THE PROS AND CONS OF SELFLESSNESS:
A HERMENEUTIC CRITIQUE OF SILENCING THE SELF THEORY

by

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Abstract

Silencing the self theory (Jack, 1987, 1991, 1999) traces gender differences in depression to many women’s moral orientation toward the interests of others ahead of one’s own needs. In this thesis, it is argued that the theory subsequently denigrates selflessness in all its forms, a stance that reflects Jack’s own moral individualism. Through a detailed hermeneutic analysis of silencing the self theory (STST), the author argues that the theory a) conceptualizes a self that is consistent with individualistic ontology, b) takes for granted the universally problematic nature of selflessness because it conflicts with individualism, c) fails to consider the potentially beneficial aspects of selflessness, even as they are revealed by Jack or the participants in Jack’s research, and d) possibly contributes to the inequality and injustice experienced by women relative to men.

Implications for future research and practice are provided.
Dedication

To my loving wife Jenny, who miraculously tolerated me through the ups and downs of writing this thesis. Truly, her love and selflessness has been a priceless gift to me.
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Table of Contents

Approval Page.................................................ii
Abstract..................................................................iii
Dedication...............................................................iv
Acknowledgements................................................v
Table of Contents..................................................vi

Section One: Exploring the Moral Dimensions of Depression......................1
  Silencing the Self Theory.........................................2
  Development and Validation of Silencing the Self Theory.................4
  The Present Critique..............................................7
  Limitations and Caveats..........................................10

Section Two: Hermeneutics and Psychology .........................16
  From Methodology to Ontology..................................16
  Critical and Moral Dimensions of Hermeneutics..................19
  Notes on Method................................................21

Section Three: Hermeneutics and Individualism..........................23
  Historical Roots of Individualism...............................24
  Gender and Individualism........................................29
  Selflessness and Possibility....................................33

Section Four: Silencing the Self Theory and Individualism...........38
  Preliminaries: What is Being Silenced?..........................38
  The Problem of Selflessness in Women’s Narratives...............43
  Selflessness and Possibility in Women’s Narratives...............47
An Individualistic Critique of Individualism

Individualism and Inequality

Section Five: Discussion, Implications and Future Directions

References
Section One: Exploring the Moral Dimensions of Depression

The modern conception of depression has held a central place in psychological and psychiatric discourse since Freud (1917) compared the "normal" mourning of loved ones to "neurotic" melancholia in response to the loss of love objects. Since then, we have seen Aaron Beck's highly influential cognitive therapy, built largely from work with depressed patients (e.g., Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979), and a booming psychopharmacological industry driven in large measure by the call to treat the illness known as depression. In the sense that it is used in psychological and psychiatric research, depression usually refers to the psychiatric disorder by the same name (major depressive disorder), as specified in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR; APA, 2000). According to the DSM-IV definition, the major depressive diagnostic category includes the presence of a depressed mood, combined with at least four other associated complaints, such as a loss of pleasure in activities one previously enjoyed, insomnia/hypersomnia, weight loss/gain, psychomotor retardation/agitation, fatigue, low self-esteem, difficulty concentrating and recurrent thoughts of death. In order for major depressive disorder to be diagnosed, these symptoms must occur consistently over a 2-week period. A great deal of research into the phenomenon of depression also deals with dysthymic disorder, which involves fewer symptoms but a more chronic duration, and subclinical manifestations of depression symptoms (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1990).

Epidemiological research has revealed that both major depressive disorder and dysthymic disorder occur twice as commonly in women as in men (APA,
A large body of theory and research has been dedicated to explaining this discrepancy (for a complete discussion, see Nolen-Hoeksema, 1990). A number of these theories trace women's greater propensity for depression to the unique social context in which women are embedded. For example, numerous studies have pointed out that women's risk for depression stems from being devalued in the workplace, both in terms of lower pay (Maffeo, Ford, & Lavin, 1991) and workplace harassment (Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, & Gelfand, 1997; Piotrkowski, 1998). Other authors have suggested that women are socialized to believe that they have little control over the outcomes of their lives, and therefore to act in helpless ways. This "learned helplessness" has been linked to symptoms of depression in women (Ruble, Greulich, Pomerantz, & Gochberg, 1993). Nolen-Hoeksema and her colleagues (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000; Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1993; Nolen-Hoeksema, Parker, & Larson, 1994) suggest that it is women's tendency to ruminate about their depressed feelings, rather than to distract themselves (as men typically do), which is responsible for women's greater depressive experiences. This tendency to ruminate, Nolen-Hoeksema (1987) contends, is linked to woman's socialization to be emotion-focused and the belief that they have little ability to effect change in their lives.

**Silencing the Self Theory**

For the most part, the approaches to women's depression discussed above are considerate and respectful of the unique context in which women find themselves. According to Dana Crowley Jack (1991), however, practitioners of psychology usually remain committed to the idea that depression rates are higher
in women because of “women’s greater dependence on relationships, their difficulty in achieving individuation and autonomy” (p. 7). Jack suggests that these interpretations of women’s vulnerability to depression exist because of “the view of the self that dominates psychology,” in which “‘man’ is intrinsically separate” (p. 7) from the social and interpersonal context in which the individual functions. In this context of separateness, relationships are considered to be collateral to the self, and only functional insofar as they benefit the individual. In her silencing the self theory (STST), Jack (1987, 1991, 1999) rejects these approaches in favor of a relational view, which argues that the self cannot be understood outside the relational context in which it exists, and that “human connectedness” is a “goal of development” (1991, p. 10). According to Jack, an orientation towards relationships, and specifically towards the needs and desires of others within those relationships, is particularly relevant to female development. Women, Jack argues, experience themselves as more connected to other people in their interpersonal context than do men. Following her teacher Carol Gilligan (1982), Jack argues that this sense of connection often is experienced as a moral imperative to look after the needs, desires and feelings of others, even at the cost of forsaking one’s own.

Jack proposes, however, that this very moral system presents a risk factor for depression in women. Specifically, Jack argues that women experience these moral standards as the “Over-Eye,” or an internalized moral voice that instructs them on the correct way to behave, think, and feel. According to Jack, such moral standards often directly contradict the woman’s “authentic self,” or sense of her
own needs, desires, beliefs, and values. Jack points out that women often do not challenge the standards of the Over-Eye, but rather, draw on their culture's devaluation of female perspectives and determine that their own feelings are not worthwhile, and therefore should not be expressed. To accomplish this task of shutting down one's own feelings, Jack suggests that women engage in "cognitive activity" (Jack, 1991, p. 129) in order to actively silence the voice of the authentic self, and selflessly refocus themselves on the interests of others. This experience of choosing, based on societal gender-role imperatives, not to express oneself, or silencing the self as Jack calls it, is hypothesized to result in an accumulation of resentment, which is then directed inward and manifested as symptoms of depression (Jack, 1987, 1991). Thus, while Jack endorses the idea that the female self must be understood in terms of its orientation toward relationships, Jack argues that the experience of depression also occurs because of this relational context.

