

SOCIETIES WITHIN:
SELFHOOD THROUGH DIVIDUALISM & RELATIONAL EPISTEMOLOGY

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Most see having their individuality stifled as equivalent to the terrible forced conformity found within speculative fiction like George Orwell's *1984*. However, the oppression of others by those in power has often been justified through ideologies of individualism. If we look to animistic traditions, could we bridge the gap between these extremes? What effect would such a reevaluation of identity have on the modern understanding of selfhood? The term 'individual' suggests an irreducible unit of identity carried underneath all of our titles and experiences—the *real* self. By linking Marilyn Strathern's elaboration of *dividualism* and Nurit Bird-David's *relational epistemology*, a clear contrast forms between the animistic sense of self and that of the West. This system of selfhood more readily encourages a life lived in Henri Bergson's sense of *duration* and sets up a state of *dialogical discourse*, as seen in Mikhail Bakhtin's work. These concepts challenge the traditional praise for individuality and exposes how individualism can be used as a tool of marginalization as seen in Michel Foucault's critique of *authorship*. I argue that pursuing a sense of self rooted in these concepts instead of individualism mitigates this marginalization via a more socially aware cultural environment that the traditional Western sense of self fails to create.

People take for granted the concept of an *individual* self that is profoundly distinct from those around them. The term *individual* suggests that who we are is an irreducible unit of identity carried underneath all of our titles and experiences—the *real* self. While many have challenged this idea in the past, a habit of compromise instead of revolution has prevented the fullest realization of alternative ways to imagine personhood. Most see having their individuality stifled as equivalent to the terrible forced conformity found in speculative fiction like George Orwell's *1984*.

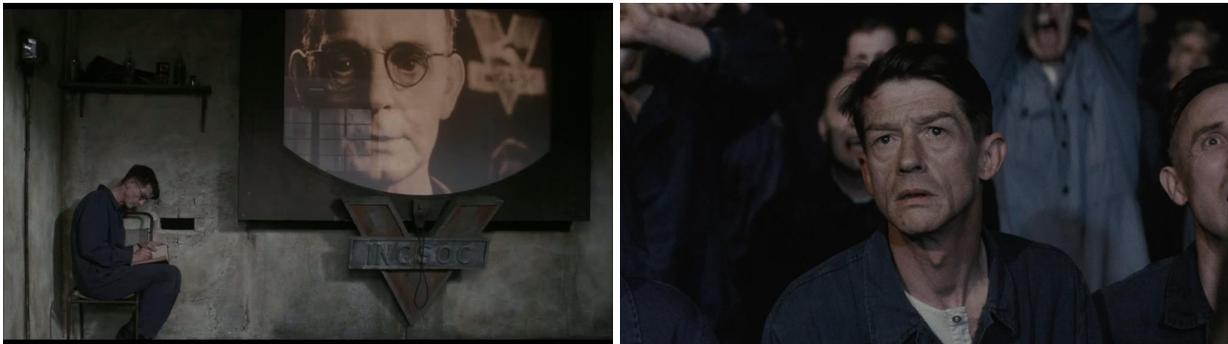


Fig. 1 & 2. Stills from the film *1984*, Directed by Michael Radford (1984)

However, throughout much of Western history we can see examples of individuals asserting selfish dominance and exclusion over others while often justifying such behavior through an individualistic ideology. Can we bridge the gap between these two extremes? What effect could a conscious and deliberate reevaluation of selfhood and identity through the lens of *dividualism* and *relational epistemology* have on the modern understanding of selfhood?

