ROUTLEDGE

INDIVIDUALITY in LATE ANTIQUITY

Edited by
ALEXIS TORRANCE and
JOHANNES ZACHHUBER

INDIVIDUALITY IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Late antiquity is increasingly recognised as a period of important cultural transformation. One of its crucial aspects is the emergence of a new awareness of human individuality. In this book an interdisciplinary and international group of scholars documents and analyses this development. The authors assess the influence of seminal thinkers, including the Gnostics, Plotinus, and Augustine, but also of cultural and religious practices such as astrology and monasticism, as well as, more generally, the role played by intellectual disciplines such as grammar and Christian theology. Broad in both theme and scope, the volume serves as a comprehensive introduction to late antique understandings of human individuality.

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Individuality in Late Antiquity

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Preface

Individuality without a doubt has been a central problem of modernity and continues to be controversial today. What are the historical and the intellectual roots of this predicament? The contributors to the present volume seek to explore dimensions of late ancient reflection about individuality as a background to more recent developments. They are not the first to have done so: the last centuries of the Greek and Roman civilisation have for a while now been recognised as a major turning point in Western intellectual, cultural and religious history, a time during which century-old traditions came to an end and new ideas were born and took shape that have ever since dominated Western culture. Individuality has frequently been considered as one of those, and distinguished students of this topic have, therefore, often chosen late antiquity as the historical starting point of their enquiries.

The editors hope that their book takes this discussion forward primarily on account of its interdisciplinary character. Individual chapters shed light on a wide variety of late ancient contexts in which problems of individuality arose and were discussed, from astrology and asceticism to grammar, Platonic philosophy and Christian theology. Contributors are trained in history, philosophy or theology; they therefore bring to their work differently schooled approaches to the texts that were written, and the events that took place, during this period.

Their different disciplinary backgrounds with sometimes varying methodological and ideological premises notwithstanding, the contributors share a commitment to intellectual history and the principle that contemporary ideas can and should be understood in the light of their transformations over the centuries. The editors hope that this book provides practical evidence for the fruitfulness of these principles as creating a bond and a commonality of purpose between an interdisciplinary group of scholars.

The chapters of this book were first presented as papers at a conference that took place in September 2010 at Trinity College, Oxford. This conference was part of a larger project, Individuality in Context, and the editors would like to thank its Principal Investigator, Prof. Wilhelm Gräb, for his support of their plans and ideas. They would also like to acknowledge the generosity of the Metanexus Institute, without whose funding the event could not have happened. The Oxford Centre of Late Antiquity and, in particular, Mr Bryan Ward-Perkins kindly provided institutional and financial support. The collaboration with Ashgate was exemplary. The editors would wish to thank especially Sarah Lloyd for her patient support; they also benefited from detailed comments by the publisher's anonymous readers.

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Johannes Zachhuber and Alexis Torrance

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Introduction

Johannes Zachhuber and Alexis Torrance

It has become customary in recent years to regard late antiquity, the centuries following the establishment of monarchical rule in the Roman Empire, as one of the great transformational periods in Western history. Guy Stroumsa, in his own landmark interpretation of this epoch published as *The End of Sacrifice*, suggested that Karl Jaspers' phrase of an 'axial age' (*Achsenzeit*) could be applied to this period with as much justification as it was to the preceding half-millennium by the German philosopher himself.[1] At least as a description of the current state of scholarship, Stroumsa's assessment seems indeed apt. Increasingly, historians of ideas seeking to understand the specific vicissitudes of Western social, cultural, intellectual and religious developments have turned to late antiquity in the hope, and with the expectation, of discerning in this vast crucible of ideas and practices some of the ingredients that have since constituted the identity of the occidental self.[2]