*Development and Validation of Silencing the Self Theory*

Silencing the self theory initially was developed through a longitudinal study of 12 women (Jack, 1987, 1991), who were diagnosed with either major depressive disorder or dysthymic disorder. Each of these women was interviewed on two occasions, separated by a two-year period. Jack also drew on interviews with four women who were contemplating divorce (Jack, 1991), and with three physicians (Jack, 1999). All of the women in these adjunct studies were diagnosed with either major depressive disorder or dysthymic disorder. The women who participated in these studies (Jack, 1987, 1991, 1999) came from a range of ages,
educational backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, domestic lives, and employments. In justifying her decision to base her theory on the narratives provided by her participants, Jack (1991) notes that, in psychological research, “we rarely hear depressed women’s own words; instead, we are commonly given summaries and vignettes created by the interpreter and ordered by concepts that may obscure women’s own representation of their lives” (p. 4). Mainstream psychological research, Jack appears to be suggesting, inadvertently contributes to silencing the self as well. Alternatively, Jack (1991) proposes that depressed women are the “people best able to guide us in the search…. because they are the ones who know about their paths into depression as well as the ways that lead out of it” (p. 23). In these interviews, themes of self-silencing clearly emerge as pervasive patterns in depressed women’s lives. In order to explore this persuasive qualitative data further, Jack developed the Silencing the Self Scale (STSS) (Jack & Dill, 1992) to examine, empirically and quantitatively, the link between self-silencing and depression. Consistent with Jack’s predictions, self-silencing has been shown to be statistically correlated with depression in women from a wide range of populations, as indicated by data gathered from samples from the general community (Thompson, 1995), college and university students (Carr, Gilroy, & Sherman, 1996; Duarte & Thompson, 1999, Jack & Dill, 1992), new mothers who used cocaine in pregnancy (Jack & Dill, 1992), victims of domestic violence (Jack & Dill, 1992), and patients with physical ailments (Ali et al., 2000).

At the same time, however, some of the empirical literature presents significant challenges to the theory. For example, it has been found across studies
that men self-silence either to the same extent (Cowan, Bommersbach, & Curtis, 1995), or to a greater extent (Duarte & Thompson, 1999; Gratch, Bassett, & Attra, 1995; Thompson, 1995), than women, and that significant correlations between self-silencing and depression exist for both genders (Duarte & Thompson). One of the basic premises of STST is that self-silencing is a function of the female gender role, and the socialization to put one’s own needs behind those of others. The empirical research, however, appears to demonstrate that self-silencing is no less a problem for men than it is for women. It is conceivable, as Duarte and Thompson have pointed out, that while women understand self-silencing to be the process of suppressing one’s genuine feelings for the purposes of maintaining harmony in relationships, men may perceive self-silencing to consist of gender role appropriate suppression of emotion (see, for example, Levant, 1998; Pollack, 1998a; Real, 1997). It also is important to realize’ that many of the above noted studies sampled college or university populations, where gender differences in depression have been found to be small or nonexistent (e.g., Bryson & Pilon, 1984; Stangler & Printz, 1980). Given the limited scope of the above empirical studies of gender differences in self-silencing and depression, it is far too preliminary to challenge the validity of STST in terms of the relation between self-silencing and gender. Nonetheless, this research demonstrates the need to consider carefully the nature and prevalence of self-silencing in male samples drawn from non-college populations.

It also is concerning that the majority of participants used by Jack as a basis for her formulation of STST are Caucasian and heterosexual. The validity of
self-silencing as a risk factor for depression has not been demonstrated consistently in non-Caucasian populations. On the one hand, Gratch and her colleagues (1995) found that levels of self-silencing differed across ethnic groups, yet always was correlated with depression. On the other hand, Carr et al. (1996) found that self-silencing was not related to depression in a sample of African American women at a community college. Thus, the applicability of the self-silencing construct to depression in non-Caucasian women is questionable, while no systematic research into the impact of self-silencing on depression in lesbian and bisexual populations of women has been undertaken to date.

The Present Critique

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a critical perspective on STST, yet with a starkly different approach than the empirical challenges raised above. My central goal is to uncover the moral position from which the theory was developed and continues to operate. This issue cannot be addressed in any straightforward sense, however. Despite Jack’s assumption that women’s lives are profoundly organized around moral beliefs, Jack herself does not elucidate any of her own such beliefs. It always is possible, of course, that such an omission reflects the relatively minor role that morality has in shaping this or any theory, a possibility that would render the present thesis somewhat trivial. However, as a number of authors (e.g., Cushman, 1995; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999; Woolfolk, 1998) have pointed out, psychological theory, research, and practice is a profoundly moral exercise. These authors also argue that a failure to acknowledge one’s moral stance increases the risk of the theory contributing to an invisible,
coercive ideology. Following from these arguments, it is my assertion that it is important to describe the implicit moral structure of STST, particularly since the theory holds that certain moral orientations create risk for depression. It might be the case that the moral beliefs held to be problematic in STST lie in opposition to the moral beliefs that are prevalent yet unacknowledged in STST. If this is the case, and if Jack implicitly promotes her own moral viewpoint, we face the possibility that the theory unknowingly puts forth a disguised, and perhaps coercive, ideology.

What is the nature of the ideology that underscores STST? In a similar analysis of STST, Janice Thompson (2001) argues that STST is driven by an unacknowledged commitment to *individualism*, an ontology and perspective on the good life that many authors (e.g., Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, & Tipton, 1985; Cushman, 1990, 1995; Fox-Genovese, 1991; Richardson et al., 1999) have noted to be pervasive in modern, Western, society. Thompson contends that Jack’s individualism is revealed by the depiction of silencing as an intrapsychic, cognitive phenomenon, despite the explicit recognition that sociocultural norms shape gender inequity, and hence, women’s greater risk for depression. In the present thesis, I also allege that an individualistic ideology is prevalent in STST, but endeavor to point out the moral aspects of this individualism. Most notably, I focus on Jack’s abhorrence of *selflessness*, or the perspective that others’ needs are more important than one’s own, and that one should attend to others, even at the cost of oneself. Jack claims that selflessness provides a powerful moral organizer of women’s experience, and the impetus to
silence the self. Putting this perspective in explicitly moral language, one might say that Jack views selflessness as the wrong or bad way of being. In contrast, as I argue in this thesis, Jack envisions the good life to consist of a drastic separation of the self from others, narrow self-interest, and a belief in the fundamentally good and masterful nature of the individual. It is my contention that STST's individualism reinforces many of the very problems in living, such as depression, isolation, and inequality that Jack seeks to redress in her theory.

This project is, in many ways, a comparison of perspectives on what constitutes the good life, as it shows up through the perspectives of women in Jack's research, Jack's interpretations of these narratives, and my interpretations of both. Because of the fundamentally moral and evaluative nature of the project, it is clear that the positivism and empirical methods typically employed in psychology are not appropriate to my research question. In Section Two, I discuss the hermeneutic approach to understanding human phenomena that will be used in the present analysis. At the risk of oversimplifying, we may, for the moment, understand hermeneutics as a perspective that emphasizes that the individual is inextricably intertwined with the shared meanings and traditions of her or his culture. Most centrally, these cultural traditions provide guidance in terms of what constitutes the good, meaningful life.

It is against this hermeneutic backdrop that the dominant individualistic view of human life has been revealed. In Section Three, I discuss the emergence and prevalence of individualism in America and Western Europe, and the particular configuration of the self that individualism entails. I also consider how
such individualism has been constructed largely through particular arrangements of gender. The impact of gender has often been ignored by hermeneutic inquiries to date, but is particularly relevant to the current analysis of a theory concerned with gender differences in depression. In Section Four, I discuss how STST clearly reflects and reinforces the dominant ideology of individualism, and the construction of the self that this ideology endorses. The hermeneutic inquiry of Section Four also will identify how this ideology contributes to the very problems STST was designed to ameliorate, and creates other problems that are exclusive to an unquestioned individualism. Finally, Section Five discusses the implications of this analysis, including a consideration of how research and practice in psychology could address the benefits and drawbacks of a moral orientation towards selflessness.