Marilyn Strathern clarifies McKim Marriott's notion of *dividualism* as a sense of composite identity comprised of distinct and interrelated parts with, most importantly, no one aspect having dominion over the others. This alternate sense of selfhood arises in what Nurit Bird-David calls *relational epistemology*, or understanding the world as made up of relationships and doing so from a fluid point of view that is defined by those relationships. Such a system of

thought and selfhood more readily encourages a life lived in Henri Bergson's sense of *duration* and sets up a state of *dialogical discourse*, as seen in Mikhail Bakhtin's work. When taken together, these concepts challenge our tacit acceptance of individuality as laudable and exposes how individualism can be used as a tool of marginalization as seen in Foucault's critique of *authorship*. I will argue that pursuing an alternative sense of self rooted in *dividual* identity through a *relational epistemology* inspired by animistic worldviews mitigates this marginalization via more a socially aware cultural environment that an individualistic approach lacks.

Dustin Yellin's *Psychogeographies* series will serve as an artistic representation of the concepts discussed here. Each sculpture consists of life-sized human forms made up of layered photos, shapes, and colors bound within blocks of laminated glass sheets.



Fig. 3-5. *Psychogeographies* 58, 55, 45, Dustin Yellin (2014)

There is no singular outline or primary image defining these figures. They are the aggregate of a seemingly countless number of images and forms—an apparent coalescence that in actuality

lacks any finalizable unity. These are astonishingly appropriate representations of the constellation-like structure of *dividual* selfhood.

In order to grasp the value of *dividualism* and *relational epistemology*, we must understand the anthropological background of the terms. Developed in the 1970s and '80s, *dividualism* is reflective of the postmodern sentiments of the time and directly contrasts the Western sense of individualism. While coined in 1976 by McKim Marriott during his study of South Asian cultures, it was Marilyn Strathern's application of the term to Melanesian society in 1988 that led us to consider it philosophically.

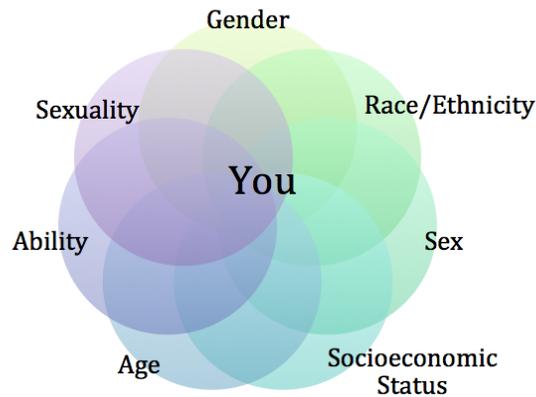


Fig. 6. Illustration of dividual identity

In this system of selfhood, there is no core to a single person—no single feature that defines them in a manner more ‘true’ than any other. What we might refer to as the self is nothing more than the overlap of all of the titles, experiences, biologies, and so on of a single person. They exist not as a subject held within a web of being, but as the very web itself. Strathern is exceptionally harsh in her critique of previous scholars’ application of Western-centric metaphysical concepts to non-Western peoples and pursues her study of Melanesian peoples through cultural relativism. By situating Melanesian culture as distinctly outside of the Western tradition, it was easier to let go of the presumed primacy of individualism inherent in Western

thought of the time. In the absence of such presumptions, *dividualism* can more readily be considered valid instead of unreasonable.

Her observations of Melanesian culture revealed people who “contain a generalized society within” and are “frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produce them.”¹ People are not forced under the umbrella of a singularly defined society that they either do or do not match. Instead, the collective group is defined by the sum of its population as a holistic reflection of each person in the same way that each of them is a holistic reflection of their own experiences and attributes. In short, both the self and one’s culture take on a *dividualized* web-like structure. Strathern casts the “cultural construct” of individuality as the “embodiment of social relations” and identifies ‘society’ as “a unifying force that gathers persons who present themselves as otherwise irreducibly unique.”² Here, ‘society’ is a dualistic term that implies a collectivism through cooperative individualism. Those within societies “are imagined as conceptually distinct from the relations that bring them together” while emphasizing the commonality of societal unity over all else.³ Plural relations within the self are transformed into dualistic relations as that which identifies with societal unity takes precedence over other parts of one’s identity in an act of domination.⁴

Nurit Bird-David’s work in Southern India regarding *relational epistemology* provides the larger conceptual framework for such personal and societal dynamics while also hinting at the animistic roots of such a system. This is the foundation of her efforts to rehabilitate Western understandings of animistic worldviews which have historically been seen as nothing more than

¹ Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift : Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*, (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1988), . p. 13.

