In a 1987 Arizona State University lecture on “Religion and the Technological Revolution in Japan and the United States,” Robert N. Bellah argued that comparisons between Americans as “more individualistic and self-oriented” and Japanese as placing a “stronger emphasis on social solidarity” need to be modified to take into account the restraints imposed upon the egoism of American capitalism, at least until recently, by the ethical and religious doctrines previously dominant in American society. And in the “Introduction” to the 1989 edition of his by now classic Tokugawa Religion, Bellah had earlier suggested that in Japan a variety of recent changes are making Japanese more like Americans: “Children will learn, as they do in the United States, that the accumulation of things and the expression of one’s own feelings are the meaning of life.” Yet what the detail of Bellah’s discussions suggests to me is that comparisons of American moral culture with Japanese, in terms of a contrast between the greater individualism of the former and the greater solidarity of the latter, and tentative predictions of a future convergence of Japanese attitudes with American, under the impact of those very same forces and practices which have strengthened American individualism—television, the weakening of family ties, economic acquisitiveness, and competitiveness—may be even more fundamentally mistaken than he suggests, just because and insofar as they presuppose what is taken to be, perhaps under the influence of a certain kind of sociological theory, a culturally neutral conception of the distinction between the social and the individual. It is in terms of this type of distinction that Americans have generally—by authors less sophisticated than Bellah—been ranked as more and Japanese as less individualistic, a claim which has characteristically had two components.

First, Americans have been taken to be individualistic because of the extent to which they have understood the individual person as possessing the resources for moral judgment and right action within him- or herself, so that each individual has the task of fashioning his or her own morality, expressed in his or her choices, attitudes, and preferences, and have correspondingly understood a shared morality as no more than agreement in and harmonization of those individual choices, attitudes, and preferences, perhaps construed in terms of some implicit social contract; and secondly because of the extent to which they view social institutions merely as means, as instruments, through which individuals may give expression to and achieve the various goals which they have chosen. Modern American democracy is then taken to be the political form of modern American individualism. Conversely,
Japanese, even modern Japanese, are ranked as less individualist, less at least than Americans, to the degree to which, first, they do find resources for moral judgment and action in the established mores of the family, the workplace, and the like, rather than within themselves, as individuals, and, secondly, they view the point and purpose of individual lives as being to serve institutional needs and goals rather than vice versa.

My skepticism about this type of distinction, drawn in this way, derives from the fact that it is not, as it purports to be, a culturally neutral distinction, but rather one already drawn from the point of view of modern American individualism. It gives expression to one specifically modern American way of understanding the differences between Americans and Japanese, so that the Japanese are represented on a scale which makes them more-or-less-like-Americans. But its defects are not to be remedied by constructing some genuinely culturally neutral distinction with which to replace it, for I suspect that there is none such to be found. To say this may seem to imply that there is no way to accomplish the task of objective cultural comparison; but this, too, would be a mistake. If there are no neutral ways of comparing Japanese and American cultures, because every such way of comparison will itself be either an American way or a Japanese way, then what we do have to compare and can compare are modes of comparison. We have to ask not how do Japanese differ from Americans in respect of the social and individual aspects or components of morality, but rather how does a Japanese view of the difference between Americans and Japanese differ from an American view of that same difference, and in what ways do the concepts in terms of which the Japanese approach this question differ from the concepts which Americans employ. And if we ask this latter question, we shall perhaps discover that the most relevant Japanese distinction cannot be rendered adequately into English as a distinction between the social and the individual. Let me, however, delay in pressing this point in order to raise a second, closely related set of questions.

One stock use of what purports to be a culturally neutral distinction between the individual and the social has been to suggest that wherever in the world modernity has lessened or destroyed the dominance of older, more traditional institutional forms, one and the same tendency towards a strengthening of individualism appears, so producing a convergence in attitudes among the inhabitants of different so-called advanced societies, the type of convergence for the occurrence of which evidence seems to be provided by just the kind of increasing resemblances between Japanese and Americans which Bellah described and predicted in his 1985 “Introduction.” But what this thesis of convergence ignores is the specificity of the different historical traditions upon which modernization has made and is still making its impacts, something to which Bellah’s work has continuously directed our attention. The individualism of American modernity has one set of highly particular, if
complex, historical antecedents; the counterpart phenomena of a Japan invaded by an ever more pervasive market economy and ever more highly developed technological products issue from a very different history. And it is therefore worth considering the possibility that when we compare, as I shall be doing in this essay, that highly specific set of concepts in and through which modern Americans try to categorize and comprehend the human person with the equally specific and notably different set of concepts in and through which Japanese categorize and comprehend the person, we have to do so in a way which presents each as not only the outcome of a past history, but also a stage in a continuing history, one which in each case is as specific as the conception of the self which issues from it. Yet even to attempt this would be, of course, to embark on a huge synthetic enterprise, one far beyond the scope of what I can do in this essay. So let me instead, although in the spirit of that overall enterprise, make three sets of brief remarks, one about the present history of the American self, one about the past European history from which it derives, and one about the Japanese self, and then in the light of these make a modest prediction about the different futures of the American and the Japanese self.

