



STATEMENT DE-311

ENGINEERING LIFE: Human Rights in a Postmodern Age

by Jim Leffel

Summary

Even scientists were shocked when researchers in Scotland recently disclosed the successful cloning of a mammal. Leaders from around the world were quick to recognize the clear implications for human rights. If a lamb can be cloned, then the door is open to clone humans. But cloning is just one further advance in presently existing genetic research and technology that poses real dangers for human rights. In a post-Christian, postmodern world only a biblical view of human dignity can provide the moral basis to distinguish between what science can do and what science should do. Christians must be prepared to address these issues.

Medical research and technology have produced an astounding array of breakthroughs in the latter half of this century. Penicillin, polio immunization, and diagnostic techniques that detect deadly diseases in the early stages have saved millions of lives. Yet in recent years advances in biotechnology have surpassed our ability to anticipate their theological and ethical implications. Nowhere is this more evident than with genetics. As the Human Genome Project nears completing its goal to map the entire human genetic structure and scientists successfully clone mammals and even primates, we are presented with a whole new set of ethical quandaries. These issues are likely to be at the forefront of human rights concerns as we enter into the next century. As technology continues to advance, Christians need to broaden their pro-life focus. Consider just a few examples:

- Researchers in Scotland have successfully cloned the first mammal. The technological door may now open to clone human beings.
- A New Jersey family takes its doctor to court for allowing the "wrongful birth" of their Down's syndrome child. Over 300 similar suits have reached the courts in recent years. Today, as in an earlier time, we hear of "life unworthy of life."
- A child is conceived in California for the purpose of serving as a bone marrow donor for an older sibling. The cells are harvested and her sister lives. It is not only possible, but also legal to create human life for "spare parts."
- State law protects an embryo conceived in a Louisiana laboratory. Yet, as soon as the embryo is implanted into the mother, federal law removes its protection and it can be aborted.
- Researchers at Harvard and Stanford Medical Schools uncover over 200 cases of genetic discrimination. Based on "preexisting conditions," insurance companies have denied coverage to people who carry some genetically transmitted disorders even though they currently show no disease symptoms and perhaps never will.

Each of these incidents illustrates the complexities introduced by genetic technology. They involve obvious ethical and legal dilemmas, but a more basic and all-too-often ignored question must also be explored: What is a human

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person? Without an answer to this question, moral and legal debate is almost pointless. How, for example, can we speak of protecting human rights without identifying the bearer of those rights?

Citing a lengthy bibliography of current scholarly works on the meaning of "personhood," psychologist and social critic Kenneth Gergen observes, "One of the most interesting aspects of this work is that it exists at all, for only under particular cultural conditions would the question be considered worthy of such attention."¹ What are the "particular cultural conditions" to which Gergen refers? Both in academia and in popular culture we are experiencing a sweeping ideological shift. It is the decline of Enlightenment assumptions that have guided Western civilization for the past 250 years and the emergence of a "postmodern" cultural consensus. This shift in thought has been extensively documented in public opinion² and in more scholarly work.³ However, there has been little analysis of the practical implications of postmodernism for the pressing biomedical issues of our day. As postmodern language and concepts increasingly become a significant part of the public discussion about human nature and medical ethics, it is essential that Christians understand the thinking beneath the rhetoric and formulate compelling responses to it.

This article is an attempt to turn the discussion in that direction. We will consider the meaning of personhood as conceived by postmodernists and its implications in an age of genetic technology. We will further observe that a biblical view of humanity uniquely provides moral guidance through the turbulent waters of our postmodern era.

FROM THEISTIC TO MODERN THEN POSTMODERN ANTHROPOLOGY

To understand what's at stake with current issues surrounding genetics, we need to consider two crucial points of transition from biblical theism to modern and postmodern concepts of human personhood. Western culture was built largely on a biblical concept of human nature. Humans are rational, but limited in knowledge by their own finiteness and fallenness. We can reason, but revelation discloses ultimate truths. Furthermore, even though we are corrupted by the fall, since we are created in the image of God we have intrinsic value as individuals. By the late seventeenth century, however, a new way of conceiving human nature emerged, and modernism was born.

