away the obvious problems. On the other hand, many intellectuals keep harping on the follies and evils of our dreadful, vulgar civilization, disregarding the obvious goods it has created, viewing "progress" as almost an obscene word. In this lecture I am therefore proposing to offer a historical perspective on our condition, in the hope of sizing it up more realistically, calmly, and humanely. I should say at once that since the situation of the person today is literally unprecedented, history cannot give us the answers, cannot enable us to speak with assurance about his prospects; so at



the end I shall leave you up in the air. But meanwhile it may help to keep an eye on the basic fact of ambiguity or paradox as a guiding principle, or simply the fact that our society is indeed as complex as everybody says it is. I could add that up in the air one may get a better view, see more. I prefer to say that my object is primarily to arrive at a clearer, fuller awareness of the whole problem, from which you may go on to give your own answers.

Now—at last—to get to my subject. Just because I am firmly committed to a belief in “the supreme importance of the dignity, freedom and responsibility of the individual person in human society,” I should begin by remarking that this belief is by no means a self-evident truth, that historically considered it is quite uncommon, and that in our own civilization, which has promoted it more than did any other, it has lately been undermined in theory as well as practice. The individual has been faring rather poorly in the thought of most social scientists, another distinctive breed of men produced by our society. He is naturally something of a nuisance to men looking for regularities or uniformities in social behavior and process, disposed to trim, positivistic modes of thought, and the easiest way to get rid of the nuisance is to minimize if not deny his importance. Apart from his common fate of being buried alive in statistics (together with the  $2\frac{1}{2}$  children he has as an “average man”), he has typically been treated as a mere product of his society. The concept of society as an organism has led to the view that he amounts to a cell, with little if any more independent existence or reality than the cells in the human body; the essential reality is the social organism, just as with the human being it is the whole organism, not the millions of little cells in it. Thus one sociologist described the individual as a “discredited hypothesis.” Others have sacrificed him to their sovereign ideal, which is a community “stable and well-integrated.” One of these describes free-

dom as a merely "subjective feeling of personal well-being" due to being a member of "an effectively functioning society"; and he added, it is "entirely possible that this can be provided by a totalitarian community . . . once the latter has been stabilized or routinized" (though he neglected to add that the stablest, most efficiently routinized society is an ant-hill). Rather oddly, in other words, positivistic social scientists have been given to a kind of Platonic concept of society.

Likewise anthropologists have tended to minimize or ignore the individual as they study culture, which he serves merely to transmit, and by which they commonly assume he is completely conditioned. As one American anthropologist put it, "The most realistic and scientifically adequate interpretation of culture is one that proceeds *as if* human beings did not exist"; and even a genius he defines as one "in whose neuro-sensory-glandular-etc. system an important synthesis of cultural events has taken place." Culture develops all by itself, it creates all the great works—as presumably it wrote the book to which this anthropologist absent-mindedly signed his own name. Historians too have played down the individual, in part because of a revulsion against the hero-theory of history, chiefly because of their concentration on the vast impersonal, involuntary processes of history, out of which emerged, for example, a massive industrial civilization that nobody planned or foresaw. Even literary and art historians have strung along, if less consciously. While they naturally pay tribute to the genius of the creative artist and the uniqueness of his work, they often treat it primarily as an exhibit of a movement or period, and seem happiest when they demonstrate that it illustrates something or other about its age.

Now, this whole trend is quite understandable, and up to a point indispensable. The individual unquestionably is a product of his society; his whole being is always conditioned



by its culture. To understand human behavior, no knowledge is more important than our knowledge of the power of the social, cultural environment. The overwhelming majority of men have always lived by custom or convention, with little if any question; or as Bertrand Russell once said, most people would sooner die than think, and in fact do so. Presently I shall dwell on the fact that the self-conscious individual has been a rare type throughout history down to our own civilization, so that most peoples did not even have a word for him. Today he perhaps needs to be told that he owes to his society his very self-consciousness, and with it the ideal of self-expression and self-fulfillment, the principles by which he may rebel against his society. We may all be too much prejudiced in his favor simply because he is you, he is me—he represents our precious selves.