Limitations and Caveats

Prior to joining this discussion, it is important to emphasize several points that readers should keep in mind. First, the fact that my analysis is concerned with one particular theory of gender differences in depression does not imply that this thesis is an exclusive attack on the merits of STST. This analysis could just as easily have focused on any of the numerous other theories of gender and depression that ostensibly acknowledge the importance of considering the individual as embedded in the context of her culture, yet downplay this understanding in the elucidation of the theory. Nolen-Hoeksema’s (1987, 1990) theory of ruminative coping, likely the most recognized and respected theory of gender differences in depression available, provides an illustrative example.
Rumination, by Nolen-Hoeksema’s own admission, is a by-product of sociopolitical realities, yet the interventions she prescribes nonetheless emphasize changing the nature of that intrapsychic by-product, rather than on addressing its underlying sociopolitical causes. Indeed, STST was selected for this analysis precisely because of its merits in recognizing the vital inseparable role of morality and even the problematic ubiquity of individualism in modern Western life. Thus, it is with tremendous respect and appreciation that I have dedicated this paper to an analysis of STST.

The reader also may wonder why I have chosen to attend to the moral attitudes that permeate the lives of depressed women and STST, and not to question the socially constructed elements of depression itself. Many impressive hermeneutic works (particularly Cushman, 1995 and Woolfolk, 1998) have addressed the question of how disease categories are largely the product of the indigenous values of a particular time and place, and how they are nonetheless assumed to be transhistorical, universal, fact-based entities. In STST as well, there is very little questioning of the assumption that depression is a natural disease entity. It is important to recognize that the very existence of the depression category is an artifact of the individualism that the present thesis critiques. It is likely that we are only concerned with people who feel depressed and unenthusiastic about their lives—to the extent that we consider them mentally ill—within the context of a moral system that regards the individual and her or his happiness as being the key to the good life. In addition, as Cushman has suggested, individualism may, ironically, result in the emptiness experienced by
modern individuals that, in turn, leads to numerous mental health complaints, including depression.

Indeed, it is a worthwhile question to examine how the category of depression also is impacted by moral commitments, in particular the individualism of the current era. However, due to the complexity of unearthing the moral positions built into various psychological contexts of the kind with which this paper is concerned, I have chosen to leave aside an attempt to deconstruct the depression category. To compensate, I opened this paper with a clear description of the manner in which “depression” is used by most psychology researchers, by Dana Crowley Jack, and by myself for the purposes of this analysis. The purpose of this articulation was to indicate that my usage of the term depression in this paper is akin to that of the established psychiatric and psychological classification, and not to any of the alternative constructions of depression that are possible. This does not imply my acceptance of the mainstream understanding of depression, merely the requirement of doing so for the purpose of this analysis.

It also is worth noting the scope of this analysis. As this paper challenges the theoretical underpinnings of STST, I will deal primarily with those sources that present the rationale for the theory itself (i.e., Jack, 1987, 1991, 1999). I noted above that STST was constructed primarily through the analysis of narratives of depressed women. For this reason, I necessarily review and comment on the excerpts provided in the context of Jack’s argument. However, these narratives are explored only to the extent that it allows us to observe how
moral themes may play out in the lives of depressed women, and how STST provides a means of interpreting these narratives from a particular moral perspective. In a number of cases, I offer alternative interpretations of the excerpts, interpretations that reflect my different moral position. It is important to acknowledge that I did not interview these women myself. My interpretations are therefore limited to the extent that the excerpts provided in the context of STST are a fair testament to the nature of self-silencing in the lives of these women.

Fortunately, Jack provides rich details of her participants’ narratives, and comprehensive interpretations, all of which made my secondary interpretation considerably easier and, I hope, trustworthy.

Given this discussion of how my moral interpretation will be starkly different from that of Jack, it is important that I describe the moral position from which I approach the phenomenon of interest. Doing so is vital, lest certain unacknowledged moral commitments on my part lead to the unintentional reproduction of the problems I am addressing in this analysis. First, I have a strong belief that participation in the traditions and practices of one’s community, ethnic or religious group, or family provides the means by which personal meaning can be created. I refer to this perspective as collectivism throughout this work. As we shall see, such a view is fairly consistent with the hermeneutic ontology discussed in Section Two, and directly antithetical to the individualistic perspective, the focus of Section Three. We must, however, be vigilant about our traditions, particularly when aspects of them run in opposition to social justice. Ordinary people, I feel, deserve lives free from manipulation, abuse and torture,
and we should be prepared to challenge cultural traditions that produce, condone, or reinforce any of these social ills. In this moral commitment to the rights and privileges of individuals, I am reflecting the *liberalism* of my era. Because many of the malicious aspects of our culture are frequently hidden from our view (Cushman, 1995), we must be prepared to engage in ongoing reflection on the historical and philosophical origins of our deeply held values, so that we may be able to realize the interests that are served by them. My moral position therefore, includes a longing for collective connection, individual rights and freedoms, and honest contemplation of the benefits and limits of our most cherished values.

I hold these values strongly, and I conjecture that they are plainly visible throughout the paper. This is a comforting thought to me, as I wish for my biases to be quite explicit, lest they become pernicious. Nonetheless, I encourage the reader to adopt a critical eye. It is very likely that there are lurking moral perspectives of which I am unaware, but that nonetheless shape my ideas in powerful ways. One possible source of unintended influence is the fact that I am a man writing about a theory of women's depression. I am an outsider, basing my understanding of this phenomenon on personal and professional relationships and conversations I have had with women throughout my life, readings from women's perspectives on this and similar issues, and the emotional resonance many of the moral themes brought to light in this analysis have for me, even though I am of a different gender. In spite of these limitations, I have tried to be clear in this paper that I wish to challenge any state of affairs where a woman is placed in a subordinate position to a man, or is made to live a less valued, and more
constricted life for the betterment of a man. At the same time, I fully encourage a critical perspective on this and any other element of my moral position as I present my own critical view on the moral positions built into individualism and silencing the self theory.
Section Two: Hermeneutics and Psychology

From Methodology to Ontology

Given that the theoretical basis for this paper, and the means by which I will be framing my argument, derive from the hermeneutic tradition, it is an important first step to consider the different ways in which hermeneutics has been understood. In its common usage, hermeneutics is defined as “the branch of knowledge that deals with interpretation and the theories of interpretation, especially of Scriptures or literary texts” (Barber, 1998, p. 660). Indeed, hermeneutics initially was devised in the sixteenth century as the method by which religious texts were subject to interpretations, with the purpose of uncovering God’s true word (Richardson et al., 1999, p. 200). The nineteenth century philosopher Freidrich Schleiermacher saw hermeneutics as being essential not only to literary and religious interpretation, but also to understanding the meanings and truths inherent in all human experiences (Grondin, 1994). For this reason, Schleiermacher has been credited with bringing about “universal hermeneutics” (Woolfolk, Sass, & Messer, 1988). Influenced by Kant’s view that there is a fundamental gap between the phenomenon as it is experienced and the truth of the thing in itself, Schleiermacher argued that we are all mired in a natural state of misunderstanding (Grondin, p. 70). Schleiermacher was interested in the processes by which understanding the meaning behind particulars, such as text and utterances, can occur. To do this, Schleiermacher emphasized the critical importance of considering how a broader context impinges upon, and is revealed by, the particular we are attempting to study (Grondin; Richardson et al.). This
process of understanding the part based on explicit reference to the whole, and of understanding the whole through the study of parts was identified by Schleiermacher as the “hermeneutic circle” (Woolfolk et al., p. 7).

