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# Individuality and Sociality in Ancient Israel

**Abstract:** In this paper, I aim to show that (1) human beings cannot escape their relatedness to other human beings and the world; (2) collectivity, on the one hand, can be understood as a social character orientation that is typical of most members of society and embedded in most individuals; while (3) on the other hand, as a socio-political agenda, collectivity can assume different forms and may attempt to leave room for (or to restrict) modes of individuation. Finally, (4) we find a contrast between individuality and collectivity when, in a culture in which tradition rules supreme, single individuals break free from social expectations and try to develop something original.

In diesem Beitrag wird gezeigt, dass (1) menschliche Wesen ihrem Bezogen-Sein auf andere Menschen und die Welt nicht entkommen können, (2) Kollektivität einerseits als gesellschaftlich geprägte Charakter-Orientierung verstanden werden kann, die typisch für die meisten Mitglieder einer Gemeinschaft ist und die den meisten Individuen eingeschrieben ist, während (3) sie andererseits als sozio-politisches Programm in verschiedenen Formen vorliegen kann und so möglicherweise Raum lässt für Weisen der Individualisierung (oder diese begrenzt). Schließlich kann (4) ein Gegensatz zwischen Individualität und Kollektivität ausgemacht werden, wenn in einer traditionsbasierten Kultur einzelne Individuen gegen anders konnotierte gesellschaftliche Erwartungshaltungen etwas Neues und Eigenes entwickeln.

## 1 Individual and Social Character Theory

Human beings always live in a society which is larger than themselves,[1] and are always subject to certain decisions over which they have no control: we do not ask to be born, we do not decide on the name we are given, and we are remembered in a way which we cannot fully control. Isolates like anchorites and other hermits may be an exception to some rules but, like everyone else, they grow up in a so-

**1** I wish to thank Dorothea Beck (Hamburg), Sarah Jennings (Aarhus), and Nicholas Wrigley (Aarhus) for improving my English, and I am deeply grateful to my colleague Hans Jørgen Lundager Jensen (Aarhus) for discussing this paper in its (almost) final form with me. In addition, I am most thankful for being able to present and discuss the last part of this paper at a conference in Bochum (June 29, 2017), and main parts of this paper at a conference in Ascona (May 9, 2018).


https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110742428-019

ciety until they decide to leave society behind. "Being-alone is a deficient mode of being-with, its possibility is a proof for the latter."[2] Even in the Gilgamesh epos, Enkidu, the solitary wild man, lives the first part of his life not all alone but together with the animals as his social equals. There is no escape from relatedness, whatever humanity's relationships may look like.

Unlike turtles, human beings do not lay eggs in the sand and leave their babies to fend for themselves, but raise their young for many years – far longer than any other animal. There is no escape from growing up in society, whatever this society may look like. The smallest unit in which people usually grow up may be coined a family, and this familial unit helps to rear young people with a view to instilling basic social values in them. This is why the familial unit may be seen as an agent or medium of society which helps to socialize young people so they can find their place in society and behave according to society's basic norms and values: "*The family thus may be considered to be the psychological agent of society*."[3] At the same time, in any kind of society there are spheres of privacy that are beyond society's watchful eyes.[4] This also applies to pre-modern cultures in which there is no sphere of privacy in the modern sense; and it also evidently applies to modern totalitarian states which try to extinguish the autonomous domain of private spheres.

As an anthropological constant, every human is both an individual being and a socialized person. As an individual, every human has distinct character traits, bodily, habitually, and psychologically. However, this kind of basic anthropological constant is different from some modern understandings of the individual. In the modern sense, the individual possesses its own inwardness, its distinct inner depths; and the individual's task is to unfold, develop, and fully evolve his or her capabilities – in contrast to society's norms and expectations if necessary. The main question, therefore, pertains to the culturally and historically distinct relationships between society and its members, and what kinds of individuality society allows and perhaps even promotes.

From the perspective of social psychoanalysis, Erich Fromm distinguished, within the individual, between individual and social character and developed a

**2** Heidegger 1996, 113.

**3** Fromm 1969, 285. Italics in the original.

**4** In ancient Israel, certain localities could sometimes offer a sphere of privacy, for instance the housetop (cf. Jos 2:6; 2 Sam 11:2; Psalm 102:8, Prov 21:9, but see 2 Sam 16:22), the garden (cf. Gen 3:8; Cant 4:12; but see Cant 8:13), the shadow under a shack in the field or trees (cf. Jon 4:5–6), a room in the house (cf. Judge 3:20–25; Jer 36; but see Jer 35:2–4), or simply when wandering (cf. Gen 28:10–22; 14:1–9), herding (cf. 1 Sam 16:11), or lying on the bed (cf., e.g., Ps 36:5; 63:7; Job 7:13–15).

social character theory that was taken up by the Frankfurt School.[5] Within the individual, Erich Fromm regards both types of character (individual and social) as part of the individual. The characteristics typical of each individual may be referred to as *individual character*, while characteristics shared by most members of a group may be called *social character*.