For modernists, *humans are rational by nature*. French philosopher René Descartes is considered by many as the father of modern philosophy. Parting company with medieval thought that sought to root reason in the soil of Christian belief,⁴ Descartes attempted to discover truth independent of divine revelation. He began inwardly, with his rationalistic deduction: "I think, therefore I am." Descartes's first certainty was that "I exist as a thinking thing." The concept of humanity as rational by nature became the hallmark of Enlightenment thought.

Second, the subtle assertion underlying Cartesian method is that the *self is autonomous*. By autonomous, we mean that the individual self (the "I" that "thinks") transcends or stands above environment and biology. Descartes based his theory of an autonomous self on mind/body dualism — the idea that an immaterial mind stands over and apart from nature. Later philosophers rejected Cartesian dualism and the theism it presumed, but for more than two hundred years, most maintained the belief in an autonomous self and confidence in the rational objectivity it made possible. The autonomous, rational self became the foundation for Enlightenment humanism and its liberal political theory, free market economics, and radical individualism.⁵

Postmodernism is a direct assault on the entire Enlightenment enterprise. At the heart of it, postmodernists deny the possibility of rational objectivity because they reject the view of the self that modernism presupposes. Rather than seeing humanity as an ocean of autonomous rational selves, as modernists held, postmodernists think of humans as an extension of culture and deny the individual self altogether. Kenneth Gergen notes, "With the spread of postmodern consciousness, we see the demise of personal definition, reason, authority....All intrinsic properties of the human being, along with moral worth and personal commitment, are lost from view...."⁶

The self stands under "erasure" for postmodernists, meaning they deny all transcendent categories, including essential human personhood, reason, and human value. There is no Cartesian "I" that thinks any more than there is a computer "self" beneath its programming. Postmodern anthropology is based on the idea that humans are "social constructs," or socially determined beings. We have no individual personhood because we are wholly products of culture. There can be no objective access to reality, because there is no neutral context from which to think. All thought is "contextual," meaning that the individual can never escape the arbitrary and subjective thought forms and values of the culture from which both personal identity and thought are formed.

Despite much of its "politically correct" rhetoric, postmodernism is antiessentialist and antihumanist.⁷ That is, there is no universal human essence, no stable personal identity, and consequently, no inherent human value. Humans derive an *illusory* sense of individual identity and value as persons from the arbitrary morés of their cultures. Therefore, one's identity, value, and civil rights are accidents of cultural origin, not some property intrinsic to human nature.

Evangelicals today show growing attraction to postmodern concepts of truth and knowledge. Some argue that postmodernism's notion of "socially constructed truth" provides both a welcome end to modernism's antisupernatural stranglehold on Western culture and a new opportunity for Christians to gain social and intellectual influence.⁸ However, the price paid for embracing postmodern constructivism⁹ is too high. It is unfaithful to the biblical claim to absolute truth,¹⁰ and it negates objective human dignity. If all truth is contextual, then truth about human value and rights must also be contextual rather than universal. Christian postmodern advocates J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh are forced to conclude, "There simply is no innocent, no intrinsically just narrative, not even the biblical one."¹¹ Naively accepting postmodern views of truth inevitably leads to serious erosion of human rights.

POSTMODERN ANTIHUMANISM AND GENETIC TECHNOLOGY

Postmodern antihumanism and the genetics industry are two powerful currents that form a potentially menacing rip tide against which proponents of human dignity must struggle. We will now look both at key forces directing genetic research and at how postmodern anthropological assumptions increasingly encroach on bioethics and biopolitics.

For the most part, scientists are extremely antagonistic to postmodernism because of its assault against reason as well as the postmodernists' accusation that science is a tool of Western cultural imperialism.¹² Furthermore, the vast majority of scientists properly regard themselves as socially conscious humanitarians, dedicating their professional lives to bettering the human condition. Christians should be grateful for their dedication and the fruits of their labor. Yet these humanitarian motivations actually find inspiration in the biblical world view, not the ideological assumptions accepted by the general scientific community.