Yet there is no denying his reality. First and last he is the only reality we can be absolutely sure of, even apart from our life-long romance with our precious selves; and all human values, including whatever the social sciences may contribute to understanding and social well-being, can be realized only in the lives of individuals. The scientific abstractions obscure the plainest concrete realities: that society is not in fact a biological organism, least of all when it becomes so highly organized as civilized societies are; that the individual is never a mere cell but has some independent existence, behaves or misbehaves in some ways of his own choosing, even to deciding to quit the whole business and kill himself; that as a product of his social environment he is still an individual, strictly unlike all the other products; and in particular that the creative individual is the most apparent agent of social and cultural change, all the more important because most men are creatures of custom. I might remark parenthetically that the shock and then the immediate fear stirred all over the world by the assassination of President Kennedy owed much to the



general agreement that the individual as leader may make a considerable difference, in spite of those "vast impersonal forces" that historians talk about. For ordinary mortals I should remark the odd implications of the cultural determinism anthropologists have insisted on: that when prehistoric men began chipping flints they were free to create culture, but that once having developed it they became completely enslaved by it, and that we today have neither the wit nor the freedom of the low-browed ape-man. But the most concrete evidence I know of for the importance of the individual is Margaret Hodgen's book *Change and History*, which I have cited more than once, and shall now cite again because it appears to be little known.

This is a thoroughly documented study of technological changes in England over a period of a thousand years, based on the records of more than 12,000 parishes. Some of the changes were plainly due to inventions by well-known persons. Most significant, however, is the fact that fewer than 20% of these parishes ever introduced a new craft or occupation, and that of these the great majority dared such an innovation just once over the many centuries. All the rest clung to their traditional ways, resisting change, at most only accepting eventually the new tools and products that more enterprising men had developed elsewhere. Hence it was not "England" that made technological history, and took the lead in the Industrial Revolution: it was a number of uncommon Englishmen, individuals mostly unknown, some of whom contributed minor improvements in arts and skills, more of whom were independent and bold enough to take up a new craft, risk setting up a new shop in the inveterately conservative village. Or if "culture" did this job, it had the wit to breed some persons able to stand up against the strongest pressures of the cultural environment.

In this view we may pay tribute to some unsung geniuses

in the long ages of prehistory, the hundreds of thousands of years during which change was extremely slow. Let us bow down with Collingwood before the unknown man, for example, who tied the first knot. Some historians give the impression that at a certain stage of man's development "society" began fumbling with reeds, and somehow a knot emerged, just as students of folklore may say that songs and tales arise "spontaneously" out of the folk; but again I assume that every new idea must have started with some bright person, and that other individuals then made the little changes that perfected the invention, the song, or the tale. Yet during these long ages what is most conspicuous is the power of culture or custom, which kept countless generations of men chipping flints in precisely the same ways as their forefathers had. Although we can never be sure just what went on in the heads of prehistoric men, we can be confident that like most primitive peoples today they had little consciousness of themselves as individuals apart from the tribe, still less of any rights *against* the tribe or tribal custom. If anyone did hit upon such an idea as the supreme importance of the dignity and freedom of the person, it failed to enter tradition, get embodied in myth or tale. Thus, in the elaborate index compiled by anthropologists covering all the customs and beliefs of all known primitive societies, I do not find the word *freedom*; and I gather from students of the world's folklore that this too does not support the now popular belief that man has a natural passion for freedom, and throughout his history has been forever struggling for more freedom.