The chapters collected in the present volume can be inscribed into this larger intellectual trend in two ways. On the one hand, they represent scholarship of late antiquity, dedicated to the elucidation of the specific character of this particular historical epoch, especially its religious and intellectual dimensions. Behind this specialist research, however, stands the broader question of the significance of late antiquity for subsequent developments up to and including our own contemporary situation. These two interests combined provide for the allure of the topic of individuality in late antiquity. There is no doubt that interest in, and concern for, the individual is a hallmark of modernity and post-modernity. Searching for conceptions of individuality in late antiquity, therefore, is a way of asking, broadly speaking, about the genealogy of the modern self. While some contributors make this link explicit more than others (most notably Wilhelm Gräb), it is nevertheless present throughout the book. It is the task of this introduction to develop some of

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[1] G. Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity* (Chicago, 2009), pp. 5–6. Cf. K. Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (Munich, 1949).

[2] Most influential has been Peter Brown's work beginning with *The World of Late Antiquity* (London, 1971). In his wake, the body of literature has been growing rapidly. For recent contributions, see esp. D. Brakke, M.L. Satlow and S. Weitzman (eds), *Religion and the Self in Antiquity* (Bloomington IN, 2005); M. Papoutsakis and P. Rousseau (eds), *Transformations of Late Antiquity* (Farnham, 2009) and D. Gwynn and S. Bangert (eds), *Religious Diversity in Late Antiquity* (Leiden, 2010).

the implicit lines connecting individual contributions within the volume among each other as well as with the larger shape and goal of the project.

The problem of individuality in late antiquity might appear at first blush as a mere variation of the theme of the self, a topic that has been treated variously in previous scholarship. And indeed, there are some rather obvious relationships between the debate about the self and the problems discussed in the present book. That late antiquity provided a novel and highly influential concept of the self has been vigorously asserted by Michel Foucault.[3] Foucault noted that throughout antiquity technologies of the self, as he would call them, were in evidence: cultural prescriptions instructing individuals to work on their bodies as well as their souls in particular ways and with specific objectives. With the rise of Christianity, Foucault saw a radical shift in the nature as well as the goal of those technologies. Where classical antiquity had pursued an ideal of self-perfection predicated on the potential for human autonomy and, consequently, aimed at the wise man or philosopher, Christianity instilled in people the much more paradoxical sense according to which the true self could only be gained by giving up, or sacrificing, the earlier empirical and sinful self. Foucault found the main harbinger for this new conception of the self in Christian asceticism: the need for public penance, the imperative to confess and thus to verbalise one's wrongdoings for him symbolised, as well as indicated, a radically transformed notion of the self with wide-ranging consequences for all aspects of human self-understanding, but also for fundamental cultural institutions: for the law, for morality, for sexuality and so forth. Crucially, Foucault claimed, institutional authority was bound to take on an altogether new and higher significance: whereas the relationship of the philosophical student to his master was by definition provisional and aimed at the student's ultimate perfection and intellectual as well as ethical independence, for the ascetic, and by extension for the Christian in general, absolute obedience remained a fundamental aspect of their existence.

Foucault's analysis, which has been all-too briefly sketched here, has of course had its fair share of criticism. Quite apart from its historical shortcomings – readers soon pointed to the severe limitation in the sources he used[4] – his intuitive understanding of Christian identity as based on the annihilation or even the sacrifice of the self arguably owed too much to rather specific religious and spiritual traditions which, however dominant in modern French Catholicism, were in fact innovations of the post-Tridentine period. As Michel Despland has shown, the conceptions Foucault held to be most typical for Christianity *tout court* emerged,

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[3] M. Foucault, *The Care of the Self* (London, 1995) and idem, *Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981–1982* (New York, 2005).