² Ibid., p. 12.

³ Ibid., p. 13.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 14-15.

“failed epistemology.”⁵ When viewed through the lens of *relational epistemology*, the animistic practice of ascribing personhood to objects is a reflection of how all levels of personhood are derived through a series of relationships that build up between each other. *Dividuation* is key to acting within a *relational epistemology* as she describes with noteworthy elegance.

I am conscious of the *relatedness* with my interlocutor *as I engage with her*, attentive to what she does in relation to what I do, to how she talks and listens to me as I talk and listen to her, to what happens simultaneously and mutually to me, to her, to *us*.⁶



Fig. 7. Stills from *The Conversation*, Lucea Spinelli (2016)
This work serves as an illustration of personal interaction within a relational epistemology.

Both people are seen as part of a multiplayer unit of identity actively developing due to the interactions of its parts without the need for any sort of cohesion. These two concepts do not just

⁵ Nurit Bird-David, “‘Animism’ Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology’, [The University of Chicago Press, Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research], *Current anthropology*, Vol. 40, no. S1, February 1999, p. S67.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. S72.

pair together to form a widely applicable epistemological system. They offer a fresh perspective on an issue that is quietly present throughout the work of many Western philosophers.

Bergson's concept of *duration* is a clear example of this. In short, it suggests that our sense of distinct life events that can be isolated from one another is nothing more than an illusion for the sake of rationality.⁷ Consider Bergson's analysis of one's view of their own personal history. We tend to imagine life events as separate and distinct units lined up chronologically. If this is so, then there must be something binding these events together in order to form a relation of some kind. The *ego* is imagined as a 'string' running beneath these segments of time in our personal history.⁸ This is our individual self—the truest aspect of our identity that is present within each event and tying it to our sense of being. While we may default to this understanding, how do we know that our immutable individuality is present *within* these events? Why would it not be intrinsically part of them, influenced by them, and therefore changed? If *duration* is entertained as a valid concept, how could our individuality be eternal and absolute if it is in a constant state of becoming?

In broader human history, the same ideas spreading from culture to culture over time are always influenced by the previous ideas of the receiving culture. Ideas do not move about as pure concepts from moment to moment or place to place. They always change. If this is so, then why would one's idea of who they are and what defines them in most absolute sense not follow the same pattern of change? Could individuality simply be a symbol contrived in order to make sense of one's personal history; "an artificial imitation of the internal life" meant to make the haze of life rationally intelligible?⁹ The influence of one's personal history upon itself is

⁷ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, (The Modern Library, 1944), . p. 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

analogous to that of others upon the *dividual* self when viewed within a *relational epistemology*. Fuzzy logic takes over as nothing is ever isolated and the entirety of one's life and self enter into a state of flux. If we return to Yellin's work, we can further see how he visualizes this Bergsonian notion of the self, albeit in a fixed state.



Fig. 8-10. *Psychogeographies 41, 54, 61*, Dustin Yellin (2013-14)

There is no ‘core’ to each figure, no singular ego upon which the form is built. Each is a cacophony of images analogous to the momentary events of one's life. This is the messy and difficult to define reality that lies beneath the illusory order of individuality. So, what happens when two of these *dividual* entities meet and begin affecting each other?

Bakhtin's notion of *dialogical ideas*, as developed through his analysis of Dostoevsky's ‘polyphonic’ style of novel, bridges the gap between *relational epistemology* and *duration* through a sense of continual development and exchange. In a *dialogical discourse*, ideas are not defined by an immaterial and external entity but by those who embody and live through them as a vital aspect of their identity.¹⁰ They grow and mature through interactions with others and their

¹⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, (University of Minnesota Press, 1984), . pp. 5–7.

embodied ideas. This interaction in a state of equilibrium, as seen in works like *The Brothers Karamazov*, is in opposition to a *monological* progression where many possible truths are dialectically synthesized into one.