The rise of civilization, however, clearly entailed a growth of individualism. As the homogeneous village developed into the heterogeneous city, with increasing specialization or division of labor, formal government, and large-scale enterprise, men were given more opportunity to realize their creative abilities, became more conscious of their differences



from their fellows, and developed a more explicit idea of their rights and duties, which presently were spelled out in written codes of law. Apart from kings or pharaohs we hear of a few remarkable persons, such as Khufu-onekh, who designed and built the Great Pyramid; and there is much evidence of individual enterprise and creativity, in art, commerce, and technology, even if by men still nameless and unknown. With the rise of the so-called higher religions, centuries later, came a major advance toward conscious ideals of personality. The founders of these diverse religions, including Buddha, Zoroaster, Confucius, and the prophets of Israel, alike conferred more dignity and responsibility on the person by loftier conceptions of the service of deity or the good life. The gods now demanded righteousness, not merely the immemorial rites for getting the crops to grow or securing material prosperity. They were spiritual beings or entities who made men more conscious of the human spirit. As in some manner they presided over the universe, they intimated the complementary idea of mankind, the ideal of the brotherhood of man, through which the individual might transcend the ancient ways of his tribe.

Yet the founders of these religions did not explicitly call for more freedom or individuality, nor preach that men should be guided by their own conscience, any more than Christ would. They proclaimed some new law of life for the community, and under new gods societies settled down into the old habits of mostly unreasoned acceptance or conformity. In particular the higher religions made little difference in the lives of the peasant masses. We are now likely to forget that the great majority of men in all past civilizations were peasants, as they still are in the non-Western world. Their superiors doubtless had occasional sympathy for them, out of simple humanity, but there was very little if any idea of their natural dignity as persons, much less any idea that freedom was their birthright; in



effect the stress was always on their responsibilities or duties. And though we seldom hear the voice of these peasants, virtually all of whom were illiterate, what appears in the record is chiefly their habit of passive submission, patient endurance. No more does the historic record support the belief that man has an unquenchable passion for freedom.

In this perspective we may better appreciate the importance of the Greeks. I shall spare you a rehearsal of their political achievements, as the first people clearly to set up a conscious ideal of freedom, and in Athens to establish a full-fledged democracy. Suffice it that as the brilliant culture of Greece developed it provided exceptional opportunity, scope, and incentive for the individual. We now hear of a great many remarkable persons and know them by name, down to a potter who proudly signed his vases—the first artisan known to have done such a thing. At Delphi we find inscribed a novel principle of wisdom: “Know thyself.” Although there must have been scattered rebels in all previous societies, we now meet self-conscious individuals who assert their rights as individuals, openly defy convention and public opinion, as did some of the lyric poets—a type already novel in that their art was devoted to the expression of purely personal emotions. Above all, we meet Socrates, whose *Apology* remains a landmark in the history of the claims of the individual. “The unexamined life is not worth living,” he said simply—so simply that we may forget how revolutionary his credo was. Taken literally, as Socrates took it, it meant that a person should accept nothing on traditional authority, but inquire into all the reigning beliefs, the immemorial wisdom of the ancestors, and remain critical of public opinion. As Socrates added in the *Crito*, “My way is and always has been to obey no one or nothing, except the reasoning which seems to me best when I draw my conclusions”; and that most people

thought otherwise only emphasized that the wise man should be above the common fear of what people will say. Let us remember that by the standards of respectable, God-fearing, right-thinking Athenians he was a subversive type, who did corrupt the youth of Athens in so far as he started them thinking for themselves. His type is scarcely popular in the United States today.

Nevertheless, the execution of Socrates revealed the limitations of Greek individualism, for his sentence was quite legal—as it would not be in America or any of the democracies today. However independent or bold in practice, the classical Greeks had no clear theory about the individual, still no precise word for him, or for the ego. They had no live idea of the sanctity of the person, as their acceptance of the institution of slavery revealed most clearly. For Greeks themselves they had no bills of rights protecting the individual against the state or the community, guaranteeing him a private realm with such rights as freedom of conscience—another word missing from their lexicon. While Socrates believed that his fellow-Athenians were making a bad mistake in sentencing him to death, and would come to regret it (as they did), he did not question their right to do so, or argue that the individual should legally be entitled to freedom of conscience. He did not generalize the implications of his way of life, explicitly maintain that freedom to think for oneself, express and realize oneself, might be best for both the community and the individual. The Greeks continued to enjoy a good deal of personal freedom in practice, in some ways more than men do in our society of time clocks, red lights, blue laws, et cetera; their later thinkers, such as the Epicureans and the Stoics, took up the problem of how the private person might achieve wisdom, virtue, and happiness under any form of state, by his own efforts alone; and the Stoics accorded more dignity to every



