

**UNITY IS PLURAL<sup>1</sup>—A REVIEW  
OF “PERSONS IN CONTEXT: THE  
CHALLENGE OF INDIVIDUALITY  
IN THEORY AND PRACTICE”  
EDITED BY ROGER FRIE AND  
WILLIAM J. COBURN**

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Keywords: contextualized individuality; felt thinking; hermeneutics; otherness; situated personal experience

The smallest indivisible human unit is two people, not one; one is a fiction. From such nets of souls societies, the social world, human life springs [Kushner, 1993, p. 289].

In the early 1990s, a sociological study on excessive individualism, “Bowling Alone” (Putnam, 1993), reflected the changing American social landscape in the final decades of the last century. The commentary shed light on America’s gradual decline in civic-mindedness and “social capital” (what happens to others affects us all),

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<sup>1</sup>See Fuller (1975, sec. 224.12).

which Alexis de Tocqueville identified as the foundation of a participatory democracy. Putnam's research initiated questioning and dialogue among social scientists on the de-democratization of American life (e.g., Coleman, 1993; Etzioni, 1993; Fukuyama, 1995), examining issues such as trust, choice, social engagement, and shared values. At the core of the discussion, owing to a discernable transformation in thinking from Cartesian dualism to that of a systems sensibility, was the emergence of a new paradigm for structuring human experience. Notably, the concept of the individual, as seen through a systems lens perspective, was viewed not as separate from the world, but inextricably connected to it (Senge, 1994).

Nearly two decades after Putnam's (1993) commentary, Roger Frie and William Coburn's (2011) scholarly book, *Persons in Context: The Challenge of Individuality in Theory and Practice*, asks essential questions about a parallel phenomenon germane to psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic discourse: the false dichotomy between the self and the world. According to Frie and Coburn, a narrow interpretation of individuality as a reified, decontextualized concept of the human being fails to take into account the essential situatedness of existence. A distinguished group of philosophers and psychoanalysts speaks to Frie and Coburn's pluralistic, contextualized concept of individuality. What unifies each separate essay is that "individuality, no matter how it is defined, always occurs within the web of social, cultural, and biological contexts" (Frie and Coburn, 2011, p. xvi).

I have rarely read an introduction to a book of collected writings that is as interesting and reader-friendly as this one. In an effort to help the reader appreciate the exploration and discussion about individuality that follows, the editors deliver a concise, focused, and erudite commentary on the multiplicity of views that sort out the existing tension between our sense of individuality and the contexts from which our perceptions about it emerge. While the editors illuminate the distinct perspectives of each contributor's exploration of the role of individuality in clinical practice and beyond, they bring to light the existence of an overlapping consensus among the contributors based on a post-Cartesian, hermeneutic, and contextualist sensibility, which, correspondingly, unifies the anthology. "In contrast to radical postmodernist perspectives that seek to undermine the very notion of individuality, the contributors to this volume take a more measured stance in the belief that individuality remains an important topic for consideration (Frie & Orange, 2009)" (Frie and Coburn, 2011, p. xvi).

This timely volume is unique for several reasons: Its perspective expands and contextualizes the narrow Cartesian-Lockean paradigm of individuality; its inclusion of complex viewpoints cuts across disciplines from philosophy to neuroscience; and its particular hermeneutics reject the Cartesian model of the mind as a non-physical, inner realm of consciousness stressing, instead, an emotionally embodied experience of being-in-the-world. However, equally important are the editors' own remarkably thought-provoking opening (Frie) and closing (Coburn) essays that bookend those of their contributors.

### HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS

Frie begins the anthology with a compelling account of the “culture and context” that shaped the so-called ideology of individualism. Rich and detailed, Frie's discussion, drawn from interdisciplinary perspectives, investigates the emergence of the Western ideals of autonomy and self-interest—ideals that underlie our current understanding of individuality. Throughout his account, he establishes how early philosophical ideas, that influenced the modern conception of selfhood, evolved to become interwoven with cultural ideas of individuality.