The present characteristic American self I take to be a divided self, often enough a self-divided self. And these divisions involve at least three aspects of the self. From the individualism of the Enlightenment there derives a capacity of the self to abstract itself from the particular social role which it happens to inhabit and indeed from the whole social order of which that role is a constitutive part, so as to reflect upon itself as an individual qua individual, rather than qua family member or member of this or that social group. This ability of individuals to stand back from the social is quite compatible with a recognition by each such individual that he or she is up to this point in his or her life in large part a product of the influences of his or her social environment; but it involves a belief that the individual is free to withdraw him- or herself from these influences and take toward them whatever attitude he or she chooses to adopt in accordance with those preferences which are truly his or hers qua individual. So there is this part of the self which views itself as beyond all social roles, capable of escaping from its past history and of making it new.

Whereas this first aspect of the contemporary American self is governed by its answers to the question “What attitude should I take to the social order?” a second aspect is governed by its answers to the questions “How do others evaluate me?” and “How shall I be thought well of?” And in late capitalist America these questions are all often asked and answered in environments dominated by standards of acquisition and competition. Moreover, characterization by others in terms of these standards often seems inescapable, and, insofar as I cannot but be what I am taken to be, I shall be responded to in terms of these standards. So there emerges a part of the self which wears and responds to the badges of acquisitive and competitive success, an aspect of the self dominated by the social relations of an at once
bureaucratized and individualist market economy, for which society appears not as that from which I am able to abstract myself and upon which I sit in judgment, but as the source of an impersonal vocation inflicted upon me.

A third and very different aspect of the contemporary American self functions both as a survival from the past and as a response to the problems and burdens inflicted by the other two aspects of the self. It is that in the self which looks to institutionalized human relationships, defined in terms of what remains of inherited religious and moral norms, for sustenance, restoration, and the resources to discharge the tasks confronting and burdening the self in all its aspects. It is this third aspect of the contemporary American self which is responsive to a variety of invocations of values as various as those which inform the public rhetoric of politics on the one hand and the success of *Habits of the Heart* on the other.

Why do I speak of three aspects or parts of the contemporary American self, embodying three different ways of both envisaging and embodying the relationship of the individual to society, rather than of three distinct and incompatible standpoints held by different individuals? It is because, although there are types of individuals in whom only one of these attitudes is to be found, there are a remarkably large number of individuals who find within themselves at least two and, often enough, all three of these attitudes, each partially constitutive of a divided and inconsistent self. Moreover, these attitudes, when spelled out, are not merely mutually incompatible, they are incommensurable. There are available in the shared culture of modern America no standards by appeal to which these conflicts can be rationally resolved, something that becomes evident in the variety and range of idioms necessary to give expression both to each aspect of the self and to the tensions and conflicts between them. So rights-based claims, utility-based claims, contractarian claims, and claims based upon this or that ideal conception of the good will be advanced in different contexts, with relatively little discomfort at the incoherence involved.

For unacknowledged incoherence is the hallmark of this contemporary developing American self, a self whose public voice oscillates between phases not merely of toleration, but of admiration for ruthlessly self-serving behavior and phases of high moral dudgeon and indignation at exactly the same behavior, a self which remarkably often no longer sees incoherence in the promises of its political leaders as a disabling fault. And this is perhaps unsurprising in a moral culture in which radically individualist modes of thought and action are both systematically practiced and praised and yet also systematically put in question, and in which both the practice and praise on the one hand and the systematic questioning on the other are functional prerequisites for a social and economic system in which the self-interested acquisitiveness of the marketplace needs to be complemented and sustained by the kind of cooperativeness that keeps markets in being, and in which the destructive self-expression
of those individuals whose overriding priority is their own personal growth and satisfaction is contained, and the wounds deriving from it are healed, by loyalties to just those institutional forms whose disciplines and constraints are in another guise barriers to what is taken to be creative self-expression.