> The social character necessarily is less specific than the individual character. In describing the latter we deal with the whole of the traits which in their particular configuration form the personality structure of this or that individual. The social character comprises only a selection of traits, *the essential nucleus of the character structure of most members of a group which has developed as the result of the basic experiences and mode of life common to that group*.[6]

In contrast to an essentialist view, social character is not a mental unit *sui generis*, existing independently of society's members, as if it were hovering above their heads.[7] Instead, in a broad sense, character traits and habits (both conscious and unconscious), cultural and social attitudes as well as corresponding forms of behavior shared by most members of a group may be termed *social character*. With "orientation" added to this term, the focus lies on the *dominant mode of relatedness* of the self towards the outer world which is typical of most members of the group. The term "character orientation" describes, both for the individual character and the social character, the "particular organization" of different character traits,[8] "by which the individual relates himself to the world."[9] In this sense, a dominant social character orientation is a reconstructed ideal type in a Weberian sense, prevalent in and typical of a group or society. In addition, a social character orientation is also the medium through which socio-economic realities may influence the religious symbol system:[10]

**5** Cf., e.g., Kessler/Funk 1992; Jay $^{2}$1996. For Erich Fromm in Hebrew Bible research, cf. Dietrich 2015.

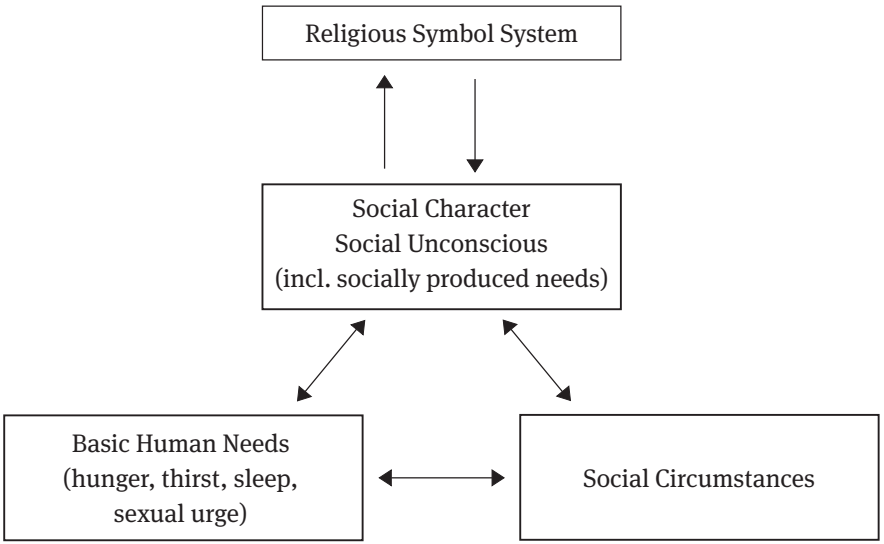
**6** Fromm 1969, 275–276. Italics in the original.

**7** Such an essentialist perspective still seems to be relevant in some modern works on corporate personality and collective consciousness, cf., e.g., Gloy 2009. For previous discussions of the concept of corporate personality in ancient Israel, cf. Wheeler Robinson $^{2}$1981; Porter 1965; Rogerson 1970. For a recent overview and critique, cf., e.g., Dietrich 2010, 8–11, 19–29; Hagedorn 2012; Frevel 2015, 75–78. For main aspects of legal relationships between individual and community, cf. most recently Schellenberg 2017 (Lit.).

**8** Fromm 1947, 57.

**9** Fromm 1947, 59.

**10** Cf. Dietrich 2015, 272–275.




With regard to identity building and the concept of individual and social character, Jan Assmann distinguishes, within the individual, between individual and personal identity:

> *Individual identity* is the coherent self-image that builds itself up in the consciousness of the individual through features that (a) distinguish them significantly from everyone else and (b) remain constant across the various phases of their development. [...] *Personal identity*, on the other hand, is the embodiment of all the roles, qualities, and talents that give the individual his own special place in the social network.[11]

While the main point here is that these general theories apply to anthropological constants and therefore to all individuals and societies, the question of how ancient Israel fits into these schemes remains to be answered. In the following section, I would like to pinpoint one main social character orientation which is typical of ancient Israel: outer-directed listening orientation.

**11** Assmann 2011, 113.

## 2 Outer-Directed Listening Orientation in Ancient Israel

The family is one of the agents of society which forms character traits in the individual that are typical of all or most members of the society in question. And this is also true of ancient Israel. In the family, the head of the household, the father figure and patriarch, represents the household vis-à-vis society in general. And within his own household he has to ensure that his wife/wives, children, maids, and servants adopt the appropriate cultural habits and behave according to society's expectations. Although we do not know very much about ancient Israelite schools,[12] they were probably very similar to schools in ancient Ugarit or Mesopotamia.[13] If the master of the household could afford to send his children to school (either in a private house or in a palace or temple), these children would also be introduced to social norms there. Both in schools and at gatherings of the assembly at the city gate or in the king's wise council, social character was continually being formed.

One main example of social character orientation is the so-called "listening heart," which was typical not only of the Hebrew Bible (cf. the topical expression in 1 Kings 3:9)[14] but also of the ancient Near East and Egypt in particular.[15] The term "listening heart" pertains to a social habitus whose main attitude is not to reveal one's own inner depths, or to present something original at the city gate or in the king's council,[16] but to be open to the ruling cultural norms and habitual forms of behavior. In terms of biblical texts, this means internalizing the instructions contained in traditional wisdom and law.

This is why listening (שמע) is a key concept for social character training, focusing on exterior, given traditions instead of a person's own inner depths.[17] In

**12** Cf., e.g., Rollston 2010, esp. 91–126; Schmidt 2015; and, most recently, Grund-Wittenberg 2017 (Lit.).

**13** For Ugarit, cf., e.g., Cohen 2013, 21–35. For Mesopotamia, cf., e.g., Charpin 2010, 17–67. For ancient Egypt, cf., e.g., Brunner 1957, 10–55; Quack 2002.

**14** Cf., e.g., Müllner 2006, 20–26. The most recent contribution to the "heart" is Janowski 2015; 2019, 148–157. He distinguishes between three phases: In the first phase, the heart stands for the integration of the individual into the community (as in Proverbs). In Deuteronomy, in the second phase, there is an internalization of the individual's relationship with God. But it is only in the third phase, in some late texts of the Psalms, Prophets, Ecclesiastes, and Sirach, that there emerges a new kind of self-consciousness.