[4] Among the most important criticisms of Foucault by the world of classicists and historians is the article by J. Porter, 'Foucault's Ascetic Ancients', *Phoenix* 59/1–2 (2005): pp. 121–32.

in fact, as part of the French school of spirituality in the seventeenth century.[5] Foucault, in other words, committed the most common error of identifying the form of Catholicism he knew best with Christianity in its entirety. In antiquity itself, as Richard Sorabji has argued, there is much more continuity between pre-Christian and Christian ideas of the self than Foucault wanted to perceive.[6]

Yet if Foucault's interpretation of the innovative character of Christian technologies of the self in late antiquity cannot be upheld as such, it certainly helps mitigate its main conceptual rival, the idea of interiorisation. The notion that late antiquity added to earlier ideas about the self a new emphasis on 'the inner man'[7] is dominant, for example, in Charles Taylor's account. Characteristically, the chapter in his monumental *The Sources of the Self* dealing with late antiquity and, specifically, with Augustine, is entitled *In interiore hominem*.[8] For Taylor, Augustine represents late antiquity: he is essentially a Platonist but his Platonism is modified precisely by his interest in human inwardness. For example, Augustine continues to accept Plato's Forms, but these Forms are now (as in much late ancient Platonism) ideas in the mind of God.[9]

Augustine, arguably, is a special case: one of the most creative individuals not merely in antiquity but in the entire Western intellectual tradition he is, in an unprecedented way, concerned with the details of his own interior life.[10] No previous book in either Latin or Greek can, properly speaking, be compared with the *Confessions*. Yet while Augustine, thus far, is an exception, Taylor is right to perceive that a greater emphasis on the inner life of the human individual is an important aspect of the cultural and religious transformation throughout the entire period. In religion, there is a general, novel tendency to value internal devotion over and against external practices: sacrifices in the traditional sense largely disappear and are replaced and, theologically speaking, superseded by prayers and the notion of the attunement of the individual will to the divine command.[11] The whole idea of individual faith and the adherence to religious

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[5] See M. Despland, *Le recul du sacrifice: Quatre siècles de polémiques françaises* (Laval, 2009), pp. 80–85.

[6] R. Sorabji, *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life, and Death* (Oxford, 2008), esp. pp. 52–3.

[7] The phrase is used by Paul in Rom 7.22. The meaning and history of the phrase is discussed in H.D. Betz, 'The Concept of the "Inner Human Being" (*ὁ ἔσω ἄνθρωπος*) in the Anthropology of Paul', *New Testament Studies* 46 (2000): pp. 315–41.

[8] C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 127–42.

[9] Taylor, *Sources*, pp. 127–8.

[10] See P. Cary, *Augustine and the Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (Oxford, 2000).

[11] Stroumsa, *End of Sacrifice*, pp. 62–4, 74–5. In early Christian worship, the distinction between the ancient sacrifices and the enactment of the Eucharist is often framed in terms of its being 'a sacrifice of praise' or a 'reasonable and bloodless sacrifice': see

doctrines, so central to the new religions emerging in late antiquity, are predicated on an emphasis on human interiority, even though it would be wrong to read the later Protestant rejection of external cults into late ancient developments as has frequently been done.

It seems plausible then that an emphasis on interiority is a crucial aspect of the late ancient intellectual revolution. All the more important is the necessity, however, not to lose sight of the countervailing evidence Foucault marshalled in support of his own theory. In spite of its inherent shortcomings, this interpretation becomes vitally important as a correction to the 'Protestant' narrative exclusively focussed on interiorisation. Christianity, after all, emphasises human inwardness only in order to radically doubt the human's own integrity. The Christian imperative to scrutinise every nook and cranny of the soul leads to the recognition of the self's utter sinfulness, and this insight cannot but influence the evaluation of the very process of internal self-reflection in which, consequently, self-deceit must always be considered at least as probable as the radical will to truthfulness.[12] The same logic, then, that favours interiorisation also nurtures suspicions about the 'inner man', and the invention and cultivation of institutions intended to provide additional checks on spiritual and moral development appears as a perfectly logical extension of this train of thought.