In so doing Americans not only try to resurrect from a variety of ethnic, often European pasts capacities for social solidarity and for shared allegiance to commonly acknowledged public goods which presupposed a very different, more unified, less individualist self, but also show themselves unable to make in fact the kind of break with those pasts, the kind of abstraction of themselves from the historically given, which their individualism continually tells them to be possible. What informed a number of those pasts was a theological and metaphysical conception of the self as soul, as *psychē*, a self which could achieve its own good only in and through its participation in forms of community in which allegiance to the good of the community educated it toward a supreme good transcending the good of the human community. There was in this theological and metaphysical conception a doctrine of the self as having no way of understanding itself in independence of and abstraction from its familial, civic, and other social roles and yet of being more than those roles, just insofar as it is a *psychē*, a spiritual substance. And it is in key part by reinvoking out of their theological past fragments and remnants of such conceptions of the self, quite incompatible with the self as conceived by different varieties of individualism, that contemporary incoherences are generated.

Japan had no such past. The metaphysics presupposed in Japanese social life at various stages, and articulated in different types of doctrine, has never found any place for the substantial *psychē*. There does indeed seem to be, at least to an observer as external as myself, a remarkable degree of constancy in the Japanese self through large institutional changes and variations in doctrine. And this constancy seems to be bound up with a mode of organization of the self in which the European and American contrasts and antitheses between individual and society, whether in the older form of a soul whose good transcends as well as includes its social good, or in the newer forms of modern individualism, find no place. Why not?

In a Japanese understanding there is that in the individual which is manifest, which is presented, which is facial expression and spoken words and actions, all of them to significant degrees conventionally ordered, and there is by contrast that which is concealed, what belongs to the heart, the sphere of unspoken thoughts and feelings. The former is not only what is socially presented, it is what in and through its conventional orderings constitutes social life. There is not the individual with inner and outer aspects and then, independent of these in some way, the institutionalized social order. The outer aspects of the individual are the social order. Or, to put the same point in another way, the individual without and apart from his or her social role is not yet complete, is a set of potentialities waiting to be achieved, just as the social
role is empty until brought into actuality by a particular person’s self-completion through it. What mediates and informs this actualization is in key part participation in the ceremonial rituals through whose formalities the personal self achieves socially appropriate expression, bringing into accord inner thoughts and feelings and outward, manifest action.

So, correspondingly, the relationship of an actor to his central role in a Noh play is very different from that of an actor to his or her role either in an ancient Greek drama or in a modern European drama. The mask in the Noh play expresses what is stereotypically given, a role which completes the incompleteness of self that the actor brings to that role. It is by the way that he plays his role that the actor particularizes the social universality of the mask; impersonal abstraction comes to life in actions which point beyond the actors by an aesthetic bareness, a stripping away of the inessential, a movement towards what is indissoluble by circumstance, that which would remain even in a ghost.

The ancient Greek actor also wore a mask, but in the interests of mimésis, of a purposeful representation of action, motivation, and changing response to contingent circumstance, which shows the individual both as tied to his or her social role and as transcending or failing to transcend its or his or her limitations as a result of the flawed judgment of hamartia. The modern Western actor by contrast with both is one complete person pretending to be another, either through the creation of illusion or, less often, through some Entfremdungseffekt. But in both ancient and modern Western cases there is involved in successful dramatic representation a particularization which is designed to point either to a self beyond the role or to a self which is more than its roles. Consider by contrast what Ernest Fenollosa said of the parts in a Noh play:

The emotion is always fixed upon idea, not upon personality. The solo parts express great types of human character, derived from Japanese history. Now it is brotherly love, now love to a parent, now loyalty to a master, love of husband and wife, of mother for a dead child, or of jealousy or anger, of self-mastery in battle, of the battle-passion itself, of the clinging of a ghost to the scene of its sin, of the infinite compassion of a Buddha, of the sorrow of unrequited love. Some one of these emotions is chosen for a piece, and, in it, elevated to the plane of universality by the intensity and purity of treatment.¹

Note that all these are emotions-as-exhibited-in-social-relationships. The Japanese emotional self has no existence apart from these relationships. There is no inner self definable apart from the defined relationships of the social world. Japanese philosophers have never needed a Wittgenstein to correct errors about the inner and the outer aspects of the self; their conceptual scheme affords no temptation to commit those particular errors.