**15** Cf. Brunner 1988, 3–41; Assmann 1993.

**16** For originality, cf. section four, below.

**17** The passages to follow in this chapter build upon my own article: Dietrich 2012.

this sense, the Hebrew concept of listening includes both hearing and obeying. Thinking is mainly what I coin a "listening thinking"[18], which includes the dimension of "obeying listening."[19] In an Egyptian analogy, this can best be observed in the epilogue of the Egyptian *Teachings of Ptahhotep*, where we find a word play with the word *sḏm* ("to listen"):[20]

> P534 Beneficial is hearing (*sḏm*) to a son, who hears (*sḏmw*),
> P535 for hearing (*sḏm*) infiltrates into the hearer (*sḏmw*),
> P536 and in this way a hearer (*sḏmw*) will become someone obedient (*sḏmj*).

The heart does not draw on its own inner thoughts, but rather acts as a "listening heart" (1 Kgs 3:9); it listens to sensations, experiences, and commandments, and integrates them. In this view, a person's heart is not inner-directed but other-directed. The "listening heart," as Carol Newsom puts it, submits itself "to an external authority."[21] This phenomenon is not only a social fact, but also a good and right commandment, as seen in Prov 23:26:

> Prov 23:26
> Give, my son, your heart to me, and your eyes may be pleased with [or: may observe] my ways.

This should not lead to the exclusion of Michael Carasik's[22] and Bernd Janowski's[23] critiques regarding outdated theories about the "Hebrew mind," which was, in contrast to ancient Greece,[24] supposed to be bent on hearing and not so much

**18** In modern philosophy, Heidegger and Gadamer describe thinking as a hearing art, cf. Barbarić 2005.

**19** However, I do not regard "taxonomic thinking" (including "seeing thinking") as missing from the Hebrew Bible, nor do I think it meaningful to oppose Hebrew and Greek thinking over against each other, like, e.g., Boman 1970. Instead, different thinking modes seem to be present in the Hebrew Bible, cf. Dietrich 2022.

**20** Cf. Burkard/Thissen 2008, 100.

**21** Carol Newsom (2012, 10–14) is right in stating that the "heart" (as well as the "spirit") is capable of moral agency, albeit the "good" heart – the one that makes the right decisions – does not decide autonomously and according to its own wants and needs, but makes decisions along the lines of traditional wisdom and God's commandments. Thus, the "listening heart" submits itself "to an external authority" (12).

**22** Carasik 2006, 32–43; cf. Lakoff/Johnson 1999, 238–240.

**23** Janowski 2013, 86–90.

**24** Bruno Snell highlights the importance of seeing for the ancient Greeks (Snell 1924, 20–39, 59–71; [5]1980, 13–16), and describes the Greeks as "ocular people" (Snell 1924, 69). Building upon this, Torleif Boman contrasts the Greek way of seeing with the importance of Hebrew hearing, cf. Boman 1970 [1952], 206. However, Snell also highlights the importance of hearing for the Greeks with regard to Greek Σύνεσις (Snell 1924, 40–59). In addition, neither in Plato and Aristotle, nor in the

on seeing.[25] However, pertaining to socialization in the family and the transmission of knowledge by schooling, and especially pertaining to wisdom traditions, hearing does seem to play the most important part.

Therefore, in my view, there is an outer-directedness, an outer-directed "listening orientation" in ancient Israel that is much stronger than in modern individualist cultures. However, this difference does not mean that there was no room at all in ancient Israel for developing an individuality of one's own, or that modern individualist cultures do not develop a social character of their own. There are indeed many examples of social character being developed in modern cultures: a typical modern marketing orientation,[26] a typical modern self-orientation,[27] or a typical modern flexible orientation that habitually aims to dissolve personal boundaries.[28] As these examples (which are typical of modern social character orientations) may show, the historical differences between ancient Israel and modern Western social character orientations are more significant than we might otherwise be tempted to assume.

## 3 The Grid-Group Theory

Though the priestly source and the deuteronomistic layers are nowadays subject to ardent controversy, their main ideas with regard to community building may still be scrutinized. Turning from a perspective of social character theory to cultural anthropology, I will try to make use of the so-called grid-group theory developed by Mary Douglas in her book *In the Wilderness*.[29] This book presents itself as an interpretation of the biblical book of Numbers. The problem with her approach is that she regards Numbers as a strand of the priestly source,[30] while most scholars nowadays regard many texts from Numbers as belonging to late redactors. However, her grid-group theory may be applied to priestly texts found in the Pentateuch (Priestly Source and Holiness School) on the one hand and, on the other

Hebrew Bible is thinking identified as a form of sensual experience only (esp. hearing or seeing thinking). E.g., Isa 11:3–4 reveals explicitly that the writer assumes that correct judgment goes beyond hearing or seeing and can grasp realities that lie beyond what the senses present on the sensual stage, cf. Dietrich 2022, 19–20.