As a complement to his inquiry, Frie integrates philosopher Charles Taylor's (1989) masterful historical reconstruction of the evolution of modern identity wherein Taylor traces the shift from Plato's “unified self” to René Descartes's model of the thinking mind (*cogito*). Frie systematically draws attention to the wrongheaded Cartesian construction of a solely thinking mind, capturing, in the following statement, the central paradox embedded within such an unwieldy construction: “In the Cartesian tradition, therefore, the ability to reason is an ‘internal property’ of the thinking mind that is radically disengaged from the very contexts—biological, social and cultural—that make it possible to begin with” (Frie and Coburn, 2011, p. 6).

Picking up on the political implications of “desituated psychological existence,” Frie stresses how Descartes's disengaged “thinking subject” paved the way for the *punctual self*<sup>2</sup>—an excessively reified self that became

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<sup>2</sup>Locke's extreme ideas of rational control is what Taylor (1989) calls the punctual self, which pushes even further the concept of a disengaged Cartesian thinking mind. Frie references Taylor's (1995) delineation of the punctual self as: “ideally disengaged, that is . . . free and rational to the extent that he has fully distinguished himself from the natural and

fully developed in Locke's political philosophy. In a fascinating historical account, Frie details the connection between the contemporary culture of individuality and the political ideas of Locke. Such ideas, exemplified in Locke's "punctual self," provided America's founding fathers with a rational template for "the purpose of government: to protect individual rights and to serve individual needs" (p. 7).

The misguided notion of a Cartesian-Lockean individual as an independent and self-determining entity, Frie argues, can obstruct our understanding of the sociocultural and political contexts of human experience. Such conceptions of "independent individualism," which found expression in the mainstream of psychoanalytic thinking, he contends, can also unduly influence the way the clinical situation unfolds. Accordingly, Frie proposes an alternative interpretation—*situated personal experience*—for understanding what it means to be human.

### AN ALTERNATIVE HERMENEUTIC

Although Fosshage brings an interdisciplinary perspective to his critical essay, Martin and Sugarman a contextualist one, and Lachmann usefully highlights the importance of solitary experiences (which are not equivalent to experiences without a context), I focus the remainder of my review on the essays of Cushman, Orange, and Stolorow. Their contributions complement Frie's hermeneutic alternative of *situated personal experience*. This particular hermeneutic bears out Frie's idea of individuality and accounts both for situated psychological existence and the role of personal agency.

In describing his alternative hermeneutic, Frie beautifully evokes Heidegger's phenomenological being-in-the-world: "[W]ithin the therapeutic dyad the therapist and patient are together able to begin learning about the limits and possibilities of a particular horizon of understanding. Therapeutic change, in this view, is located not in a patient's interior life or structure of mind but in the development of new and different ways of relating to oneself and others in the world" (Frie and Coburn, 2011, p. 16).

Bringing to mind the hermeneutics of both Heidegger and Gadamer, Cushman tells us that understanding the interpretive turn embraced by these philosophers means "a critical understanding that recognized both

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social worlds, so that his identity is no longer to be defined in terms of what lies outside him in these worlds" (Frie and Coburn, 2011, p. 6).

the pervasive constitutive nature of the social realm and also the vital role played by psychological processes in the life of the individual, who is an active, agentic, intersubjective—sometimes self-deceptive—interpreter” (Frie and Coburn, 2011, p. 25).

Stolorow weighs in with a similar argument that considers individualized selfhood as “grasped always and only as a dimension of personal experiencing” (Frie and Coburn, 2011, p. 59). Whereas Cushman’s emphasis is on the entanglement between politics and the self, which he believes are enmeshed in such a way that it is impossible to “step out” or “take sides”—thus, his reference to “a sometimes self-deceptive interpreter” of the world—Stolorow’s emphasis is on an emotional selfhood, “the mineness of experiential life” that is embedded, strengthened, and consolidated through an attuned responsiveness expressed within an intersubjective system. It is important to note that such a perspective does not nullify personal experience, but contextualizes it.

Cushman’s politicized view of selfhood and Stolorow’s emphasis on attuned emotional relationality illustrate Frie and Coburn’s commitment to the exploration of multiple perspectives in questioning and challenging the concept of individuality in theory and practice. Cushman’s selfhood, historically situated and emerging out of a “moral dialogue” and “power relations” that are indelibly embedded in a variety of distinctions including, but not limited to, “mind and body, self and other” (Frie and Coburn, 2011, p. 25), supplements Stolorow’s pre-reflective, implicit sense of “mineness” of emotional experience constituted within the arena of intersubjective systems. Both are significant and powerful challenges to a narrow Cartesian-Lockean concept of individuality.