In spite of all their disagreements, however, Foucault and Taylor take for granted that the major agent of change in late antiquity is Christianity. In other words, for both of them the challenge of understanding how late antiquity is a period of radical transformation is tantamount to the task of explaining how Christianity created new religious and intellectual conditions that modified and, in some cases, radically altered received ideas and practices. Is this, however, the only or indeed the best way of approaching this period? Was the new religion which, from the fourth century, took over the institutions of the Roman Empire the only or even the main force of transition during these centuries? Could one not, rather, see the success of Christianity as a function of its ability to answer new needs that emerged independently and to which the more traditional institutions of the Mediterranean world had too little to offer? And is not, at the same time, Christianity at least as much a *product* of late antiquity as driving its development? The strongest case for a continuous intellectual culture throughout antiquity (and beyond) was made by Richard Sorabji.[13] One may wish to doubt his overall vision, but be this as it may, it is arguable that late antiquity cannot be reduced to the rise of Christianity. In particular, careful attention to non-Christian developments will guard against any one-sided attribution of social, cultural or even religious transformations merely to the emergence of this one, new religion. Guy Stroumsa's emphasis on the role of Judaism may, in its own way, be exaggerated but it serves

G. Wainwright and K.B. Westerfield Tucker, *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (Oxford, 2005), esp. chs 1–4.

[12] Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, pp. 363–6.

[13] Sorabji, *Self*.

as a reminder of the sheer complexity of the situation.[14] *The Changing Self* has also been studied specifically with an eye on Neoplatonist philosophers,[15] and several contributions in the present volume, notably those by Mark Edwards, Riccardo Chiaradonna and Julie Brumberg-Chaumont, discuss changes occurring during this period that cannot be attributed in any obvious way to the rise of Christianity.

How do the chapters collected in this volume relate to the debates about the self? Investigating individuality in late antiquity is at once broader and narrower than studying the self. On the one hand, the problem of individuality is one particular way of asking about the self as it addresses the specific issue of the self as an individual. Implied in this approach is the assumption that transformations of the self in late antiquity did not only concern a reconfiguration of the relationship between the exterior and the interior, or of soul and body, but also of community and individuality. It seems evident that any conception of the self must in some way negotiate the tension between individuality and commonality, a point emphasised in the present volume by Christoph Markschies. The self is always both: part of a larger whole and defined by its participation in such entities, *and* an individual who comes into being at some point in time and ceases to be at some later moment. The human self, at least, is both defined by and in continuity with social, ethnic or religious groups *and* independent from them to varying extents. Asking about individuality, then, is looking at the self precisely insofar as it is the latter. It means asking for the self as non-identical with other members of its community.

Is there evidence for reflection about the self *as* individual in late antiquity? Detailed answers can only be given in the individual chapters, but it seems clear that the picture is mixed: Plotinus and Porphyry discussed the problem of individuals in various ways. The former – as Riccardo Chiaradonna shows – looked in particular at the problems posed for individuality by the Platonic theory of Forms (hence his famous question of whether there are Forms of individuals). Porphyry on the other hand largely operated within the framework of Aristotle's *Categories*. Neither of them, however, seemed particularly interested in the individual self as something unique – not least because they both were happy to accept the traditional Platonic assumption that individual persons will become reincarnated. While Plotinus accepted the existence of an 'idea' or 'form' corresponding to Socrates, he thought that, once Socrates was dead, the same idea would correspond to some other human person yet to be born. The same solution was evidently unavailable for those Christian authors who battled with the notorious difficulties of the doctrine of the resurrection of the body.[16] As Yannis Papadogiannakis' contribution demonstrates, the conceptual implications of this doctrine required a much more

[14] Stroumsa, *End of Sacrifice*.

[15] C. Steel, *The Changing Self. A study on the soul in later Neoplatonism: Iamblichus, Damascius and Priscianus* (Brussels, 1978).

[16] Cf. C. Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York, 1995).

sustained reflection on the uniqueness of the self's individual identity, including body and soul.