Materialistic naturalism, the dominant working presupposition among secular scientists, ultimately leads to postmodernism's antihumanism. This creates a dangerous consensus in secular culture today. Consider the remarks of Robert Haynes, president of the 16th International Congress of Genetics:

For three thousand years at least, a majority of people have considered that human beings were special, were magic. It's the Judeo-Christian view of man. What the ability to manipulate genes should indicate to people is the very deep extent to which we are biological machines. The traditional view is built on the foundation that life is sacred....Well, not anymore. It's no longer possible to live by the idea that there is something special, unique, even sacred about living organisms.¹³

Whether biological machines or cultural constructs, naturalism and postmodernism strip humanity of all intrinsic value and leave postmodern culture with no meaningful frame of reference to address the pressing bioethical issues of our day.

One assumption that drives the frenzy to map the human genome is that all human behavior is of genetic origin. Behaviors that in previous times were attributed to environment or moral choice are now being attributed to genetics. High profile scientists claim to have discovered the genetic basis for a host of behaviors and characteristics, including alcoholism, homosexuality, promiscuity, I.Q., and violence. Serious scientific doubts about these claims are commonly given little attention, leaving the public with the impression that science is on the verge of solving some of society's greatest concerns. The wide acceptance of genetic explanations for these probing social problems, whether grounded in solid science or not, has created an ideological climate that has grave implications for human dignity.

Beyond these social issues, there are areas of research and technology where families may have a more personal stake. This is where postmodern constructivism is particularly dangerous. For example, as genetic screening of prenatal children becomes more of an option for parents, we can expect to see further erosion in the value of human personhood. Dr. Harvey Lodish of the Whitehead Institute for Biomedical Research in Cambridge, Massachusetts,

states, "By using techniques involving in vitro fertilization, it is already possible to remove one cell from the developing embryo and characterize any desired region of DNA. Genetic screening of embryos, before implantation, may soon become routine."¹⁴

The door is opening to "reproductive consumerism." As technologies develop, parents will be able to select a wide range of traits and select out undesirable traits from their children. Clearly, there is a demand for such procedures. Added to reproductive consumerism, economic and social pressure may well turn the possibility of genetic screening and engineering into a social expectation. After all, some will be prepared to argue, "If we can prevent another alcoholic from wasting valuable economic resources, it seems that we ought to." Or, some may say, "Who wants the trauma of raising a homosexual child if it can be avoided?"

Important market forces are also at work in the genetics research industry. Fortunes will be made through the commercial marketing of genetic material. And scientists have been quick to seize the opportunities. Since 1971, corporations have put on a relentless legal battle to patent genetically altered organisms. After nearly a decade of legal bantering, the United States Supreme Court decided that life forms can be considered "human inventions," thus patentable by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (PTO).¹⁵ This case began a slippery slope toward the inevitable patenting of human life.

In 1987, the PTO widened patent rights to include all life forms on earth, including animals.¹⁶ Human beings were exempt from the ruling, citing the Thirteenth Amendment's prohibition of slavery. However, the ruling had significant shortcomings. Attorney Andrew Kimbrell notes, "Under the PTO's 1987 ruling, embryos and fetuses, human life forms not presently covered under Thirteenth Amendment protection, are patentable, as are genetically engineered human tissues, cells, and genes."¹⁷ Corporate America won the right to own, use, and sell all multicellular creatures, including human ones.¹⁸

While a storm of pro-life protest resulted in the withdrawal of the National Institutes of Health requests for public funding to use human embryos in genetic research, it is still legal. The PTO is now flooded with applications for patents on hundreds of human genes and gene lines. Kimbrell warns, "As patenting continues, the legal distinctions between life and machine, between life and commodity, will begin to vanish."¹⁹ With the potential for human cloning, the picture becomes even less clear. If a researcher clones a human, is the clone a human invention, exempt from civil rights, or is it a person with constitutional rights?

Human genetic engineering and cloning have been suggested for all kinds of medical applications. Fetal tissue harvested from cloned or genetically engineered fetuses could be used to treat a variety of diseases, from Parkinson's disease to leukemia. If human cloning techniques are developed, it will be possible for persons to clone themselves to produce the healthy tissue their bodies need. It's not hard to envision a future in which leukemia is diagnosed, and the next day the patient's DNA is fused to an ova and implanted into a surrogate. Within a few months, the needed fetal bone marrow is harvested for the treatment.

