

# An Introduction to the Foundation of the Concept of the Individual in Western Ways of Thinking Between Antiquity and Medieval Times

Subjects: [Cultural Studies](#)

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The individual, as found primarily in modern Western civilization, is defined as “the independent, autonomous and thus (essentially) nonsocial moral being”, “the rational being” who is “the normative subject of institutions”. This is the definition of the individual we adhere to in this text. This text delves into the intricate dimensions of the concept of the individual by exploring the theological foundations inherent in Western thought. Rooted in Max Weber’s assertion regarding the theological meanings of Man’s self-perception, the entry emphasizes the pivotal role of theological understandings in shaping the concept of the individual. Focusing on the influence of Christian perspectives on the development of the concept of the individual, the article traces the historical entwining of theology and the concept of Man between antiquity and medieval times.

[God–man relationship](#)

[Greek mythology](#)

[individual](#)

[unity of existence](#)

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The concept of the individual in the ways of thinking of a people is crucial not only for instituting and sustaining democracy as a form of political governance but also as a way of life. Democracy and individualism, the foundational concepts in political and social systems, interact and complement each other. Exploring their main principles reveals how they contribute to a well-functioning society. Key aspects include respect for individual rights and freedoms, the empowerment of individuals, inclusivity and equality, accountability and transparency, pluralism and a diversity of ideas, and the protection of minority rights <sup>[1]</sup>.

Studying the evolution of the concept of the individual in the Western mindset is crucial to comprehending the development of key institutions in the Western world. Additionally, it is essential to address contemporary threats to individualism and democracy in the West, where issues such as racism, fascism, and religious and political fundamentalism pose significant challenges (see, for example, <sup>[2][3]</sup>).

When exploring the individual as a concept, it becomes imperative to delve into ideas that encompass the metaphysical and theological dimensions of humanity. The God–man relationship emerges as a central theme, offering insight into the evolution of the individual concept. Guided by scholars like Dumont, Mauss, and Durand, this article centers on the prevalent dualistic view’s role in shaping the concept of the individual. In this regard, the narrative briefly explores first the dualistic impact of Greek thought on Christianity. While constrained by space, this concise text aims to highlight key aspects essential for grasping the evolution of the concept of the individual within

Occidental thought (In this first section of the text, the paper is limited to the period spanning from antiquity to the pre-Reformation era).

According to Parsons, the validation of Man's position in the world and his alignment with it is rooted in "what Weber referred to as the theological meanings of Man's conceptions of himself and his place in the universe" <sup>4</sup> (p. xxxii).

These conceptions not only lend significance to Man's varied pursuits but also play a pivotal role in shaping his metaphysical and theological understanding of self.

A fundamental aspect crucial to the formulation of Man's metaphysical and theological conceptions revolves around how he perceives his relationship with a transcendental Being. In Weber's analysis of the influence of individuals' notions of Divinity on their social interactions, one can discern the extent to which the concept of Man as an individual owes its development to Christianity's interpretation of the connection between Man and God.

Examining the history of philosophy briefly reveals that, at least until modern times, the evolution of the concept of Man was inherently tied to theology. The profound impact of Christian theological perspectives on Man has been widely acknowledged for shaping the trajectory of the notion of Man within the realms of modern philosophy, psychology, and sociology.

Recognizing the importance of metaphysical and theological conceptions in philosophical and analytical psychology underscores their enduring relevance in understanding the multifaceted nature of the human experience.

All that has been previously mentioned is widely recognized, and we reiterate it here to underscore the significance of the God–man relationship in the exploration of the evolution of the concept of the individual. First, in examining the influence of the dualistic perspective on the burgeoning concern for the individual self in Western thought, which we are introducing with a focused lens on specific aspects of reality, we must clarify that we do not assert this dualistic conception as the sole or authentic perspective. When we refer to the duality between body and soul in Christianity, we intend to highlight the prevalence of such dualism within the understanding of this religion as it is assimilated into Western thought. Therefore, throughout this article, our reference to Christianity primarily pertains to this mainstream understanding, unless explicitly stated otherwise.

Secondly, while we acknowledge dualism in Western thought as a noteworthy factor contributing to the conceptual development of the individual, it is crucial to note that we do not perceive the entire history of Western philosophy as exclusively a history of dualism (see, for instance, <sup>5</sup>). Undeniably, non-dualistic trends exist in Western philosophy, exemplified by figures such as Spinoza, who advocated ideas akin to the unity of existence <sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, guided by the research of scholars like Dumont, Mauss, Durand, and others, whose investigations encompass the concept of the individual in both traditional and modern societies, our focus remains on delving into

the dualistic view. This perspective, prevalent in Western ways of thinking, has played a pivotal role in shaping the evolution of the individual concept.

In this context, this entry will briefly examine the initial impact of the dualistic view in Greek thought on Christianity concerning the conception of Man. Subsequently, we will provide a concise exploration of the post-Christian period on the Western dualistic perspective. Throughout this effort, emphasis will be placed on elucidating the role of the dualistic view in the emergence of Man as an individual. Space constraints compel us to compromise on the depth and/or breadth of this text. While this concise introduction to the dualistic facet of Occidental thought cannot fully capture the richness of Occidental philosophy, it serves to identify key aspects crucial for comprehending the evolution of the concept of the individual.

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## References

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