A generation later, Wilhelm Dilthey extended many of Schleiermacher’s ideas in order to propose a methodology for the human sciences, an area of study that grew in popularity in late nineteenth century Germany (Woolfolk, 1998). However, Dilthey was faced with a growing ideology that the methods of the natural sciences are the standard to which all forms of inquiry should strive (Woolfolk, 1998; Woolfolk et al., 1988). According to Dilthey, the methods of the natural sciences are inappropriate to studying human beings or human events, because of the emphasis in the natural sciences on reducing phenomena into constituent elements. In contrast to the natural science view, Dilthey asserts that human life is itself irreducible. As a result, we cannot “explain” human life in terms of causal laws, but must seek to “understand” it instead (Woolfolk et al., 1988, p. 8). Such understanding, Dilthey argues, proceeds first by describing the entire life context in which a specific event takes place, and then by proceeding to understand specific events in light of that context. As we can see, Dilthey echoes many of the ideas put forth by Schleiermacher, and maintains the “hermeneutic circle” at the center of this methodology. Dilthey is unique, however, in his dedication to establishing the epistemological legitimacy of a form of human sciences based on hermeneutic principles (Grondin, 1994, p. 85).

Beginning with Martin Heidegger (1927/1962), the focus of hermeneutics turned from epistemology to ontology, from how hermeneutics provides
appropriate methods for certain types of inquiry, to how our very being as selves in the world is hermeneutic (Richardson et al., 1998). Ontological hermeneutics begins with an examination of the person’s actual experience of being human in the life-world, or, as Heidegger puts it, our “being-in-the-world.” Heidegger immediately notices that our existence is inseparable from our attempts to make meaningful sense of ourselves, and our place in the world; it is our fate, Heidegger argues, to be self-interpreting beings. Following from this argument of the inevitability of interpretation, Heidegger describes how the things, people, and ideas in our world directly show up in terms of the meaning and value they have to our existence. The particular meanings we devise, Heidegger argues, result from being thrown into, and participating in, the traditions and practices of a culture. In this situation, our individual selves are fundamentally inseparable from the social context in which we exist.

Extending this notion, Heidegger’s student Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/1975) discusses how being a part of a particular historical and cultural tradition endows us with certain preconceptions or prejudices. Gadamer does not use “prejudice” in the pejorative sense. Instead, prejudice is viewed as the means by which particular aspects of culture, such as a work or art, psychological theory, or conversation, are understood and evaluated. Such interpretation, however, is not something that individuals choose to engage in or not, as Schleiermacher, or other methodological hermeneuts would have it (Grondin, 1994). Instead, Gadamer echoes Heidegger in claiming that interpretation and attempts to understand particulars are constitutive of human existence.
Importantly, Gadamer does not conceive prejudice as an immovable state, as the common understanding presumes. To demonstrate the flexibility of culturally inscribed prejudices, Gadamer points out that the process of human understanding necessarily involves the assumption that the particular contains both a complete coherent meaning, and some truth that will lead us to reconsider and reconstruct many of our own prejudices. Our openness to change in this sense requires us to be aware of the prejudices with which we enter into the dialogue of understanding. However, to leave aside all prejudices is neither possible nor desirable, since prejudices form the benchmark from which our evaluations and meaning-making emerge. To forego all our prejudices would mean the wholesale adoption of the ideas expressed in the particular, without any consideration for how these ideas fit with one’s current understandings and values. Thus, Gadamer helps us to see the necessary quality of our cultural frame of reference when we participate in the very activity of interpretation that defines our existence. At the same time, he notes that this frame is ever-changing as we encounter particulars that do not completely fit with our current value system.

**Critical and Moral Dimensions of Hermeneutics**

Gadamer’s (1960/1975) notion that prejudice is an inevitable feature of human understanding has come under fire from philosophers of social science who seek to challenge the impact of oppressive ideology on individuals’ lives. Led by Jurgen Habermas (1973/1980), these objections are captured under the rubric of critical hermeneutics. Habermas argues that it is dangerous to view prejudice as our inescapable destiny, as it may make us apologists for the
oppressive and coercive components of the tradition in which we are embedded. Instead, Habermas postulates that one of the key goals of understanding is the pursuit of freedom from all ideology, an end that can be accomplished by beginning hermeneutic inquiry with the assumption that the dominant ideology limits our tacit preunderstanding. Through such a proposal, however, Habermas cannot escape from the Heideggerian notion that this tacit knowledge emerges from participating in a common tradition of meaning. This tradition, of course, will carry with it its own dangerous prejudices, thereby bringing us right back to the initial problem that Habermas noted.

Fortunately, many of the concerns raised by Habermas can be dealt with through an ontological hermeneutic approach. The starting point of any critical analysis of an aspect of tradition is a firm sense of what one finds to be good and right. How else can we know which elements of a tradition are objectionable, and with what we should replace them? Just like the oppressive elements that a critical approach seeks to rectify, this sense of goodness emerges from the practices of one’s cultural tradition as well. Perhaps if we can become aware of the objectionable features of our tradition, we will be more capable and motivated to rework or reject them, particularly when we find out how disparate they are from our most cherished values.

In our current era, for example, there is a high premium placed on individual rights and freedoms, on challenging any instances of people being manipulated, tricked, oppressed, physically or psychologically harmed, or killed, when they are clearly innocent and undeserving of these fates. If we uncover
hidden features of the cultural tradition that subjects people to such fates, we can perhaps be assured that the public will be on board to rethink its own commitments to the tradition in which it is embedded. A central point to hermeneutic ontology is that the “horizon” of understanding (Gadamer, 1960/1975) is always changing through the process of interpretation. However, the potential to shift our understandings, prejudices, and moral commitments in more favorable directions is much more possible when we are explicitly aware of the prejudices that shape our lives, and the other prejudices that are possible (Woolfolk et al., 1988).

**Notes on Method**

In the field of psychology, there is a small but rapidly expanding group of critics (e.g., Danziger, 1990; Christopher, 1999; Cushman, 1995; Fowers, 2001; Greenberg, 1994; Richardson et al., 1999; Wolszon, 1998; Woolfolk, 1998) who have adopted ontological hermeneutics for the purposes of understanding how the unacknowledged moral commitments present in psychology shape the theories, research, and practice of the discipline. These authors approach such hermeneutic analyses by focusing on specific aspects of psychology, in order to see how each is influenced by the tradition in which the discipline is immersed. At the same time, attending to particulars reveals the manner by which the tradition itself emerges in the everyday life of the discipline. As Woolfolk suggests, “(w)ith additional components available, we begin to see better the character of the whole” (p. 66). These authors make full use of the hermeneutic circle by continuously moving back and forth between the part and the whole, in order to facilitate understanding of both. For example, in Philip Cushman’s exemplary
analysis of the co-construction of America and psychotherapy, the author focuses on particular therapeutic approaches, including Kleinian psychoanalysis, object relations theory, and self psychology. Each of these "case studies" reveals how elements of the tradition in which psychotherapy is embedded shaped these theories, while the theories themselves are shown to reflect, reinforce, and sometimes change, the prevailing tradition.