It is not, of course, that every Japanese individual relates to the social world in the same way and to the same degree. The Japanese individual may be more or less successful in completing him- or herself by assuming those
social roles in which he or she gives particularized life to socially and conventionally ordered institutional arrangement; but to the degree to which someone fails to realize him- or herself in the medium of social forms, and thereby produces discrepancies between inner feelings and thoughts on the one hand and manifest performances on the other, “between omote and ura,” between “tatamae and honne,” such an individual will approach a condition of crisis of identity.²

If this is correct, then it is not difficult to understand why Japanese metaphysical conceptions of the self, very different as these are from each other, should exclude both the substantial soul, the psychê, of older Western theology and the individual of modern Western individualism. We find instead in Japanese thought an entirely intelligible hospitality to, at the one extreme, doctrines such as those of Confucianism, in which the self is understood entirely in terms of social roles and responsibilities, and at the other that Zen Buddhism for which the self is no-self, is in itself, so to speak, a nothing, to be pointed at only by paradoxes which make of that pointing a no-pointing. For, take the Japanese self, in its self-understanding, away from social roles, and what you have is a self that is not yet or no longer. It is no accident that there are no Japanese Aristotelians any more than there are Japanese Wittgensteinians. For the terms of Japanese philosophical debate, except insofar as they are affected by the incursions of the West, presuppose a conceptually structured tradition quite other than and alien to that presupposed by Western philosophy.

It is also no accident that these concepts, transformations of which expressed the transition from the older Western self to the newer, simply could not be expressed in or translated into the idiom of traditional Japanese life, something remarked upon by Fukuzawa Yukichi in 1869 in his Seiyo jijo (Conditions of the West). Fukuzawa picks out as one central example the Western concept of a right.³ Rights, jura, were originally in Roman law norms governing social relationships. When the same expression was first used by medieval theologians and philosophers to express parts of the natural law, it still defined what someone in a particular social relationship owes or is owed by those to whom he or she is related. But in the later middle ages there is the first movement towards that later conception of rights, according to which rights are ascribed to individuals qua individuals, apart from and prior to their entering into relationships, so that claims to rights became claims whereby individuals fence off themselves from the threats presented by others. Rights became primarily rights against others.

Unsurprisingly this conception was alien to the Japanese traditional idiom. New senses had to be given to old words when, in the late nineteenth century, Japanese writers began to debate a variety of Western conceptions, including that of rights, in the context of proposed constitutional changes. Neo-Confucianism had had no place for any conception of rights, and Japanese
theorists, with astonishing rapidity, transplanted Western discussions to Japanese contexts. But in practice ever since, it seems to be the case—and here I defer to others more knowledgeable than I—that rights in Japan are characteristically understood as secondary aspects of more fundamental norms and relationships, belonging therefore in practice not to individuals qua individuals, but to the roles and relationships through which individuals realize and constitute themselves. If this is correct, it is one more example of the Japanese capacity for transformation through adaptation at every level, including the linguistic.

The linguistic idioms through which Japanese give expression to their sense of the incompleteness of the self, apart from the specificities of its social relationships, have changed over time, as have the social relationships themselves. Consider, for example, what Takao Suzuki has said both about the contrast between the distinctive Japanese vocabulary of self-reference, marking as it does the appropriate modes of deference or otherwise, and the ubiquitous Western use of ‘I’ and about the way in which Japanese speakers will nonetheless on occasion add to their linguistic resources by adopting American usages, without paying attention to or even perhaps being aware of the evaluative presuppositions of those usages in their original American contexts.4

It is this capacity for adaptive change which suggests that even those radical transformations which Japan has undergone between the sixteenth century and the present are compatible with a certain constancy in the understanding of the self and show no sign of generating the type or degree of incoherence in the understanding of the self, and the consequent oscillations in attitude and action, which have become so evident in contemporary America. If this is so, then, in certain important respects, convergence, increasing resemblance between Japanese and Americans, is unlikely to occur, although I do not under-rate the common effects of a shared consumerism. But even the impact of consumerism will be constrained by, among other influences, the constraints imposed by the continuities of early childhood upbringing, preoccupied as that is with rendering the child compliant to the values of groups, in which it is through doing one’s utmost (gambaru) and exercising patience (gaman) on behalf of the group that the self matures into someone who cannot find integrity in discordance from its modes of being-with-others.5 The ‘other minds’ problem is yet another philosophical problem for which Japanese modes of self-understanding afford no conceptual space. Correspondingly, the type of divided self from which contemporary Americans so often suffer is unlikely to become a Japanese phenomenon. But this limited conclusion is less important than the thesis which underlies it, namely, that attempts to compare Japanese and American moral outlooks and perspectives in terms of some culturally neutral conception of the social and the individual and of variations in the relation between these were founded upon a mistake.
NOTES