In Christian authors, then, the latter kind of interest in the individual self is paramount. It is the individual who is created, sins and will be saved, or in any case be judged, by Christ. Yet within Christianity itself these notions caused considerable difficulties. These come out particularly clearly in those second-century Christian thinkers we now, in keeping with a name invented by their theological foes, call Gnostics. The chapter by Christoph Markschies illustrates these problems in some detail. The attraction was evidently strong at this point to conceive the salvation of the self as precisely leaving behind its individual instantiation in order to re-join the all-unity of the original community of spirits. And yet the Gnostic evidence on this point is far from conclusive, and there are equally clear hints of a real interest in individuality and in the role individuals play in the process of their salvation.

One indubitably pagan context for reflections about the self as individual in late antiquity was astrology, which can be seen as a systematic attempt to align human existence precisely in its individual dimension to the eternal continuity of the celestial bodies. As Mark Edwards' chapter demonstrates, its enormous popularity and almost stubborn perseverance throughout the centuries notwithstanding, astrology was regularly met with stinging philosophical criticism – not just for its conceptual weaknesses but for its purported damaging effect on morality. An underlying philosophical presupposition of the late ancient astrological enterprise, namely determinism, is explored in some depth. We meet with a number of late antique arguments in this chapter for and against individual identity and destiny as predetermined. While the arguments themselves, at least in more intellectual circles, may have shifted gear over the centuries, Mark Edwards points out that the basic issue at stake has endured.

Generally, however, the various contributions to the present book would seem to support the assumption that it was Christianity, and Christian theology in particular, that created a novel interest in the individual self in late antiquity: quite apart from the eschatological reconstitution of each individual person, conceptual necessities created by the Trinitarian and Christological debates beginning in the fourth century created an unprecedented theoretical interest in the individual, as in particular Johannes Zachhuber's chapter illustrates. He elucidates how the need to reconcile the individuality of Father, Son and Holy Spirit with the singleness of the Godhead, on the one hand, and to allow for the combination of divinity and humanity in the one individual Christ, on the other, created an array of philosophical quandaries for post-Nicene and post-Chalcedonian theologians. Moreover, it is shown that the implications such debates had for the conceptualisation of purely human individuality were, if not always recognised at the time, nonetheless significant.

This is not to say, of course, that Christianity in late antiquity was a religion of individuality in any sense this term could possibly have. In some ways, arguably, the role it ascribed to the religious community and, more specifically, the religious

institution, the Church, with its authority to establish doctrinal and moral rules to be obeyed by every believer and its central administration of the sacramental means of salvation created a novel and rather rigid source of supra-individual normativity and identity. Nowhere was this tension between a radical emphasis on the isolated individuality together with an equally radical stress on the communal forms of life with strict hierarchical structures of authority and obedience more evident than in monasticism, as Alexis Torrance's chapter shows.

Theological interest in 'individuality', however, also hints at a topic broader than the human self. Christ's humanity can probably be called a self but it is questionable whether the whole Christological debate about the hypostatic union, which clearly is concerned with individuality, can be summarised under this heading. And it seems certainly arguable that the 'individuality' of divine hypostases in the one Trinitarian Godhead is not a matter of individual selves. Quite generally, transcendent entities, which many ancient thinkers postulated, were sometimes considered individuals without necessarily being selves. Much debated among Platonic philosophers was the individuality of Forms.[17] Traces of this philosophical controversy can be discerned in the Gnostic concern about the precise status of the various aeons their mythology postulated, as Christoph Markschies illustrates in his chapter.

The philosophical discussion of individuality or particularity, initiated in Aristotle's *Categories* (1b 3–9) and continued in late antiquity by philosophers, theologians and grammarians, was also largely unconcerned with the problem of the self. This debate was concerned with issues such as the principle of individuation, the identifiability of individuals and its diachronic identity throughout its existence. As Julie Brumberg-Chaumont's chapter demonstrates, reflection about individuality in this sense was of great interest in late antiquity – driven by the need to explain grammatical phenomena, but this grammatical reflection was closely connected with philosophy and most especially with logic. Apart from Aristotle's *Categories*, it was in particular the intellectual inheritance of Stoicism that loomed large in these late ancient debates.[18] In fact, interest in the conceptualisation of the individual using a combination of Aristotelian and Stoic notions constitutes a link between philosophers, such as Porphyry and Philoponus (see the chapters by Riccardo Chiaradonna and Christophe Erismann), grammarians such as Apollonius Dyscolus (see Julie Brumberg-Chaumont's contribution) and theologians such as Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa or Leontius of Jerusalem (see Johannes Zachhuber's chapter).