The present analysis of STST provides another such "case study" in this tradition. Consistent with hermeneutic ontology, I endeavor to show how particular interpretations of depressed women's narratives provided by STST reflects and reinforces the broader moral tradition in which the theory is embedded. Of course, what I am offering are interpretations of interpretations, and thus the hermeneutic circle also applies to my own research process. Specifically, my moral inclinations towards collectivism, social justice, equality and freedom from oppression, and perhaps others of which I am not aware, are revealed through and shaped by the interpretations I provide. In the point of contact of this paper, therefore, we are witnessing what Cushman (1995) refers to as intersecting traditions. The contexts of mainstream Western society, the author of STST, myself, and the depressed women who contributed to STST, connect in the present analysis. Through the course of this thesis, it is hoped that understanding of all four elements will be enhanced. Through this understanding, I may be able to bring to light the moral themes of selflessness in women's depression, and compare the various ways in which this selflessness is interpreted.
Section Three: Hermeneutics and Individualism

A recurring theme in ontological hermeneutics is the idea that the human self is constructed through participating in a meaning-making cultural tradition. Since the end of the sixteenth century, North America and Western Europe have increasingly been influenced by a tradition that categorically denies the impact of the social context on the individual. This tradition of individualism involves the belief that the individual is separate from the social and historical context in which he or she exists, that the individual can function free from any such context, that the interests of the individual are primary to those of society, and that social institutions are generally intrusive and oppressive in the lives of individuals. In sum, the modern age views the self as being “bounded,” or distinct from other selves and a community context, and “masterful” or capable of achieving a powerful, meaningful life all on one’s own (Cushman, 1995). It is ironic indeed that the ideology of individualism, with its boundedness and mastery, is intricately tied to the historical context in which it exists.

It appears as though the very power of individualism, and the construction of the self that it entails, lies in its covertness. Thinking of the self as being separate from the social and historical context from which it emerges helps to discourage any historical tracing of its origins. By occluding history in interpreting the current construction of the self, the belief that the self is separate from its social context and that it always has existed in this form, is reinforced. However, if we wish to engage in a hermeneutic analysis of STST, the tradition that forms the context of the theory must first be elucidated, as we cannot
understand the particular without an adequate sense of the whole. In what follows, I offer a very brief history of individualism, and the concomitant construction of the self, as they have emerged in Western society over the past five hundred years. Limitations of space require this history to be quite cursory; for a more complete understanding of the history of individualism, the reader is advised to consult the works of Cushman (1990, 1995) and of Bellah et al. (1985), which, together, provided most of the foundation for the present historical retelling.

**Historical Roots of Individualism**

Tracing the history of a tradition that emphasizes the primacy of the individual begins with the clash of two social institutions. From the heretical insights of Copernicus in the sixteenth century, Western culture frequently has been defined by the ubiquitous tension between science and religion. Despite the church's best efforts to suppress the work of scientists who provided data that did not fit with established theological doctrine, the combined efforts of Galileo, Newton, Darwin, and others functioned to debunk the epistemological legitimacy of the church. Absent its ability to explain worldly phenomena, the church slowly began to fade as a unifying social and political force. In many ways, removing the church from these roles also eliminated the moral oppression that rigid religious doctrine entails. At the same time, however, it left individuals without a common tradition from which personal meanings could be derived.

Enlightenment philosophers were soon on board to fulfill the role of guides toward the good life (Cushman, 1995). Drawing from the socially determined legitimacy of science, and the decay of the church, these philosophers
were keen to point out that the individual is fully equipped to achieve a complete, rational understanding of the world around him or her, without the need for any institutional mediation. John Locke (1690/1959), for example, claimed that we begin our lives as blank slates upon which sensory experiences of the world are inscribed. Locke considers this unmediated experience of the world to be the basis of all our knowledge. The philosophy of Immanuel Kant often is understood to lie in direct opposition to that of Locke (see for example, Rychlak, 1973). Kant (1781/1990) challenges Locke’s radical empiricism by arguing that sensory information is actively processed and organized by the mind’s categories of understanding. In other words, Kant suggests that human beings are fundamentally rational creatures, a priori to any sensory experience. The complexities of, and differences between, the philosophies of Locke and Kant are beyond the scope of this paper. The important point, however, is that both philosophers, and indeed the entire Enlightenment spirit, contributed to a vision of individuals as being bounded and masterful (Cushman). Individuals were seen as able to gain knowledge of the world through their own empirical and rational capacities, and as completely free from the restraining influences of religious dogma.

Simultaneously with these philosophical developments, the political and economic structures of North America and Western Europe were shifting in unprecedented ways. Britain, France, and America all experienced considerable restructuring of their political systems in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, France and America through the means of violent revolution. The thrust
of these changes involved a comprehensive challenge to autocratic authority, and the enshrinement of the rights of individuals within free and democratic society. Yet even in the wake of this fresh emphasis on the individual, the good of the community was not cast aside easily. In America, Bellah et al. (1985) point out, there was a strong belief that individuals should be free from oppressive actions of the state, but it also was held that such freedom can be realized through active participation in one’s small town community.

However, with the gradual decline of agrarian communities and the rise of factories, families left behind the communal traditions of the small town, and migrated to large, heterogeneous cities (Cushman, 1995). In these urban centres, the economic landscape came to be dominated by capitalism, wherein individuals’ survival was dependent on their ability to supply a product or service that matched or exceeded the current demand, and the mass consumption of goods and services was needed for the perpetuation of economic order. Isolated from families and from religious and ethnic communities, and faced with an economic system that emphasized personal achievement as the ultimate end, the ideology of the self-made entrepreneur took hold. Individuals became exclusively concerned with their own personal achievements, an orientation that Bellah et al. (1985) refer to as “utilitarian individualism.” This form of individualism involved a capitalistic view of freedom that was largely inherited from the eighteenth century philosopher and economist Adam Smith (1776/1976): freedom of the market from bureaucratic intervention, and the freedom to enter any trade, and consume any product, that the individual desires. The good of the community was no longer in
the picture in the individualistic and capitalist landscape of America, either in terms of ideology, or in terms of the concrete reality of most Americans' lives.

Utilitarian individualism did not go unchallenged. What showed up as particularly pernicious was the basis of this form of individualism, and indeed capitalism itself: the view of the self as rational, calculating, and focused on the manipulation of environmental contingencies for one's own earthly success. Many writers in the Romantic and humanistic tradition felt that such an understanding of what it means to be human robbed human life of its sacredness and vitality (Woolfolk, 1998). The good life, Romantics insisted, is founded on individuals' unencumbered emotive and artistic expression. This "expressive individualism" (Bellah et al., 1985) challenged the narrow focus on material wealth explicit to the capitalist agenda, but did not question the isolation of the individual from the communities and traditions from which personal meaning was once derived. Fundamental to the Romantic, humanistic conception of the human self is a belief in the fundamental goodness of the unique and separate individual, a goodness that the forces of church, culture, state and capitalist industry can only corrupt. Given the inherent goodness that is assumed to reside within the individual and the contaminating influences associated with social institutions, it makes sense that we do not see writers in the Romantic tradition attempt to reinstate cultural traditions.