man as man by their idea of natural law, a universal principle of justice that led them to declare slavery unnatural, and that was eventually incorporated in Roman law. Yet neither the Greeks nor the Romans went so far as to maintain the "supreme importance" of the individual person as defined in the stated purpose of the Dunning Trust Lectures. To my knowledge, this remains essentially a unique ideal of our Western civilization. It helps to explain why ours has been the most boldly, continuously creative civilization in all history—not necessarily the grandest in its works, but the most unflinching in its creativity in all branches of culture over the longest period of time, now some thousand years; and why it has been said that never before has mankind owed so much to so many.

Now, the immediate source of this ideal was Judaeo-Christianity, which proclaimed the sanctity of the person as one created in the image of God and endowed with an immortal soul. Although such sanctity was continually violated in medieval practice (especially when the person was a heathen, a Jew, or a heretic) it persisted in theory and to some incalculable extent got engrained in common thought and feeling. As I have written elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> I appreciated how much real difference it might make when I talked a few years ago with some Japanese professors, who suddenly realized that it was lacking in their own tradition. One reported that in trying to convince his students that the Japanese custom of political assassination was deplorable he finally remarked that it was simply wrong to murder people, whereupon his class looked blank: they asked *why* it was wrong. Christianity also supported the importance of the person in more questionable ways, however, preparing for the ambiguities to come. Thus its characteristic doctrine

<sup>1</sup>*Religion and Freedom in the Modern World* (Chicago, 1963).



of personal immortality, even to the resurrection of the body, meant that the Christian went to heaven as an individual, his immortal soul was somehow stamped by his mortal existence as John Smith. This was a possibly arrogant belief; and though Christians were always reminded that they might go to hell instead, this too might make them callous about the sufferings of many persons on earth, or in their religious conceit disposed to make considerable hell on earth for persons who had different ideas about God.

In the Renaissance, at any rate, individualism became much franker and more worldly. Like the ancient Greeks whom they were rediscovering, Europeans began providing exceptional opportunity and incentive for the gifted or daring person, while also developing the Socratic spirit of critical inquiry. A further stimulus was the invention of the printing press: the rapid multiplication of bold print encouraged writers to seek fame, express themselves more boldly as individuals. The Protestant Reformers then reasserted the rights of the individual on religious grounds, initially declaring that every man could be his own priest; Puritanism especially cultivated what is now called the "Protestant ethic," the type of the "inner-directed" person. The Age of the Enlightenment provided a broader basis for the claims of the person, declaring the dignity of man on naturalistic, humanistic grounds, in that he was a rational being, every person was blessed with some measure of reason; while as a champion of freedom Voltaire went considerably beyond the position of Socrates, in the spirit of his legendary saying: "I disagree with every word you say, and will fight to the death for your right to say it." With the rise of democracy came bills of rights for all men that were characteristically called "natural rights," "inalienable rights," even though very few men throughout history had ever enjoyed them. In America, where English ideals of

liberty had been transported, Thomas Jefferson went further, maintaining not only that common men were entitled to equal rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but that they were fit to govern themselves—an idea that had been rejected by virtually all political thinkers from Plato on, including Voltaire. The United States became the most democratic nation of the time, and also the most pluralistic society, permitting more social and religious as well as political freedom. And it was now, early in the nineteenth century, that the word *individualism* was coined. It appeared in de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, still a classic analysis of the revolutionary new kind of society. Presently Ralph Waldo Emerson made individualism a gospel by declaring that self-trust was the primary source of all virtues, self-reliance the primary duty. "Whoso would be a man," he proclaimed, "must be a non-conformist."