As practical demand for human tissue increases, human value in a postmodern culture experiences a corresponding decline. In today's world of gene mapping and gene therapy, we hear terms such as the "commodification of life" and "the human body shop industry."²⁰ As Kimbrell puts it: "We are witnessing the depersonalization of human bioscience language: As body parts and [genetic] materials are sold and patented, manipulated and engineered, we also are seeing an unprecedented change in many of our most basic social and legal definitions. Traditional understandings of life, birth, disease, death, mother, father, and person begin to waver and then fall."²¹

With depersonalizing language, scientific and legal jargon obscures important moral distinctions. The consequence is that genetic research and technology appear more neutrally scientific than deeply ethical and human. Scientists and biopolicy have largely failed to distinguish between what they *can* do and what they *should* do.

At a time when few people can articulate a meaningful defense of human dignity, we are left open to the increasing influence of postmodern antihumanists. David Hirsch raises a daunting problem: "Purveyors of postmodern ideologies must consider whether it is possible to diminish human beings in theory, without, at the same time, making individual human lives worthless in the real world."²²

There are important indications that Hirsch's fears are being realized. In recent public opinion surveys, a substantial majority favor genetic screening for a wide range of genetically transmitted disorders.²³ Abortion as a therapeutic option is, of course, in view.²⁴ But it is not merely serious or fatal diseases that are being singled out. For example,

in a recent survey taken in New England, 11 percent of couples polled said they would abort a child genetically predisposed to obesity.²⁵ We need to call these sentiments what they are: *eugenic*.²⁶

This popular opinion is also reflected in the medical community. Between 1973 and 1988, the percentage of geneticists who approved of prenatal diagnosis for sex selection rose from 1 percent to 20 percent.²⁷ In a broader study, American physicians were given a scenario in which a pregnant woman wants only a son. If she is pregnant with a girl, she will abort. Sixty-two percent of these physicians said they would perform genetic screening to identify a fetus's gender or refer patients to a doctor who would.²⁸ Civil rights activists have rightly condemned abortion based on gender around the world and we should be equally outraged by the blatant misogyny these studies suggest.

BACK TO THE FUTURE?

Postmodernists recognize the potential cost of their denial of objective human value. Kenneth Gergen concedes, "Postmodernism has often been viewed as morally bankrupt because it fails to profess any fundamental values or principles. More forcefully put, postmodernism fails to offer arguments against Nazism or any other forms of cultural tyranny."²⁹

Gergen's point is grossly understated. There are dangerous historical and conceptual connections between postmodern antihumanism and *folkism*, the ideological basis of fascism.³⁰

In his sobering and timely essay, "Biological Science and the Roots of Nazism,"³¹ George Stein states, "German philosophic romanticism was a xenophobic reaction against the idea of 'man' as a species. Rather, 'men' participated in life or had their being through a unique natural and cultural identity. Folkism was established as both a philosophical ideology and as a political movement."³² For folkism, human value and human rights were associated with cultural identity just as it is for contemporary postmodernism. There simply are no inalienable rights, because there is no universal human essence.

Individualism was also illusory for folkism in much the same way it is for contemporary postmodernists. Again citing Stein, "Man is a social species. Individualism is an illusion...each individual is subordinate to the social body of which he is a member."³³

Individuals possess value only as they take their place in culture. This raises two questions: first, What is "culture"? and second, What does it mean to have a place in culture? Early fascists found the question of culture easy enough to define: Aryan folkism. And in the post-World War I era when Germany was searching for some way to regroup, folkism provided the rallying point. As to what it meant to have a place in folkish society, that was another matter. Stein points out, "Without human essentialism, folkish standards came to define normative humanity at the exclusion of other races, and even many within the race. [German social Darwinist Ernst Haeckel] and others were thus willing to argue that we must assign a totally different value to their lives."³⁴