**25** Cf. Wolff 1974, 74–75.

**26** Cf. Fromm 1947, 67–82.

**27** Cf. Funk 2005.

**28** Cf. Funk 2011.

**29** For the following, cf. Douglas 2001; Lundager Jensen 2015.

**30** Cf., e.g., Douglas 2001, 38.

hand, to late-deuteronomistic and post-deuteronomistic layers to be found in the Pentateuch, as well as to some post-exilic books and strands which show late- and post-deuteronomistic influence, like Ezra–Nehemiah and Malachi. Both biblical programs (priestly and deuteronomistic) develop a social map that aims to limit individual identity and emphasize personal identity by developing a kind of *protreptic ethics*. While "the ethics of pre-exilic Yahwism might be expected to be paraenetic, reflecting the life of a people not trying to distinguish themselves from the surrounding world; that of the post-exilic Jewish communities protreptic, since it required a commitment to live differently from the surrounding population."[31]

However, the priestly and the deuteronomistic programs support different kinds of personal identity. Building upon and criticizing Max Weber, in her grid-group theory, Mary Douglas distinguishes between two types of groups, or societies, and two types of grids, or hierarchies, answering the question whether group cohesion and/or grid hierarchy is strong or weak.[32]

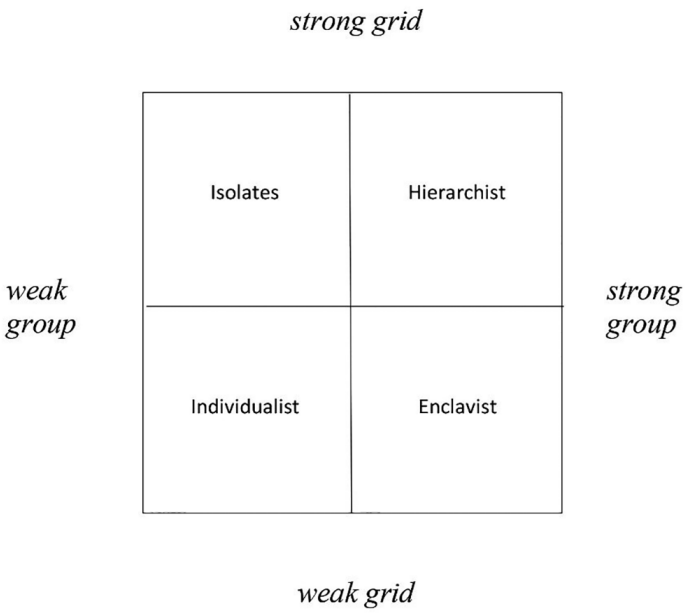



**Figure 1:** The grid-group scheme following Douglas, *Wilderness*, 45, and Jensen, Abraham, 331.

**31** Barton, 2014, 151, building upon Wolter 2009, esp. 122–169.

**32** Cf. Lundager Jensen 2015, 331–334.

In the Hebrew Bible, the deuteronomistic and priestly programs both aim to achieve strong group cohesion. Individual freedom appears limited compared with the envisioned power of the group over its members. The difference pertains to the grid. The hierarchical thinking of the priestly source aims to achieve a strong grid, a grid of fixed hierarchies typical of the priestly universe. Humans, animals, and things are classified, often according to analogical and binary thinking; and a distinction is drawn between holy and profane, pure and impure, disgusting and normal.[33] As for the envisioned hierarchy, the anointed priest, or high priest, priests in general, leaders, and laypeople follow each other. Group cohesion and grid hierarchy are upheld by a fixed set of rituals. These classifications and rules help to uphold a strong inner group cohesion, which is why the hierarchy's relation to outsiders can be relatively tolerant.[34] Because such a hierarchical society does not need strong individual characters, the description of the high priest Aaron as an individual character (for instance) is rather flat.[35] His individual identity is weak while his personal identity, his identity according to his role as high priest, is strong.

In opposition to the priestly program, group cohesion and grid hierarchy are different in late redactional (i.e. late- and post-deuteronomistic) texts found in the Pentateuch; and in some post-exilic books and strands which show deuteronomistic influence, like Ezra–Nehemiah or Mal 2:10–16. In these texts, the group does not comprise a strong hierarchy but resembles an enclave with socially weak but charismatic leaders (Moses, Ezra, Nehemiah). The character is "weak" in the sense that its authority relies not on socially embedded hierarchical institutions, but on charismatic roles and the ability to influence the group and wield authority.

This "enclave thinking" described in Ezra–Nehemiah tries to uphold group cohesion not hierarchically by strong internal hierarchies, but horizontally by identity markers which mark boundaries to the outside world, such as the city wall and the prohibition of mixed marriages.[36] Typically for enclave thinking, in-

**33** Next to her classification of priestly thinking in Numbers, Mary Douglas also offered a classification of priestly thinking in Leviticus which is supposed to be analogical; Douglas, 2009, esp. 13–65; cf. Dietrich 2022, 101–119. For analogical modes of thinking in different but comparable cultures, cf., e.g., Descola 2013, esp. 201–231.

**34** This is also true of Deuteronomy but obviously not of late- or post-deuteronomistic layers, see below.

**35** In other biblical texts, the characterization of Aaron may be more varied, cf. Findlay 2017. But in the priestly source, Aaron is mainly characterized according to his role in office, and the same applies to Lev 10 (*pace* Findlay).

**36** For an overview cf., e.g., Berlejung 2012, 178–216; Becking 2011, 1–108; Hensel 2018. In contrast to the Golah community of returners, all other groups in Trans-Euphrates (including other

dividual freedom is reduced to a minor sphere. In texts from the law codes, foreigners are not regarded as hostile and threatening but have to be protected,[37] but late- and post-deuteronomistic texts like Deut 7:3–4; 21:18–21, Ezra 9–10, and Nehemiah 13[38] display hostility towards foreigners and aim to govern even the private sphere of households.[39] It is one thing to try to establish an official monolatric cult and to prevent foreigners from participating fully in it (this is typical of some law texts), but it is quite another issue to try and rid households of "stubborn" sons and "foreign" elements by stoning sons and dissolving mixed marriages to ward off apostasy. These texts, of course, do not show that family and household religions[40] were governed by "totalitarian" programs in historical reality, but they do show that late-deuteronomistic and post-deuteronomistic writers aimed to limit individual freedom by underlining the importance of social bonding and religious worship. According to this socio-political program, individual identity was limited and totally dependent on social restrictions. In contrast to this, in the last part of this paper, I will ask where examples for developing one's own individual identity can be found – even in opposition to society's norms and expectations. To do this, I will take up the quest for originality as a case example. This quest contrasts strongly with an enclavist or hierarchist program and displays competitive and individualist aspects, as well as (in the case of Khakheperreseneb) partially isolationist features – even if they are unwilling ones.