Yet America was already a land of paradox, conspicuous for the basic ambiguities that will concern us from now on, and give more point to the elementary survey of history I have inflicted on you. To de Tocqueville *individualism* was a bad word. It signified something short of the pure egoism that had been so rampant in the Renaissance, but something potentially more insidious: a calm, settled policy of every man for himself, and let the devil take the hindmost. It was apparent in the American devotion to business, which narrowed the pursuit of happiness to a pursuit of wealth. Already in de Tocqueville's day individualism was becoming a gospel of economic individualism, or what would later be dignified as "rugged individualism." It was supported by Adam Smith's doctrine of *laissez faire*, which argued the great social value of free private enterprise; Americans in particular came to believe that the most fundamental, precious freedom was economic freedom, even though the



Founding Fathers had neglected to feature it.<sup>1</sup> The new gospel also drew on the Protestant ethic, with its gospel of work in the Lord's vineyard and the Puritan type of the God-fearing businessman—a historically singular type, since no previous society had exalted business as a primary way of serving God. And the obvious trouble with those who helped God by helping themselves remained that soon they were helping themselves to a great deal, and the more they got, the more perfunctory became the service of God. Economic freedom did not clearly promote the dignity of the individual either, still less his responsibility; the men who made fortunes were often socially irresponsible, the more so because they forgot all that their society had contributed in making possible their success, and fondly believed that they were wholly "self-made" men—a typical American coinage. It has been observed that the self-made man relieves God of an awful responsibility. With every man for himself, the devil was likely to take the foremost too.

Another major source of confusion was a romantic kind of individualism, stemming directly from the Romantic movement. This bred the cult of genius, or especially of the artist as hero. It spread the idea that the essence of individuality was what distinguished a person from his fellows, excluding all that united him to them, and again obscuring his immense debt to his society, which now included this very self-conscious ideal of individuality. Writers had good

<sup>1</sup>Richard Nixon recently provided a striking example when, in taking the examinations for admission to the bar in New York, he was asked to write a 500-word essay on the basic principles of American constitutional government. His essay was printed in the newspapers because the examiners considered it the most brilliant one on the subject that had been handed in in twenty-eight years. Mr. Nixon emphasized that individual liberty was one of the basic principles, but he entirely ignored civil liberties, mentioning only the right of free private enterprise—which is nowhere mentioned in the American Constitution. I cannot forbear from adding that the staff of the introductory course in American government given at my university agreed that if Mr. Nixon's paper had been handed in by a freshman, they would have given it a grade of C.



reason for their common hostility to their society over the last century, since it was ruled by the money spirit, but their hostility was aggravated by the notion of the artist as one by nature set apart from his fellows, which made them more liable to feelings of estrangement or alienation. And though such attitudes were less prevalent in democratic America than they were in Europe, with its long aristocratic tradition, Emerson contributed his bit to the confusion by his declaration that whoso would be a man must be a non-conformist. To maintain personal freedom and dignity, one does not actually have to be a bold non-conformist—any more than Emerson himself was in his private life. While thinking for oneself, one may be quite content to shave, dress conventionally, have only one wife, go to church, or give public lectures; while on the other hand non-conformity can obviously become conventional, even compulsive, as it has with many a bohemian and beatnik. In any case, a great deal of basic conformity is of course absolutely necessary. We can criticize it more easily because we forget how much of it we take for granted, and how it is essential even to the toleration of non-conformity.

In general, I suppose no principle is more liable to abuse than that of individualism. I should therefore now state—rather tardily—what I mean by it. Beginning with the biological fact of individuality, I am assuming that the ideal is an autonomous person, one with a mind, a character, and a life of his own. The ideal is bound to have a selfish aspect, since it involves an effort at self-realization and calls for the maintenance of a personal, private realm; the person must never be completely subordinated to the state or submerged in the group. Nevertheless, simple selfishness tends to limit and warp the development of personality, restrict even the autonomy of the person. Psychological freedom requires a measure of rational self-control, or reasonableness, and this in turn requires the recognition of

responsibilities to the community, not merely as a social necessity, but as a necessity for individual maturity and mental health. The person can fully realize his potentialities, moreover, only in a literate, civilized community; a vast deal of exceptional ability or potential genius must surely have been buried, unrealized, in the peasant masses through the ages. Specifically, I am assuming that one becomes a full-fledged person by developing the capacities for the pursuit of truth, beauty, and goodness that constitute the distinctive worth or dignity of man, and involve the traditional values of high culture. My objection to the gospel of economic individualism is therefore not only that it may encourage selfishness and social irresponsibility, but that it does not necessarily promote a full, free development of individuality, and that historically it has tended rather to narrow and impoverish individuality by obscuring the values of culture.