The legacy of individualism in all its forms, and the construction of the bounded, masterful self that individualism has fostered, have been maintained and developed in the twentieth century by the profession of psychology. Psychology
has provided a modern ideology that combines the Enlightenment emphasis on rational capacities of the human self, the utilitarian agenda of maximizing self-interest, and the Romantic priority on emotional catharsis. Despite the conflicts and rivalries that have colored the history of psychology, the various streams of the discipline are united in the fundamental belief in the individual's separateness from, and primacy over, the social context. Numerous accounts demonstrate the specific means by which the discipline of psychology represents and reinforces individualistic trends of the current era, and the many problems with doing so (e.g., Cushman, 1995; Richardson et al., 1999; Woolfolk, 1998). The present thesis provides a similar function, by exploring how individualism shows up in a particular psychological theory, and how the implicit commitment to this individualism ends up reinforcing many of the same ills the theory was designed to confront and ameliorate.

Having brought the reader up to the present century, it is worth taking stock of the arguments that have been put forth thus far in this section. I have postulated that modern Western history has been colored by a pervasive individualism, and a construction of the self that is bounded and masterful. I also have suggested that these trends are reflected in, and perpetuated by, the modern discipline of psychology. Implicit in my discussion is the point that the configuration of the self as bounded and masterful provides not only a perspective on what the nature of the self is, but also a moral ideology, or guidance for how people should live their lives. In this sense, I am echoing a number of hermeneuts (e.g., Richardson et al., 1999; Sass, 1988) who argue that ontology and morality
are inseparable in perspectives on the nature of selfhood. Consistent with this hermeneutic position, we have seen how the various individualistic traditions explored in this section take for granted the division between the individual and collective, and understand the good life to be one where the influence of the collective on the individual is minimized or eliminated. Such restrictions on the collective are thought to be necessary because of the inherent goodness and truth that is presumed to exist in the interior of the isolated individual, and because, historically, many of these collective institutions were unjust and oppressive. The rejection of the collective has led to the impression that it is possible to eliminate moral claims in social inquiry, a point that is particularly well demonstrated in psychology’s claim to be a “value-neutral” and “scientific” discipline. Nonetheless, the hermeneutic approach utilized in this section reveals that the present configuration of the bounded, masterful self not only is socially constructed, but also is constituted by moral claims of what makes up the good life.

Gender and Individualism

Thus far, I have relied on a broad historical survey of trends in Western history in order to claim that the present ideology of the self is one that is “bounded” and “masterful,” and one that is connected inextricably to the historical context in which it emerged. Of course, the dominance of the ideology of the bounded, masterful self does not necessarily imply that such a self is descriptive of all individuals in Western society. Bellah and colleagues (1985) confronted the very question of the prevalence of individualism in America.
These authors interviewed over 200 Americans, to examine the extent to which the respondents endorsed a morality based on commitment to traditions and other people, or to the pursuit of one’s interests. By and large, the conclusion was that most of these individuals were committed to the same individualistic principles that have become increasingly dominant in Western history since the late sixteenth century.

Despite the persuasiveness of Bellah et al.’s (1985) data, it is important to recognize that the individuals interviewed represent a cross-section of middle class, White society, so it may be that such individualism is not as prevalent among other demographic groups. Along these lines, a number of authors (e.g., Cross & Madson, 1997; Cushman, 1995) point out that Western culture is anomalous in its emphasis on the separate, independent self and that other cultures view the self as fluidly connected to the traditions and environmental contexts in which it is embedded. However, Cross and Madson suggest that the notion of the independent, bounded, masterful self does not even typify the experience of all individuals within mainstream Western society. The authors suggest that a construction of the self that is based on one’s uniqueness and separateness from others — labeled an independent self-construal by the authors — is more descriptive of males in our society than females. Females, it is suggested, are socialized to have a self that emphasizes their affiliation to others, or an interdependent self-construal. Cross and Madson provide evidence for this notion by comparing differences in men’s and women’s cognitions, motivations, affect, and relationships. For example, the authors cite research that suggests that men
tend to describe themselves in terms of independent characteristics, whereas women are more likely to reference their relationships with others in their self-descriptions. In addition, the authors point out that women are more likely to establish their self-esteem through their relationships with others than are men. Overall, the body of evidence reviewed by these authors consistently shows that women construct their selves in terms of their relationships with close others more so than do men. This also implies that a configuration of the self that is sharply distinct from its relational and cultural context does not describe the female experience, a point that Jack (1991) herself raises in delineating the theoretical foundation for her approach to women's depression.

It may seem odd at first that an interdependent self can show up in an era where individualism is valued. It makes a lot more sense, however, when we consider Michel Foucault's point that the construction of the self in any given era reflects the interests of those in power (Cushman, 1995, p. 12). Across the history of Western civilization—and most other civilizations for that matter—men have held dominion over women in almost all aspects of life. With men in this privileged position, features associated with the masculine—including construction of the male self—are highly valued, while features associated with the feminine are denigrated. However, with the collapse of commonly held traditions over the past few centuries, the proper way to be a man has become increasingly unclear. According to Cushman, groups holding power find it difficult to create clear identities for themselves when common traditions have been deconstructed or obliterated. In these situations, it is considerably easier to
construct the self in a roundabout way, through the construction of features of “the other,” or a group that is subordinate and devalued (p. 41). For example, Cushman points out that the White self in post-Civil War America was largely built around constructing African Americans as lazy and stupid, and Native Americans as uncivilized savages. Through these constructions of the features of racial others, Whites were assured that they occupied the opposite poles of intelligence, civility, and the Protestant work ethic.

In a similar way, men may have found their identity through comparison to women’s relational proclivities, construed negatively by men as dependency, enmeshment, and personal weakness. By devaluing these attributes, and claiming that men possess the opposites of these characteristics — specifically an orientation towards personal gain and achievement, independence from others and a steely resolve — men are able to establish the nature of the male self and its centrality as the preferred war of being in the landscape of the era. It also is functional for men to continue to reinforce the construction of a woman’s interdependent self, as such a construction provides men a standard against which to strive: to be a man is to not be a woman.

The female interdependent self, however, may offer more than a mere representation of “the other” that maintains a valued image of the male self. Women’s orientation towards relationships and the needs of others provides great benefit to the individuals to whom these women are oriented. By and large, women look after the needs of men in their lives: their husbands, sons, and even their brothers and fathers. They also look after other women, including the sick
and elderly in families, thereby allowing the men in these families to concern themselves with their own needs and privileges. Feminist author Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (1991) considers this gender bifurcation in the historical context of individualism. Fox-Genovese suggests that discussions of individuals and their rights and privileges have historically referred exclusively to men, while women's purpose was thought to involve the nurturing of male individuals. Thus, there are two possible paths in an individualistic context, paths that seem split along gender lines. On the one hand, men are encouraged to look after their own individualistic interests, and to place the needs of others at a lesser priority. On the other hand, women are valued as mothers and wives; in these roles, women are charged with fulfilling the individualistic destinies of their sons and husbands, by nurturing them into mature, independent citizens. Importantly, both the proper way to be a man and the proper way to be a woman are concerned with helping men achieve a life that constitutes the valued way of being.