Did this debate take a radically new direction in late antiquity? Arguably, there is no one single answer to this question, but contributions to this book will provide important pointers. Porphyry, in his *Isagoge* permitted the individual to be a predicable – a clear break with Aristotelian orthodoxy, and generally some of the more innovative ideas in this introductory writing seem concerned with

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17 Detailed references in Christoph Markschies' chapter.

18 Sorabji, *Self*, pp. 83–93.

the conceptualisation of the individual.[19] The rather sharp rejection his views encountered in the slightly later Neoplatonic commentator Dexippus would additionally suggest that Porphyry's views on this topic were far from consensual. At the same time, there is no evidence that this school-internal dispute was particularly central to the concern of the Neoplatonists in the third and fourth centuries.[20]

Things look different again in John Philoponus, the Christian philosopher and Aristotelian commentator from the sixth century. As Christophe Erismann's chapter shows in detail, Philoponus took the traditional Peripatetic emphasis on the ontological primacy of individuals or particulars to a new extreme by adopting a radical version of particularism – a systematic denial of the ontological reality of non-particular being. As Erismann's careful investigation shows, there is no evidence that this philosophical position was in any way influenced by Philoponus' more specifically theological interests; in fact, it appears that he subscribed to his version of particularism at a time prior to his conversion. At the same time, the case of the sixth-century Alexandrian philosopher and theologian is instructive in other ways as well: his work provides one of the earliest examples for a quasi-scholastic use of philosophical method for the benefit of Christian theology, and it is in particular his ideas about individuals that he brings to bear on contentious issues such as Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity, thus contributing to the rather radical reconceptualisation of the individual happening within Christian theology in this period, as shown in Zachhuber's chapter.

Given how pervasive the problem of individuality has become in the modern world, it was perhaps inevitable that investigations of its historical sources have always been coloured by contemporary interests and concerns. Research into ancient conceptions of individuality thus becomes itself part of the archaeology of the modern self. Modern religious thinkers have sought to anchor their identities by reference to real or purported historical precedents, but those with more strictly political, intellectual or cultural agendas have equally researched ancient conceptions of individuality in order to construct a historical pedigree of one kind or other. This dimension of the volume's theme is most explicitly treated in Wilhelm Gräb's chapter which traces the reception as well as the inflection of Augustinian ideas about the self as an individual first in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, then in Ernst Troeltsch and, finally, in Alfred Döblin's novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Yet it would be wrong to look at the reception history of late ancient conceptions of individuality as separate from their truly historical study. Differences in methodology and style are never categorical; the lines demarcating these discourses from one another are inevitably porous. In this sense, the more

[19] See A. Lloyd, *The Anatomy of Neoplatonism* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 43–7 and the contributions by R. Chiaradonna and J. Brumberg Chaumont below.

[20] For the Peripatetic Alexander of Aphrodisias, see M. Rashed, 'Alexander of Aphrosisias on Particulars and the Stoic Criterion of Identity', in R. Sharples (ed.), *Particulars in Greek Philosophy* (Leiden, 2010), pp. 157–79.

historical investigations contained in this book are self-consciously influenced by contemporary debates about the individual and about individuality. By the same token, editors and authors have the hope that these collected studies dealing with the problem of individuality in late antiquity will be seen also, if not primarily, as contributions to the ongoing clarification of the understanding of the individual and of the place individuality occupies, and the role it plays, in our own world.

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