## 4 The Quest for Originality

In modern times, the quest for originality is part of social character orientation since we are all expected to constantly produce something new and original. In his book *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identiy* (1989), Charles Taylor holds that originality is part of modern self-awareness of and search for inwardness. According to Taylor, the modern self develops self-reflexivity re-

groups in Jehud) seem to be regarded and presented by the biblical writers as enemies. This means that group cohesion is upheld not only against foreigners in a national sense, but also against a complex society with several different groups within one and the same society.

**37** For an overview, cf. van Houten 1991; Bultmann 1992 and the articles in Achenbach/Albertz/Wöhrle 2011. Furthermore, the foreigner is not regarded as hostile and threatening in the post-exilic books Ruth, Jonah and Job.

**38** Cf. Pakkala 2004; Kaiser 2010; Frevel 2011.

**39** The prohibition of mixed marriages may be compared to Pericles' citizenship law and some later Greek laws on mixed marriage, cf., e.g., Blok 2017.

**40** On household religion in ancient Israel, cf., e.g., Albertz/Schmitt 2012.

garding its own inner depths, which can be distinguished from the outside world: "Our modern notion of the self is related to, one might say constituted by, a certain sense (or perhaps a family of senses) of inwardness."[41] For Taylor, this development starts partly with Plato and is then located in late antiquity with Augustine. According to Taylor, modern culture is individualistic in three senses: "it prizes autonomy; it gives an important place to self-exploration, in particular of feeling; and its visions of the good life generally involve personal commitment."[42]

In the following, my aim is to present three examples from ancient Israel and the ancient Near East that reveal an awareness of the inner self with regard to questions of originality, providing case examples of a form of individuality that opposes collectivity or conformity. Originality enables individuals to focus on their inner selves and come up with something new that does not originate in the outside world.[43] For Taylor, an early turning point and a first step in history towards the appreciation of originality is Montaigne: "Montaigne is an originator of the search for each person's originality."[44] In Taylor's view, this kind of modern individualism ends up with "an understanding of my own demands, aspirations, desires, in their originality, however much these may lie athwart the expectations of society and my immediate inclinations."[45] In the late 18th century, according to Taylor, expressionism added originality to the modern quest for inwardness:

> What the late eighteenth century adds is the notion of originality. It goes beyond a fixed set of callings to the notion that each human being has some original and unrepeatable "measure". We are all called to live up to our originality. [...] Expressive individuation has become one of the cornerstones of modern culture. So much so that we barely notice it, and we find it hard to accept that it is such a recent idea in human history and would have been incomprehensible in earlier times.[46]

**41** Taylor 1989, 111. Based on Charles Taylor's studies of the construction of personal identity in Western modernity, Robert di Vito compares modern identity to the way personal identity is constructed in the Hebrew Bible; cf. di Vito 1999; 2009. For a recent critique and discussion of Taylor's theory of inwardness and di Vito's application of it from a Hebrew Bible perspective, cf. Frevel 2017a; 2017b; Newsom 2017.

**42** Taylor 1989, 305.

**43** For instance, the idea of the artist as an *alter deus* during the Renaissance, or the genius cult of the 18th century.

**44** Taylor 1989, 182.

**45** Taylor 1989, 182.

**46** Taylor 1989, 376.

And indeed, this modern quest "to live up to our originality"[47] seems only rarely to be found in ancient Israel and the ancient Near Eastern sources. Instead, the main character orientation here, as shown above, was outer-oriented "listening thinking," which is why the quest for originality was definitely not a general social character orientation shared by the many. On the contrary, ancient Israel was, like all of the ancient Near East, "past-oriented," and legitimized reforms by presenting them as restorations and a "turning back" to the good old days.[48] Instead of invention, the ideal of imitation ruled – in this sense, ancient Israel was a mimesis culture.

Nevertheless, the three examples below may show that a kind of awareness and search for originality did exist in at least a few sources at different times and in different local cultures – not only in ancient Israel, but in the whole of the ancient Near East. My first example stems from the Middle Bronze Age and examines the quest for originality to be found in the Egyptian teachings of Khakheperreseneb. My second example stems from the Late Bronze Age and examines the boast of originality to be found in the texts from 'Ilîmilku from Ugarit. And my third example stems from the Persian or Hellenistic period and examines the forms of originality to be found in the biblical teachings of Ecclesiastes.[49]

## 4.1 The Search for Originality in Ancient Egypt: the Sufferings of Khakheperreseneb

The quest for originality may already be found in Nefermaat's self-praise about the invention of the hieroglyphs (ca. 2650 BC),[50] Amenemhet's invention of the water-clock (before 1500 BC),[51] or Senen-Mut's self-praise as original teacher of

**47** Taylor 1989, 375: "Expressivism was the basis for a new and fuller individuation. This is the idea which grows in the late eighteenth century that each individual is different and original, and that this originality determines how he or she ought to live. Just the notion of individual difference is, of course, not new. Nothing is more evident, or more banal. What is new is the idea that this really makes a difference to how we're called on to live. The differences are not just unimportant variations within the same basic human nature; or else moral differences between good and bad individuals. Rather they entail that each one of us has an original path which we ought to tread; they lay the obligation on each of us to live up to our originality."