Substantially I agree with John Stuart Mill that the most precious of freedoms is the right to pursue one's own good in one's own way, so long as one does not directly harm others or interfere with their right to do likewise, and that both the individual and society at large benefit from the fullest possible extension of such freedom. But I should then qualify somewhat Mill's classic argument in *On Liberty*, on the grounds of his own essentially reasonable, humane spirit. He deceived himself, I think, in basing his argument on utility alone, for this clouded his living belief in the dignity or even sanctity of the person. One could argue, for instance, that Hitler's persecution of the Jews promoted the happiness of the greatest number of Germans; but one may be certain that in any case Mill would have absolutely condemned this persecution, just as he would have condemned the tyranny that possibly made the Soviet stronger. I should also emphasize more than he did the complications of individualism, even apart from the difficulty of drawing the line between personal rights and social duties, since almost



anything one says or does is likely to affect others, possibly harm them. While Mill took for granted the values of solidarity and the obligations to the community, he slighted the need of community in a deeper sense: the primary need of a feeling of belonging, of social identity, of security, for the very sake of the freedom and dignity of the person. In the light of modern psychology, and of the mass movements of our time, the deep need of security has become much clearer; for when people feel insecure they are obviously prone to anxiety, then to the indignity of irrational fears and hatreds—to a psychological unfreedom that may lead them to surrender their political freedom, as the Germans did to Hitler. Mill took too optimistic a view of man as a naturally rational, progressive being.

He was quite aware, however, of a profounder paradox of democracy noted by de Tocqueville. In theory dedicated to the ideal of personal freedom, democracy by its very nature tends in practice to menace this freedom and to smother individuality. Rule by the majority breeds the tyranny of public opinion, or the opinion of the majority. This is accordingly the opinion of common men, whose voice counts for much more than it did in the traditional aristocratic societies of the past. The immediate trouble is that their opinions are likely not to be really their own, but held in common—mostly unreasoned, absorbed more or less unconsciously from the social environment, come by in the same way people catch colds. "I know of no country," wrote de Tocqueville in 1835, "in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America." Before him Thomas Jefferson had likewise complained that "the inquisition of public opinion overwhelms in practice the freedom asserted by the laws in theory"; and with an eye to ancient Greece he expressed the hope that "the human mind will some day get back to the freedom it enjoyed two thousand years ago," and America set an



example in moral emancipation too. Emerson was still more critical as he proclaimed his gospel of self-reliance; he preached it so insistently because he felt that most Americans did not trust or really respect themselves, and were afraid to be themselves, because of what other people would think of them.

These pressures to conformity lead to the theme of my next lecture, all the massive pressures against the individual in the modern world. It is an all too familiar theme, the more depressing because of the commonplaces it calls out. But at this point I should repeat that it remains ambiguous. In the democracies the threats to the dignity and freedom of the individual person are not due to simple tyranny, simple perversity, simple stupidity. The problem has been aggravated by a disregard of other commonplaces, due to some want of historical sense—my excuse, once more, for this historical survey.

First, let us remember that conformism was the rule throughout most of history. In no past society was it regarded as a serious problem; the leaders of virtually all societies—the kings, the priests, the sages—wanted nothing more than they wanted conformity or obedience in ordinary men. And let us put in a humane word on behalf of the billions of anonymous conformists through the long ages. The peasant masses always lived a primitive life, often a pretty wretched life, as they still do in the non-Western world; only God knows how many millions of them starved to death, how many more millions suffered agonies for want of medical care. They might remind us that for people who are decently off, as most now are in the Western democracies, the ordinary conventional, routine life may suffice well enough. Today many literary people regard such a life as simply dreary, indecent, almost inhuman. They do some injustice to a great many people of a kind we all know: simple people who are not very independent in mind, who

are content to live by custom, who neither want to be nor are capable of being sturdy non-conformists, yet who are still decent people, friendly and often kindly, generally maintaining their simple integrity, pursuing their good as they see it, doing some good to others, certainly less harm than many rugged individualists do. Their critics include too many men who are too sure they know what is best for other people.