When each author summons Heidegger’s (1927) existential philosophy of being-in-the-world, their individual work takes on a nuanced, if contrasting, depth of understanding. Cushman states, “There is a subtle and complex dialectic at work in human life: the world we are thrown into constitutes us, and then we must continually reproduce it. It limits us by its givenness, and then we, in turn, recreate it. Where does the givenness end and our semiconscious collusion begin?” (Frie and Coburn, 2011, p. 35). What Cushman is saying is that, given the world in which we live, one constructed by political arrangements and moral understandings about those arrangements, we need to recognize the political contexts that influence our attitudes and values about ourselves, each other, and our practices. In an earlier commentary, Cushman (2009) made the following case: “Psychotherapy isn’t recognized as political because its politics are so

much in sync with our era that it melds into the cultural background of ‘everydayness’ and simply escapes notice” (p. 122).

Stolorow, influenced by Heidegger’s concept of authenticity, suggests that we need to own up not only to our embeddedness in a social context, but also to our own finitude and to the finitude of those to whom we are deeply connected—“[T]hat authentic being toward death always includes being toward loss as a central constituent. . . . Existential anxiety anticipates both death and loss” (Frie and Coburn, 2011, p. 65). Stolorow’s (2007) earlier ideas about finitude “relationalize” Heidegger’s conception of authentic being-toward-death. It is “our existential kinship in the same darkness [that] is a condition for the possibility of forming bonds of deep emotional attunement within which the devastating emotional pain inherent to the traumatizing impact of our finitude can be held and integrated” (Stolorow, 2007, p. 64). Stolorow’s suggestions about finitude, as expressed through Heidegger’s conception of authentic being-toward-death, is especially meaningful when applied to therapeutic and psychoanalytic practice. Owning our painful experiences and the anxiety that is part and parcel of human finitude is a precondition for being emotionally present to those who share their own painful feelings of loss and death with us.

Recognizing that intersubjective systems theory (Stolorow and Atwood, 1992; Stolorow, Atwood, and Orange, 2002) stands as a formidable challenge to the “isolated mind” of modern philosophy and of most psychoanalysis, Orange, venturing beyond the systems perspective that has informed her practice, seeks to grasp how the meanings of “Otherness” (how we treat each other) can be applied to our psychoanalytic work. For clues that could support a “profoundly relational (i.e., nonindividualistic) account of personal individuality in our psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic work” (Frie and Coburn, 2011, p. 45), Orange turns to the work of three 20th-century philosophers—Martin Buber, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Emmanuel Lévinas.

Buber and Gadamer, who both lost their mothers at a young age, concentrate their ideas of individuality on “dialogue and understanding,” offering us what Orange refers to as the dialogical “I.” Whereas Buber’s (1970) dialogical “I” is an intimate dialogue that “involves belonging to the human race together and a warmth of embrace within this commonality” (Frie and Coburn, 2011, p. 49), Gadamer’s dialogic “I” suggests relational understanding that emerges within a conversation—a “genuine dialogue” in which “people attempt to convince each other, but always also with

the expectation that the other can teach us something” (Frie and Coburn, 2011, p. 50).

Lévinas, a Jew who survived the *Nazizeit* in which most of his family perished, brings a strong moral and ethical perspective to his work—one that was shaped by the dominant memory in his life, the Nazi horrors. Orange cites Lévinas’s conception of his own sense of individuality: [It is] “the Other (the stranger/neighbor) to whom one speaks, whose face constitutes an infinite responsibility for me” (Frie and Coburn, 2011, p. 55); and, in clarifying what the philosopher means by the “Other,” Orange, again, turns to Lévinas’s (1987) words: “It is my answerability to the Other that makes me an individual” (p. 150). According to Critchley (2002), Lévinas’s “big idea” is that “ethics is first philosophy,” adding that, for Lévinas, ethics “is understood as a relation of infinite responsibility to the other person” (p. 6). One pitfall I see in that idea is that it might collude with a requirement to the Other at the expense of individualized selfhood (Brandchaft, 2007).