**Selflessness and Possibility**

The construction of the female self in the Western individualistic landscape appears to be fully compatible with, yet fundamentally different from, the valued ideology of the bounded, masterful self. The valued female self is shaped by an ideology of selflessness, or the view that others' needs are more important than one's own and that one should do everything possible to put others' needs and feelings before one's own. When such an ideology exists in a context where an opposing ideology (i.e., that of the bounded, masterful self) is dominant, we can expect the former to show up as problematic. Indeed, many
feminists lobby for the shedding of the male-imposed shackles of selflessness, and advocate the full participation of women in the pursuit of their own individual interests. In so doing, feminists not only are striving to achieve gender equality and social justice, but are also taking for granted that the dominant ideology of the self that is based on individualistic principles is the universally desirable configuration of the self.

It should be clear by now, however, that I do not share this enthusiasm for the ideology of the bounded, masterful self. From a hermeneutic perspective, the notion that the interior of the isolated individual is inherently “good” while the exterior social realm is inherently “bad” is problematic, in that the individual always derives meanings, and a sense of “goodness” and “badness,” through participation in the traditions of a common culture. Besides being ontologically unsound, however, the notion of the bounded, masterful self appears to run counter to many of the moral principles considered important in modern, Western consciousness. For example, our democratic tradition holds equality of all persons in high esteem, yet we saw above how the construction of the bounded, masterful self is largely built on a foundation of gender inequality.

The reason that such a moral paradox can exist, however, may be due to a more fundamental problem with the current configuration of the self and the individualistic ground from which it sprang. The absence of commonly held traditions, and the presence of an ideology that espouses that goodness, truth, and meaning only can come from “within” oneself, may create fundamental confusion as to what makes up a good, meaningful life in the first place. Cushman (1990)
notes that this experience of confusion and alienation from tradition became particularly acute in the latter half of the twentieth century. For this reason, Cushman argues that the post World War II configuration of the bounded, masterful self is an “empty self,” or a self that significantly experiences the absences of community and tradition, at the same time as it strives to be “bounded” and “masterful.” The “emptiness” that results from absent traditions is fully consistent with a hermeneutic ontology: if meaning stems from communal participation, it only stands to reason that individuals will experience profound confusion and alienation when valued opportunities for such participation are absent.

As an alternative to the ideology of the individualistic, bounded, masterful self, my understanding of what the self is, and what the self should be, derives from a hermeneutic perspective. I reject any notion that the individual’s separate, unique interior contains the true or good self, because I consider the self, and the concomitant claims of the good life, to be fundamentally constituted by the social and moral context in which the notion of selfhood is embedded. The challenge with such an understanding, of course, is that the dominant individualistic ideology in twenty-first century Western life espouses a notion of the self that is fundamentally at odds with a hermeneutic notion of the self. As Martin and Sugarman (1999) have pointed out, the sociocultural reality in which our understanding of the self is embedded cannot be cast aside by the whims of particular individuals. This is a basic principle of hermeneutic ontology, one that
is relevant even when the sociocultural reality is largely incompatible with a hermeneutic conception of the self.

However, this does not mean that we are stuck in a particular configuration of the self either. Gadamer (1960/1975) suggests that the "horizon of the present," or the particular set of prejudices from which we approach understanding, "is being continuously formed, in that we have continually to test our prejudices. An important part of this testing is the encounter with the past and the understanding of the tradition from which we come" (p. 273). In other words, despite the extent to which we adhere to a particular configuration of the self in the present, a consideration of the historical context of the tradition, as I have done in this section, allows us the possibility to shift many of our prejudices.

Right now, what may be emerging for the reader is a realization of the presence and pervasiveness of problems associated with an individualistic orientation and with the concomitant construction of the bounded, masterful self. In the context of that questioning, the reader might also reconsider the value placed on the pursuit of one's own interests, as opposed to a selfless orientation towards others. It may become apparent, for example, that an orientation towards selflessness is only problematic to the extent that it reinforces inequality and injustice. It is even possible that the process of giving up one's own interests for the sake of others can provide the means through which a reconnection and participation in other traditions can be enabled, thereby addressing the emptiness (Cushman, 1990) that exists in the absence of these traditions. I am getting ahead of myself somewhat, however. In the detailed analysis of STST that follows, I invite the reader to
consider the possibilities associated with selflessness, and the difficulties associated with narrow self-interest, particularly in light of the historical insights that have been gained in this section.
Section Four: Silencing the Self Theory and Individualism

Preliminaries: What is Being Silenced?

Silencing the self theory (Jack, 1987, 1991, 1999), as its name implies, deals with a proposed process whereby a person’s moral stance encourages the active silencing of feelings one would like to express, actions one would like to carry out, and needs and desires one would like fulfilled. As we begin our analysis of STST, it is important that we clarify exactly the nature of the self that the theory proposes is silenced through internalized moral dictates. Does the basic ontology of STST feature an individualistic, bounded and masterful self? Or does the theory adopt a configuration of the self that is similar to the hermeneutic understanding of the inseparability of individual and context?

Jack’s initial presentation of her theory appears to adopt an ideology of the self that is somewhat consistent with a hermeneutic ontology. For example, Jack (1991) points out that “[a]s we listen to the words of depressed women, we will necessarily interpret them. There is no such thing as raw data; even the collection of data requires a framework for understanding and ordering reality” (p. 22). In this passage, Jack appears to be echoing Gadamer’s (1960/1975) claim that all meaning necessarily proceeds from the prejudices with which we enter into understanding. Shades of hermeneutics can also be found in Jack’s explicitly declared understanding of the self. As we already have seen, Jack claims her theory to be shaped by a relational view of the self and her rejection of assumptions that the self is “separate” from its relational, social, and historical context. Jack considers individual selves to be inseparable from their relationships with others, an understanding that approaches Heidegger’s (1927/1962) claim of
the intertwined nature of self and world. Further, in presenting her allegiance to
the relational configuration of the self, Jack explicitly attributes the taken for
granted nature of the separate self to the dominant individualism and capitalism of
Western life:

The psychological notion of the separate self dovetails neatly with
dominant ideologies of the United States—individualism and its
fraternal twin, capitalism. Capitalism requires autonomously
functioning, independent individuals making economic
determinations in their own self-interest. (p. 8).

There also appears to be a tentative recognition of the problems that may arise as
communal traditions deteriorate. Specifically, Jack notes that women are faced
with the difficult task of establishing meaning in their lives in a context of
“poverty, violence, lost anchors of religious or ethnic communities, and
increasing divorce” (p. 27). This understanding of the consequences of a lack of
consistent traditions and communities echoes Cushman’s (1990) claim that the
current configuration of the bounded, masterful self is an empty self.