In particular their critics are too free with crude labels, or the stereotypes they deplore in popular thought. I think we could now do, for example, without the term *bourgeois*. This led Marx to his remarkably crude division of our society into just two classes, a violent simplification that still makes it impossible for his supposedly realistic followers to understand the Western democracies, or modern capitalism either. But the term remains standard in literary criticism of our society. *Bourgeois* then means narrow, conventional, stodgy, smug, materialistic—traits that are of course all too common, and that help to define our problem. Once upon a time, however, *middle-class* had more agreeable connotations, such as industrious, prudent, solid, respectable in the best sense—traits that are also quite common among the kind of people called bourgeois. We might remember that this class played the leading role in the historic struggle to establish the rights of the individual, that over the last century it has not only bred but supported most of its critics, and that presumably most of us here come from it. Sociologists now distinguish such classes as upper-lower, lower-middle, upper-middle, and lower-upper, all of which I suppose might be called bourgeois by either Marxist or literary standards, but include a lot of people who look quite diverse to me, not to mention that I am not sure just where I myself fit into this picture.

Such diversity brings up a different kind of oversight, or failure to appreciate the uniqueness of the Western achieve-



ment. The encouragement of individuality naturally led to the growth of a pluralistic society, involving a wide diversity of belief that is likely to be unpleasing to a philosophical or a sociological eye. Mill was among the first thinkers to maintain that such diversity was not merely the price that had to be paid for liberty, but was itself a positive good, a necessary means to growth or possible improvement. Today, however, many thinkers worry over our "divided loyalties," which are a logical consequence of a pluralistic society, as of the democratic idea that the state exists to serve the people, not vice versa. Social and political scientists still tend to hanker for the Platonic ideal of complete stability, harmony, and order, or at least to fear that a free society is no match for a totalitarian society with a uniform ideology. There is much talk in the United States now about the "national consensus," that is, the general agreement on basic principles needed to hold the nation together. Writers are saying that we need a more uniform philosophy, a more definite agreement on the absolute truths of democracy and Christianity; or in other words, it appears that we need a kind of high-class conformity.

This seems to me a serious confusion. Granted the plain necessity of a national consensus, it remains strictly impossible for men in free societies today ever to agree on the first and last questions about God, the good life, or the meaning and purpose of man's life; but neither is such a consensus necessary or even desirable. I should define the essential agreement rather in the terms of Mill, as a public agreement on the right to disagree peaceably on all first and last questions, and to make the good life a private affair, allow individuals to go freely about their personal business, so long as they do not interfere with the rights of other persons to do the same. I remain fond of the saying of the emancipated slave in America, that he liked this here freedom—there was a nice kind of looseness about it. In these terms I believe



we may perceive more clearly the threats to individuality and personal freedom, and contend against them without necessarily imperiling the national interest; for most men today can be trusted to be nationalistic and self-righteous enough, sure that God is on the side of their country.

Having paid my respects to the many good simple conformists, I should now add that the crisis of our revolutionary world calls for much more than decent conformity. It calls for not only nerve but a critical, enterprising spirit, a willingness to experiment and adventure, a capacity for hard, independent, responsible thinking—for qualities that we cannot expect of every simple citizen, but must hope to find in our political, business, and cultural leaders, the molders of public opinion. These give me a further excuse for dwelling at length on the pressures against the individual, the thinking person; for sociologists and anthropologists notwithstanding, I still do not believe that society or culture can think by itself. Meanwhile the fact that our society is still pluralistic, and that men disagree widely and openly over public policy, is a sign of our actual freedom.