**48** Cf., e.g., Berlejung 2009.

**49** For the first and last example, cf. Dietrich 2012.

**50** "He was the one who made his gods in a writing which cannot be obliterated." (OI E9002) Translation van Walsem 2013, 135. Cf. also Ankhtifi's self-praise (pillar I.β.2; TUAT.NF II 190). My thanks go to Ludwig Morenz (Bonn) who pointed these two texts out to me.

**51** "Never before had something like it been made since the primeval time of the land. I made this august measuring vessel in the favour [of] the king of Upper and Lower Egypt, (Djeserkare)".

queen Hatscheput's daughter (ca. 1475 BC).[52] This quest for originality shows itself, in a rather self-critical way, also in the *Complaints of Khakheperreseneb*.

The ancient Egyptian *Complaints of Khakheperreseneb* were found on a tablet from the 18th dynasty of the New Kingdom (the reign of Amenophis III, 14th century BCE),[53] and probably date back to the Middle Kingdom, possibly the end of the 12th or the beginning of the 13th dynasty (the reign of Amenemhet III, about 1800 BCE).[54] The text is a soliloquy spoken by the author, a priest from Heliopolis, to his heart, without ever receiving an answer.

Relevant in our context are, first, the reflection about the repetition of the known and the unsuccessful pursuit of artistic quality; and second, the author's desperate effort to communicate with his own heart. Let us first have a look at the pursuit of originality as mentioned in r. 2–4:

> *Khakheperreseneb r. 2–4:*
> Would that I had unknown speeches, erudite phrases in new language which has not yet been used, free from (the usual) repetitions, not the phrases of past speech / which (our) forefathers spoke. I shall drain myself for something in it giving free rein to all that I shall say. For indeed whatever has been said has been repeated, while what has (once) been said has been said. There should be no boasting about the literature of the men of former times / or what their descendants discovered![55]

In this soliloquy, the author laments his lack of originality and, additionally, that of the people of his time. The author seeks new words (*md.wt*) and sentences (*ḫn.w*) so far unknown to him, as well as unusual wordings (*ṯs.w*). He dreads ending up as someone who just reiterates things that have long been said. For this reason he strongly opposes a literary tradition which is characterized by the verb *wḥm* ("to repeat"). He wants his speech to be "free of repetition" (*šwt m wḥmmyt*; r. 2). The goal is to know and formulate something "which is not repeated" (*m tmmt*

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Translation von Lieven 2016, 226. Cf. the artist Bak who tells of himself that he had learnt his art from the king himself, showing that Akhenaten's art was being regarded as a special new invention: "if this artifact can be considered a masterpiece, it is due to its incredible inventiveness (*ḫmww-ỉb*, 'heart-skill') rather than to the technique (*ḫmww-ḏb'.w=f*, 'finger-skills)' of its creator." (Angenot 2021, 134) My thanks go to Ludwig Morenz (Bonn) who pointed these two "invention-sources" out to me.

**52** "Senen-mut, der Gerechtfertigte (, er sagt): Zeichen, die ich mit den Gedanken meines (eigenen) Herzens gemacht habe wie etwas, was im Felde gemacht ist und was nicht in den Schriften der Vorfahren gefunden wird." (Berlin Statue 2296; Urk. IV 406). Translation Blumenthal, Müller, Reineke & Burkhardt 1984, 56, after Cancik-Kirschbaum/Kahl 2018, 313.

**53** Cf. Gardiner 1909, 95–96. For the ostracon from Cairo, cf. Parkinson 1997.

**54** Cf. Vernus 1995, 2–4.

**55** Translation by Simpson [3]2003, 212.

*wḥmt* r. 7).[56] This text shows early awareness of the abominations of imitation, and criticizes a social character orientation that I have coined "listening thinking" above.

Even though this text shows early literary awareness of the abominations of imitation, the author does not quite manage to ignore himself: after all, his words are classic laments about the hopeless state of the world, as can also be found earlier in the *Admonitions of Ipuwer*. In my view, Gerald Kadish has argued quite convincingly for the originality of this failure: the author is well aware of his own limitations and those of his contemporaries, and is also capable of articulating this painful awareness.[57] They who know the philosopher's way – the Socratic way – namely that they know nothing, know more than the conceited mediocrities who have made themselves comfortable by following the traditional wisdom through imitation and mimesis. They who accept their limitations as a tragic thinker show much more insight than someone who has never found their own limits because of traditions.[58]

Interestingly, the pursuit of originality in the *Sufferings of Khakheperreseneb* happens in dealing and communicating with his own heart. The last paragraph of the relevant passage on the pursuit of originality goes like this (r. 7): "Would that I might know what others did not know, even what has not yet been repeated, that I might speak and my heart answer me."[59] I find it significant that this reflection on the unsuccessful pursuit of originality takes place concurrently with the unsuccessful communication with the heart, the ancient Near Eastern "organ" of thinking, and that both aspects are explicitly linked to each other in the passage just quoted. If one is to oppose repetition of tradition, a new source is needed for creative purposes – and Khakheperreseneb seeks this source in his own heart. By doing this, he postulates a contrast between the exterior (i.e. given traditions) and his own inner self – his heart, which is silent, but which he chooses as the addressee for his lamentations in his quest for originality, in order to create his own individual literary quality. According to Jan Assmann, "the invention of the heart as a symbol for the self-directedness"[60] of human beings begins at the end of the Old Kingdom; and, we might add, it finds an initial conclusion in the *Sufferings of Khakheperreseneb*. At the end of the day, it is the fault of Khakheperreseneb's own heart that he is incapable of an inner and original dialogue – which is probably

**56** Transcriptions according to Parkinson 1996.

**57** Cf. Kadish 1973, 85–88.

**58** For some similarities between archaic and classical Greek philosophy and ancient Near Eastern wisdom cf. Dietrich 2019, without delving into differences.