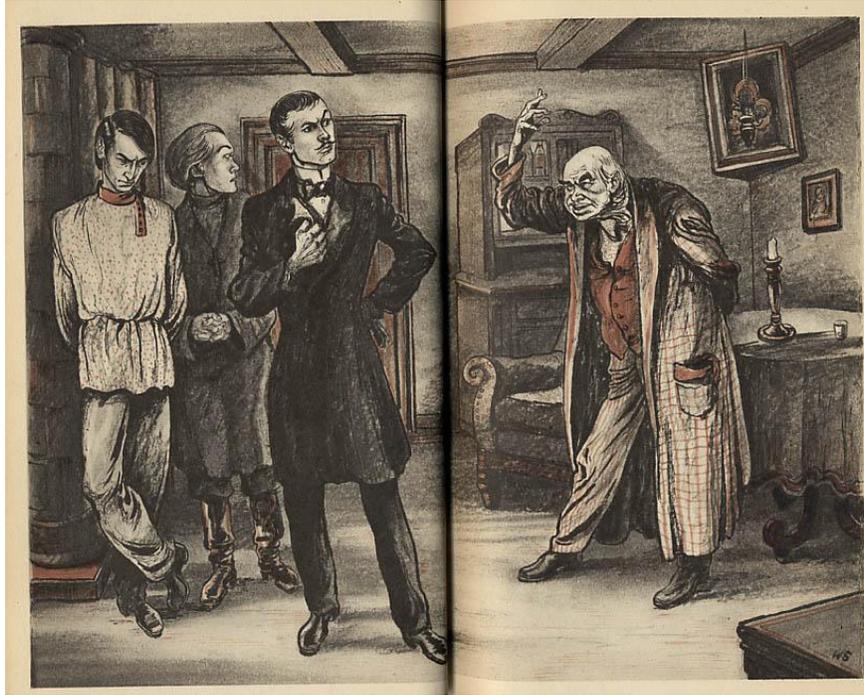


Fig. 11. Selection from the *Illustrated Brothers Karamazov*, William Sharp (1945)

Monologism reduces all ideologies into either true or untrue based upon a certain worldview and reinforces the idea of a unified consciousness.¹¹ This is the same mechanism identified by Marilyn Strathern in her assessment of the domination of ‘society’ and runs counter to Dostoevsky's work.

Instead, *dialogical discourse* allows a person to enter a constant state of becoming with limitless potential through his or her interactions with others—the dialog between them. Even in agreement, these *dialogical* ideas never merge into a unified one. They are in a constant state of development like the characters who embody them.¹² Not only does this reinforce Bergson's

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 95.

notion of *duration*, but it shows how the mechanics of *relational epistemology* guide the development of *dividual* selfhood. It is the web of relationships we form, both with others and within ourselves, that make us who we are, shape our understanding of the world, and allow for constant creation and development.

These concepts challenge our tacit acceptance of individuality as laudable and expose how it can be used as a tool of marginalization. To better understand this implication, we need to look to Foucault's critique of *authorship* as a tool of punishment. *Authorship* is reliant on individuality being accepted as a naturally valid state of selfhood and has little connection to the functional reality of the work produced. Collecting works under a single *author* reflects the assertion of "a relationship of homogeneity" that acts as a verbal shorthand and indicates a special ideological discourse.¹³

Ascribing *authorship* to something establishes ownership of the mode of thought present in the work. That mode of thought can now be linked to a single person who can thus be punished or praised for whatever real or perceived impact they may have. The insidious aspect of this is how *authorship* in conjunction with individualism fashions explanations for deviant modes of thought.¹⁴ To destroy a thought is terribly difficult if not impossible. There is no material object to contain its influence. *Authorship* solves this problem by attaching a person to the thought as its sole representative, as its source. The author's individual history is seen as intrinsic to the work—above all other influences—as part of their expression. This allows for their ideas to be seen as reflecting an individual worldview that can readily be dismissed. The ideological discourse within the work is isolated from representing wider society or even

¹³ Michel Foucault, 'What Is an Author?', in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art in theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, (Blackwell Publishers: Malden, 2002), p. 950.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 952.

humanity. It belongs solely to the *author* who can now be branded as a radical madman or heretic disconnected from their own culture.