Ideology alone could not accomplish the folkish ideal of the pure German Aryan state. But what if folkish romanticism and Aryan superiority were *scientifically* true? This was the claim of the German social Darwinists and the basis for the Nazi eugenics program. It was a scientific application of what postmodernists today call *social constructivism*. Social undesirables — those who did not fit the folkish ideal — were considered genetically inferior. As such they had a responsibility to surrender their lives for the good of the state. As Haeckel stated, "Hundreds of thousands of incurables — lunatics, lepers, people with cancer — are artificially kept alive without the slightest profit to themselves or the general body."³⁵

A growing number are expressing concern that the same ruthless pragmatism could be cultivated without much difficulty in today's genetics revolution. Arbitrarily assigning value to human life and scientific justification for social engineering is not merely a folkish matter. America has looked to eugenics in the past to address social problems.³⁶ And as economic and social pressures merge with various prejudices, postmodern constructivism provides a compelling basis for weeding out so-called "undesirable traits" from the gene pool.

Along with marketing genetically engineered fetal tissue, popular demand for wider reproductive freedom, including the parents' right to design their children, is perhaps the most insidious danger that genetic engineering creates. We

can point, however, to three other areas where genetic determinism and postmodern constructivism may compromise human rights as these notions continue to take root in culture.

Genetics and crime. Millions of dollars are being directed to research the genetic basis for human behavior. This substantial financial commitment reflects the prevailing assumption that behaviors are reducible to genetics. Consequently, we should not be surprised that solutions offered to manage social crises will tend to "medicalize" deviant behavior. For example, some have considered proposals to medically treat people who carry the alleged "violence gene," since reform is considered unlikely.³⁷ Several states are in the process of enacting legislation making it possible chemically or surgically to castrate certain sex offenders for the same reason. But such initiatives can lead down a slippery slope, promoting the assumption that human behavior is reduced to either biology or environment, with no room for character formed by moral choice *or* transformed by spiritual regeneration.

The medicalization of criminal behavior seems inviting because it connects the helplessness many feel about violence and the escalating cost of incarceration with the idea that the criminal is a victim of "bad genes." It's alluring because it absolves society of addressing key social, moral, and spiritual failures. In a postmodern culture that has no objective basis for social ethics or individual dignity, it is very realistic to expect proposals to treat other behaviors the same way. Only arbitrary social consensus will determine where to draw the line.

Genetics and racism. The popularity of the book *The Bell Curve* has disturbed many people. Written by two prominent academics (one a Harvard researcher and the other a conservative social theorist), this book argues for a social policy that curbs efforts to educate many poor people based on their presumed limited genetic potential.³⁸ The book argues that blacks on average have lower IQs *by nature* and consequently are unworthy recipients of educational and other government programs to help them rise out of poverty. Critics have rightly pointed out the biases and limitations of the study, but there is little question that *The Bell Curve* has fed the undercurrent of racism that plagues our society. The notion of genetic inferiority and a social policy to reflect it is tragically back in the national debate.

Genetic discrimination. As correlations are drawn between genetics, disease, and certain behaviors, we can expect insurance carriers and employers to consider broader genetic screening to minimize financial risk. According to a report by the Committee on Government Operations, "Pressures to evaluate risk on an individual basis might make genetic assessments a prerequisite to insurance."³⁹ At a time of enormous health insurance cost, genetic tests could be used to determine what kind of job people are suited for and what kind of extended medical coverage they should be given. Many public health experts have expressed substantial concern that the pressures of cost containment and the availability of genetic screening will potentially create a climate of "genetic discrimination" despite the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act.⁴⁰ Economic pragmatism and postmodern antihumanism provide little defense against these very real threats.

A CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCH

We are entering a new age in the struggle for human rights. The secular world view, rooted in genetic determinism and postmodern constructivism, leave little room for the inherent dignity of human life. Apart from the image of God in all people, there is no basis to resist the current momentum toward social engineering. Christians must take an informed stand on genetic engineering and cloning, understanding both the appropriate use of genetic technology and the potential dangers it presents.

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NOTES

¹Kenneth Gergen, *The Saturated Self* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 272.

²George Barna, *The Barna Report: What Americans Believe* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1991), 112.