**59** Translation by Simpson $^{3}$2003, 212.

**60** Assmann 1993, 97.

also the fault of the defective hearts of his time and its people. In a world upturned,[61] he laments, the pursuit of originality and inwardness must fail because, eventually, the inside and the outside do not form a hiatus but stand in relation to each other.

Indeed, the pursuit of originality in the *Sufferings of Khakheperreseneb* is successful in the sense that it is the first example in Egyptian literature of a wish for literary quality, although in the end it fails when new and original lamentations are required to make the wish come true.[62] From an anthropological perspective, it must be noted how hard it is for an individual of ancient Egypt to leave given traditions behind and to discover originality in an inner dialogue with their own heart – even if the person explicitly desires it. In the words of the Danish philosopher Poul Martin Møller: "In the realm of thought, man should be regarded as a ruminant animal."[63] However, the reflection on the failure of the pursuit of originality is precisely the original quality of the writings of Khakheperreseneb. According to the words of the Colombian philosopher Gómez Dávila: "Sometimes the originality of a work of art depends on what its creator cannot achieve. There is a certain creative inability."[64] And it seems as if the author of the teachings of Khakheperreseneb is fully aware of this.

This creative inability of Khakheperreseneb resembles modern expressionism, understood as "the basis for a new and fuller individuation"[65], which sees art and wisdom no longer as the imitation and *mimesis* of given traditions, but rather as an *expression* of inner sentiments – even if these sentiments are the unfulfilled or unrealizable wish for originality. Even the failure to regard the inner self belongs to the romantic and post-romantic characteristics of modern individuality, too. The first signs of this can be found in the writings of Khakheperreseneb, which express the wish for originality on a high literary level. Let us now turn to another source that may highlight a quest for originality: a Late Bronze Age colophon of the scribe 'Ilîmilku from Ugarit.

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**61** For the notion of the world turned upside down in ancient Egypt and the ancient Near East, cf., e.g., Kruger 2012.

**62** However, he does formulate new words and insights by speaking to his heart – an idea that Khakheperreseneb seems to formulate for the first time; cf. Burkard/Thissen $^{3}$2008, 139–140 and 142.

**63** "Mennesket maa i Tankernes Rige regnes for et drøvtyggende Dyr." Cf. Møller $^{2}$1848, 91. Similar difficulties appear in ancient Mesopotamia, since, though Mesopotamia "yielded evidence of a self-conscious, self-critical perspective [...], value rests not on newness and individuality, but on integration and community." Cf. Machinist 1986, 200–201.

**64** Gómez Dávila 2006, 13.

**65** Taylor 1989, 375.

## 4.2 The Boast of Originality in Ancient Ugarit: the Colophon of ʻIlîmilku

My second example stems from ancient Ugarit.[66] In ancient Mesopotamia, Sumerian and Akkadian were the two languages used in cuneiform writing. But in ancient Ugarit, the alphabetic cuneiform system was introduced in addition to Akkadian.[67] Although the local scribal elite had been writing Akkadian for centuries, it seems that in the mid-13th century BCE King ʻAmmiṯṯamru III of Ugarit institutionalized the alphabetic cuneiform script as one of the official writing systems, an innovation that placed traditional cuneiform script on a par with (and perhaps even in contrast to) the new alphabetic script.[68] In this context, and for our purpose, in the search for the quest for originality in the ancient Near East and ancient Israel, a colophon from the famous Ugaritian scribe ʻIlîmilku is extremely important. This scribe used both Akkadian and Ugaritian cuneiform scripts, and "set down versions of Ugaritic mythology on large multi-columned tablets."[69] Five of his colophons were preserved, and the one discovered most recently, from the house of Urtēnu, reads as follows:

> *RS 92.2016 (RS. XIV 53): 40'–43'*
> 40') [Scribe: ʻIlîmilku from Šub]banu, student of Attēnu the diviner
> 41') [ ] and this story, he
> 42') [ ] and no one taught it (to him)
> 43') [ ] document.[70]

As Hawley/Pardee/Roche-Hawley posit: "The last colophon cited above betrays a degree of self-awareness, not to mention self-proclamation, that is also without parallel in the Ugaritic corpus."[71] Probably, as with most of the tablets from the house of Urtēnu, this should also be dated to the mid-13th century BCE, redating the scribe ʻIlîmilku to this period.[72] In this colophon for an exorcist text, ʻIlîmilku, interestingly, does not come up with the usual scribal claim to have copied a pre-

**66** This part mainly relies on the contribution by Hawley/Pardee/Roche-Hawley 2015.

**67** For a general introduction to the history, language, and religion of Ugarit, cf., e.g., Watson/Wyatt 1999. For a recent introduction to the archaeology of the city and its objects, cf., e.g., Yon 2006.