Relational epistemology and its promotion of *dividualism* challenges the validity of punishment and dismissal via *authorship* as one person cannot logically be blamed for ideas that are a reflection of others in society. Foucault argued that much of human history was made up of ideological constructs that did not necessarily reflect reality, or “stories we have made up in order to make the world intelligible and acceptable.”¹⁵ If we follow Foucault’s Bergsonian suggestion that such constructs exist simply to make the world “intelligible and acceptable,” then who is to say that the individual self is a naturally occurring part of human selfhood? In fact, we see how it benefits the status-quo to promote individualism as a means of isolating people from one another. Even collectivist societies require a forced individuality that represses divergent aspects of a person for the sake of emphasizing commonality, as Strathern pointed out in her work. Embracing a *relational epistemology* would lead people to pay close attention not to their singular role in the world around them, but to their effect on others and *vice versa*. If we return to Yellin’s work for a moment as a metaphor for the *dividual* self, his use of collage can be recognized as immensely valuable.

¹⁵ Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen Marie M. Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy*, (Oxford University Press: New York, 1969), . p. 303.



Fig. 12. *Psychogeography 43*, Dustin Yellin (2014)

These images from popular culture layered within his constellations of the human form symbolize how a person is constructed from every experience and relationship they have. The self is never isolated from the people or objects that surround it. It is a self-affective living archive of those things, people, and events. When comprehending others in this way, consideration of the impact of one's actions would be essential and deviant behavior would prompt investigation of the perpetrator's cultural and the spatiotemporal conditions instead of the isolated history of one person removed from society by their irregular behavior. Through a *dividualistic* sense of self, that behavior would be seen as the result of numerous relationships building up the person's identity over time and, equally, capable of rehabilitation through further positive relationships.

This paper is not an attack on the influence of biological factors on the development of human consciousness like DNA and physical irregularities or impairments in the brain. Such factors would be part of the internal *dialogical discourse* of the self and merit further study. This

is also not a broader argument on one side of the nature versus nurture question. The goal of this paper is to present an animism-inspired alternative to Western culture's acceptance and praise of individuality that better serves a stable and inclusive environment encouraging all manner of identities and their collaborative development.

This idea of recognizing the humanity and value of people we interact with is a strong theme within Western philosophy. The fact that the concepts of *relational epistemology* and *dividualism* were pioneered in the study of non-Western cultures, yet are applicable within Western philosophy, speaks to their potential in analyzing the basis of human selfhood and its development beyond cultural boundaries. These are concepts based within humanity's shared history as an object-oriented species and the intuitive value/power we ascribe to those objects. Bergson and Bakhtin's complementary concepts of *duration* and *dialogical ideas* are emblematic of how *dividualism* and *relational epistemology* not only fit into many lines of discourse within the Western tradition, but also enhance them. Foucault's critique of *authorship* within his larger body of work regarding societal marginalization provides evidence of how the individualistic model is ripe for exploitation by those who succumb to narcissistic tendencies.

Entertaining this alternative view of selfhood as dependent on relationships with others creates a sense of self emphasizing community more effectively than a unified society of individuals. When the self is a result of relations and interactions, acts of altruism and compassion no longer require triumph over the individual self. Such behavior becomes natural and encouraged as the very fabric of one's identity is interwoven into the way he or she engages with others. The exploitation of others is then equal to the exploitation of the self and the negative effects of such behavior would be recognized as damaging to both parties. Such an

increase in personal responsibility benefits everyone in society and is worth pursuing as it limits potential marginalization and provides a strong and clearly identifiable counter to rampant individualism and its negative impacts.

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