³See Jim Leffel and Dennis McCallum, "Postmodernism: The Spirit of the Age," *Christian Research Journal*, Fall

1996.

⁴Medieval epistemology can be summarized in Anselm's dictum, "I believe so that I may understand."

⁵For an outstanding discussion of American individualism, see Robert Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). Bellah does an excellent job of showing the transition from a biblically based conception of human personhood to an Enlightenment or modernist base.

⁶Gergen, 228–29.

⁷See David Michael Levin, *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 405–8.

⁸See J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

⁹Constructivism is the idea that truth and reality are socially *created* not *discovered* in an objective world.

¹⁰For an outstanding critique of Middleton and Walsh, see Peter Payne, "A Review Essay of *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be*," *Religious and Theological Studies Fellowship Bulletin* 13 (1996):16–25.

¹¹Middleton and Walsh, 84.

¹²See Jim Leffel, "Postmodernism and the Myth of Progress," in Dennis McCallum, ed., *The Death of Truth* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), 45–57.

¹³Andrew Kimbrell, *The Human Body Shop: The Engineering and Marketing of Life* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1993), 233–34.

¹⁴Harvey Lodish, "Viewpoint: The Future," in *Science* 267:1609.

¹⁵Sidney A. Diamond, Commissioner of Patents and Trademarks, petitioner, V. Ananda M. Chakrabarty et. al. 65L ed 2d 144, 16 June 1980, 144–47.

¹⁶U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, *Animals-Patentability* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, 7 April 1987), cited in Kimbrell, 199.

¹⁷Kimbrell, 199.

¹⁸Kimbrell states, "It is important to note that, as described in the last two chapters, current U.S. patent law makes patenting human embryos perfectly legal." 223.

¹⁹Kimbrell, 212.

²⁰These terms describe both the rhetoric and the emerging biopolicy surrounding genetic research and technology.

²¹Kimbrell, 228.

²²David Hirsch, *The Deconstruction of Literature: Criticism after Auschwitz* (Hanover: Brown University Press, 1991), 165.

²³Kimbrell, 290.

²⁴"It should be clear that for now and the foreseeable future, a major benefit derived from genetic information by families and individuals is the possibility to prevent the birth of other gene carriers by utilizing selection abortion." (*Designing Genetic Information Policy: The Need for an Independent Policy Review of the Ethical, Legal, and Social Implications of the Human Genome Project*, Sixteenth Report [Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1992], 30.)

²⁵Kimbrell, 124.

²⁶"Eugenic" means "good genes." However, the term has come to represent programs aimed at eliminating people considered to possess inferior genes, or preventing them from reproducing.

²⁷Gina Kolata, "Fetal Sex Test Used as Step to Abortion," *The New York Times*, 25 December 1988, A1.

²⁸Cited in Kimbrell, 123.

²⁹Gergen, 231.

³⁰See Gene Edward Veith, *Today's Fascism* (St. Louis: Concordia Press, 1993).

³¹George Stein, "Biological Science and the Roots of Nazism," *American Scientist* 76 (1988):50–58.

³²*Ibid.*, 53.

³³*Ibid.*, 56.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 55.

³⁵Ernst Haeckel, *The Wonders of Life* (Harper, 1905), cited in Stein, 54.

³⁶For a survey of the development of eugenic policy in the United States, see Kimbrell, 250–57.

³⁷See Kimbrell, 258–59.

³⁸See Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

³⁹Committee on Government Operations, *Designing Genetic Information Policy: The Need for an Independent Policy Review of the Ethical, Legal, and Social Implications of the Human Genome Project*, 17.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 15–22.

COMPARING VIEWS OF HUMAN NATURE

Biblical Theism	Modernism	Postmodernism
Rational, but fallen and finite. In need of revelation for true and ultimate knowledge.	Rational and capable of starting from finite human experience and reason to discover ultimate truths.	Reason and truth are not objective. Human thought is limited to and determined by culture.
The image of God. Intrinsic human value, even though corrupted by the fall.	An autonomous, individual "self" exists.	Individuals are the product of cultural determinism. Individuality is an illusion.