**68** Cf. Hawley/Pardee/Roche-Hawley 2015, 234 and other pages.

**69** Cf. Hawley/Pardee/Roche-Hawley 2015, 246.

**70** Translation according to Hawley/Pardee/Roche-Hawley 2015, 249. The text was edited by Caquot/Dalix 2001.

**71** Hawley/Pardee/Roche-Hawley 2015, 253.

**72** Cf. the arguments presented by Hawley/Pardee/Roche-Hawley 2015, 249–250.

decessor's tablet in a notoriously accurate way.[73] Instead, he seemingly claims that he is a scribe who, even though he had been a student of the diviner Attēnu, writes independently "at his own dictation."[74] Furthermore, 'Ilîmilku omitted the usual element "son of NN" in his colophon, thereby discounting any continuity with scribal predecessors.[75] Instead, he highlights that he is from the town of Šubbanu, i.e. from a northern subgroup of central towns near the capital, Ugarit,[76] "thus detaching himself from the scribal traditions of the capital."[77] With line 42' *w ỉnd ylmdnn* "and no one taught it (to me)," 'Ilîmilku says that his text is not traditional but an original work "of his own creation."[78] Like the boast of originality so typical of the modern artist and the modern human being in general, 'Ilîmilku reflects upon his own writing and presents himself as an innovative and original writer. Let us now, to give a third example, turn to the biblical book of Ecclesiastes.

## 4.3 The Original Voice in the Book of Ecclesiastes

An original voice can also be found in Ecclesiastes (also called Qohelet). To be sure, many of the books of the Hebrew Bible may be called innovative and original works; but – and this is my point – normally there is no boast about it and no reflection upon it, and the author of Ecclesiastes is the only biblical author to pass himself off as an innovative writer, proud of claiming to have written something new "at his own dictation."[79] Most other cases involve traditional literature instead. Furthermore, knowledge and wisdom are normally presented as an entity independent of the individual mind.[80] But with Qohelet a thinker emerges who speaks of himself in a new way, searching for truths beyond traditional assumptions and conceiving of wisdom as a product of his own mind.[81] Martin Hengel highlights:

**73** For the typical genre of colophons in ancient Mesopotamia, cf., e.g., Charpin 2010, 181–183, 191–192, 197–198.
**74** Hawley/Pardee/Roche-Hawley 2015, 250.
**75** For this and the following arguments, cf. Hawley/Pardee/Roche-Hawley 2015, 251.
**76** Cf. van Soldt 2005, 93–95.
**77** Hawley/Pardee/Roche-Hawley 2015, 251.
**78** Hawley/Pardee/Roche-Hawley 2015, 251.
**79** Hawley/Pardee/Roche-Hawley 2015, 250.
**80** For this, cf. Carasik 2006, 139–176, with regard to Proverbs.
**81** Cf. Fox 1987, 148.

> The first striking thing about him is that in his work we encounter a wisdom teaching which goes beyond the anonymous matter-of-factness of earlier wisdom and its unbroken optimism, and find in it the personally engaged, *critical individuality* of an acute observer and independent thinker.[82]

Let us have a look at a most prominent section, in which Qohelet introduces himself:

> *Ecclesiastes 1:12–13a, 16–17a*
> [12] I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem,
> [13]applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven [...]
> [16]I said to myself, "I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge."
> [17]And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly.[83]

Qohelet claims to have surpassed all others in wisdom and to have found truths by his own experience and reflection, thereby claiming a form of originality which is not to be found with respect to any previous biblical sages, and going well beyond the "listening thinking" orientation shared by the many. Qohelet does not rely on tradition but sets out to seek and evaluate truths by judging his own experience. In addition to the section just quoted, the following text also makes this clear:

> *Ecclesiastes 2:1–3*
> I said to myself, "Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself." But-again, this also was vanity.
> [2]I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?"
> [3]I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine – my mind still guiding me with wisdom – and how to lay hold on folly, until I might see what was good for mortals to do under heaven during the few days of their life.[84]

Michael Fox seems to be right when he states:

> The boldest, most radical notion in the book is not Koheleth's contradictions, his pessimism, or his observations of injustices. It is the belief that the individual can and should proceed toward truth by means of his own powers of perception and reasoning; and that he can in this way discover truths previously unknown. There are no external rules, no doctrines or traditions to which his conclusions must conform.[85]

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**82** Hengel 2003, 116.
**83** Translation following NRS.
**84** Translation following NRS.
**85** Fox 2004, xi.

As in the teachings of Khakheperreseneb, an individual thinker emerges – one is even inclined to say: a philosopher[86] – who is not totally dependent on tradition but sets out to find things out for himself. Of course, the literal figure Qohelet also uses self-presentations typical of fictional royal autobiographies from the ancient Near East.[87] However, his individual voice comes through in his quest to find things out for himself – not with the help of tradition or revelation, but through his own experience. There is no other book in the Hebrew Bible that uses "I" more often and more profoundly than Qohelet.[88] The text presents to the reader an introspective and self-reflecting mind at work:

> Qohelet constantly interposes his consciousness between the reality observed and the reader. It seems important to him that the reader not only know what the truth is, but also be aware that he, Qohelet, saw this, felt this, realized this. He is reflexively observing the psychological process of discovery as well as reporting the discoveries themselves.[89]

Connected to this, "almost every verb indicating production and acquisition is accompanied by *li*, 'for myself': 'I built for myself ... planted for myself ... made for myself,' and so on."[90] Therefore, with Qohelet, we have a third example that shows an appreciation of and a quest for originality as opposed to collectivity and a social character orientation shared by the many. As with the teachings of Khakheperreseneb, with Qohelet we have an inventive and groundbreaking sage who "is watching his mind at work."[91]

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**86** Cf. Fox 2004, xii.

**87** Cf. Koh 2006; Dietrich 2019, 4–5, 9.

**88** For the implications of first-person language for the self and its individuation in late texts of the Hebrew Bible, cf. Niditch 2015, 32–71.

**89** Fox 1987, 147–148; 1999, 79.

**90** Fox 2004, 13.

**91** Fox 2004, 8: "Koheleth refers to his heart so frequently – especially in 1:12–2:26 (twelve times) – because he is reflecting on the process of perception and discovery, and the heart (or, as we would say, 'mind') has a central role in this process. Koheleth is watching his mind at work."

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