At points, Orange’s essay becomes inspirational: “[W]e are always already infinitely responsible to and for the other” (Frie and Coburn, 2011, p. 55). In asking what we can learn from these thinkers, Orange beautifully elucidates the meaning of the Other through Gadamer’s (1975) words: “It is the other who breaks my self-centeredness by giving me something to understand” (p. 9). Orange’s exploration of otherness serves to highlight important questions that may help us expand our own parameters regarding the meaning of individuality. Orange not only gently guides us to think about the therapeutic relationship in terms of the “generosity, care, and protection of the other,” but, as her body of work also suggests, to extend those same qualities to those who experience the “face of the other” as a threat to their tenuous hold on their sense of being. Our attunement to their feelings of endangerment serves as an important containing function as they struggle to widen their own horizons of understanding that contextualize their world.

### CLOSING COMMENTS

Coburn’s rich closing chapter offers a scholarly summary of each contributor’s unique essay. Through his fair and clear-minded analysis, Coburn demonstrates exactly what he is arguing for—“the utility and conceptual elegance of a psychoanalytic complexity perspective” (Frie and Coburn, 2011, p. 131). I cannot possibly capture the openness of his attitude, nor

his unifying (yet incompressible) approach to highlighting each contributor's salient themes and therapeutic implications, as well as those of the work as a whole. His commentary needs to be read in its entirety to grasp how skillfully he applies a complexity sensibility to his analytic.

In delineating and distinguishing between phenomenological and explanatory levels of discourse, Coburn (2009) sheds light on the distinction's usefulness in reference, but not limited, to the unique situatedness of our emotional worlds. *Phenomenology*, the language of dimensions of personal experiencing, best captures the realm of lived, emotional being-in-the-world; whereas *explanation*, the language of theory, gives an account of the genesis of those phenomenological dimensions of or disturbances in personal experiencing. Reiterating the viewpoint of Stolorow, Atwood, and Orange (2006), Coburn emphasizes that "contextualizing is not nullifying," meaning that to contextualize experience through *explanation* in no way nullifies personal *phenomenology*. Conversely, Coburn points out how easily one can lapse into an isolated Cartesian form of thinking when these two levels of experience are conflated. In addition, when the distinction between phenomenological description and theoretical explanation is collapsed, the integrity of complex emotional experience is covered over with muddled thinking and speaking.

As a parallel to Coburn's critical delineation of an overly simplistic view of being human, the result of which conflates rather than allows for the complexity of experience, I have argued: "Given the extraordinary extent to which the Cartesian universe in which we live is out of sync with the flow of *felt thinking*,<sup>3</sup> emotional vulnerability subsists under the cultural radar, where it is easily disguised, unnoticed, or explained away" (Cates, 2011, p. 523).

Coburn's delineation of therapeutic change is especially meaningful: "[C]hange does not occur inside a 'patient's interior life or structures of the mind' but in one's relationship to one's self and to others in the world" (Frie and Coburn, 2011, p. 132). This powerfully underscores Coburn's (2009) claim that in the absence of situational awareness, there exists a tendency to blame one's own mind for the emergence of painful emotional experience. When one is blinded by decontextualized forces, the imagined

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<sup>3</sup>My contention is that the distinction between "thought about feeling" and "feeling thought" (i.e., *felt thinking*) pinpoints how cognitive reflections about feelings abrogate the aliveness of emotional experience.

“defect” seemingly lies within the (mythologized) isolated realm of one’s own interiority.

Finally, Coburn asks if, within psychoanalytic theory and practice, we can mesh a contextualist and systems sensibility with the uniqueness of the individual—answering with a definitive, “Yes.” The unifying conduit, Coburn tells us, rests with “the distinction between thinking and speaking *phenomenologically* (addressing the realm of lived experience) and thinking and speaking *explanatorily* (addressing the realm of theory and explanations presumed to account for emergent experiences)” (Frie and Coburn, 2011, p. 141).

This book, in its entirety, demonstrates that unity is indeed plural and captures a pluralized, contextualized systems sensibility without annulling individualized selfhood. One gets the sense that each contributor enters the consultation room not only with a fallibilistic attitude, but also in a spirit of willingness that, as specified by Coburn, “entails learning to live with the indeterminacy of contextualized, emotional life and meaning” (Frie and Coburn, 2011, p. 142). The basis of philosophy, going back to Socrates, is the asking of questions. This rich, philosophical volume, with its spirit of inquiry into what it means to be human, leaves us with many important questions to ponder.

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