However, this understanding of the self, which is seemingly consistent
with hermeneutic ontology, is not borne out by the core elements of STST.
Rather, the nature of, and relationship between, the “two parts of the self,” namely
the authentic self or “I,” and the Over-Eye, (Jack, 1991, p. 94), reflects an
unequivocal individualism. To consider this point, let us bring to light Jack’s
definitions of these constructs. According to Jack, the authentic self is

the first-person voice...the self that speaks from experience, that
knows from observation. This voice says, ‘I want, I know, I feel, I
see, I think.' The bases for its values and beliefs are empirical; they
come from personal experience and observation. In this sense, the
first-person voice is authentic; I will call it the ‘I,’ the authentic
self. (p. 94)

Jack also claims that, “speaking one’s feelings and thoughts is part of creating,
maintaining, and recreating one’s authentic self (p. 32), and that the authentic self
is synonymous with the “creative self” (p. 101). The Over-Eye, in contrast,
speaks with a moralistic, ‘objective,’ judgmental tone that
relentlessly condemns the authentic self. It sounds like a third-
person voice... because it speaks to the ‘I.’ It says ‘one should, you
can’t, you ought, I should’ .... It has the feeling of something over
the ‘I,’ which carries the power to judge it... [It has a] surveillant
(sic), vigilant, definitively moral quality [, and a] collective
viewpoint about what is ‘good’ and ‘right’ for a woman. (p. 94,
italics in original)

In the description above, it is clear that the authentic self involves the
pursuit of one’s own individual interests, and expression of feelings, thoughts, and
creative gifts, while the Over-Eye represents culturally generated restrictions on
the individual. By referring to the desires, thoughts, and feelings of the individual
as authentic, and the moral imperatives of the collective as an Over-Eye that is
separate from the authentic self, a moral individualism is suggested. On the other
hand, claiming that individualistic interests represent authenticity leaves the
impression that the distinction between the authentic self and Over-Eye does not
reflect a moral position at all, but rather a description of the way the self really is.
However, if we look closely at the way Jack (1991) describes individual expressiveness and self-interest, it is clear that a moral individualistic stance is adopted. This is difficult to see, because Jack specifically identifies only the Over-Eye as having a “definitively moral quality” while the authentic self’s beliefs and values are thought to be based on direct personal experience. Ironically, however, by claiming that the moralistic, judgmental, surveillant, vigilant part of the self is foreign to and separate from the authentic self, Jack demonstrates a moral censuring of any questioning or challenging of the actions, thoughts, beliefs or feelings of an individual. Jack demonstrates this moral individualism throughout the elucidation of STST. For example, her claim that depression involves the silencing of “the active, creative, spontaneous self” (p. 128) reveals a valuation of creativity and spontaneity, traits that are consistent with the unencumbered expressiveness that typifies individualism. At the same time, this passage reveals an opposition to any action by the individual or collective that inhibits the expression of these attributes. Interestingly, Jack also admits that the authentic self involves particular standards of behavior, standards that can be experienced as intrusive by women in much the same way as can the standards of the Over-Eye. In her discussion of one of her participants, for example, Jack suggests that, “[f]rom the viewpoint of her authentic self, her ‘I,’ she also condemned herself for falsification, for ‘lack of courage’ to say or live her own truth” (p. 60).

It is apparent, therefore, that Jack’s (1991) notion of the authentic self appears to be an unintentional moral maneuver (Cushman, 1995) to promote a particular way of being as the only appropriate way of being. The good life, Jack
Silencing the Self Theory 42

seems to argue implicitly, involves the unencumbered expression of one’s own thoughts and feelings, free from the restrictions of collectively established morality. In other words, Jack appears clearly aligned with an individualistic moral position, and opposed to moral systems that limit individualistic interests. Of course, it may be the case that such a moral choice is perfectly sensible. We have seen, after all, that traditional, collective, standards for feminine behavior prescribe a selfless orientation towards the needs of men, a situation that creates inequality, resentment, and, it seems, depression. At first glance, it is difficult to question the premise that pursuing one’s own interest, and expressing one’s own thoughts and feelings, is preferable to stifling these things in the selfless service of others.

However, it is possible that there are moral options beyond selfless giving for the benefit of one individual on the one hand, and the complete rejection of tradition in favor of pursuing one’s own self-interest on the other. In what follows, I explore excerpts from the narratives of Jack’s depressed participants, in an attempt to reinterpret the phenomenological data from which Jack’s understanding of selflessness came about. Consistent with Jack’s theory, my analysis will show that selflessness is both prevalent and problematic in the lives of Jack’s participants. However, when the individualistic context that permeates both the lives of these women and Jack’s interpretations, is taken into account, it is possible to see how selflessness may in fact facilitate, rather than impede, a good, meaningful life.
The Problem of Selflessness in Women's Narratives

Looking at the narratives of depressed women presented in Jack’s writings lends legitimacy to the assumption, fundamental to STST, that these women are morally driven to look after the needs of others at the cost of their own. For example, one respondent, Diana, states, “[I]n terms of my priorities, I would have to say first comes my husband, well, my home and my husband and then me (Jack, 1991, p. 37).” Another woman, Anna, describes her approach to her family in a similar way: “I guess you please them, you look after them, you love them, you do things to make them happy. I guess I don’t really think about myself, I put myself as a person out of the picture and I just accommodate other people (p. 38).” These themes of taking care of one’s husband at the cost of oneself are also echoed by Cathy, who states, “I was always very careful not to seem hurt but to protect his ego, and I just always kind of worked around his wishes” (p. 38). The words of these women point to the ubiquity of a moral commitment to look after the needs of others—usually their husbands and families—and to neglect their own needs.

These narratives, and Jack’s (1991) interpretations of them, also lead us to understand a possible function of this selfless moral orientation. Consistent with the notion that the self, particularly the female self, is relational, Jack proposes that selfless attendance to the needs of another is the means by which women attempt to “ensure the safety and survival of a primary relationship” (p. 55). Jack’s participants provide phenomenological evidence that selflessness provides such a function in their lives. For example, Cathy reveals her worry that “if I do
something that my husband disapproves of, then he would withdraw his love. And so therefore, to keep his love I always thought I had to do things the way he wanted (pp. 83-84). Similarly, Kim describes how dutifully following her wedding vows was “part of my identity of success, of giving all and giving as much as was possible for me to keep the relationship together” (p. 119). Therese, meanwhile, reveals how, in her marriage, “I could not be myself—I didn’t think—because he would find my rough edges unacceptable and leave” (pp. 47-48).

These women seem to forego their own interests in an attempt to have their most cherished need for intimacy and closeness be met. According to Jack, however, this selfless orientation rarely achieves the goal of intimate closeness. In Jack’s (1999) words, selflessness is “a standard that is unattainable and self-defeating in relationships” (p. 224). The problem is that the attainment of closeness requires intentional action on the part of the male partner. As I discussed in an earlier section, we men appear concerned primarily with our self-interest, and tend to eschew the connection and “dependence” that closeness entails. When women selflessly dedicate themselves to men’s interests, men are able to achieve their individualistic goals (Fox-Genovese, 1991), even if women were hoping that such selflessness would draw their relationship partners closer.

According to Jack (1999), “being ‘selfless’ in relationship” requires a woman to “deny whole parts of herself, including negative feelings and direct self-assertion” (p. 224). Jack (1991) argues that, as a result of this denial, women are left with an experience of being alienated from the person they “truly” are:
"[a]s women describe the pervasive impact of depression, they most frequently call on the metaphor 'loss of self' to describe their inner experience" (p. 29).

Indeed, this is borne out by the excerpts of depressed women provided in Jack's writings. In her life as a housewife, Susan describes how she has had to "put off" her "own self," and has "lost a lot of myself that gave me some confidence" (Jack, 1991, pp. 31-32). Linda echoes this notion by declaring that she "lost myself in those years of marriage" (p. 30), while Maya comments that marriage involves a process whereby a woman "molds and melts into" her husband, with the result that "the woman gets lost in there" (p. 63). Therese declares that getting married resulted in her "losing absolutely all sense of who I was" (p. 170), and Cathy describes how it was "like I was dying inside" (p. 83), to suppress her negative emotions and dutifully carry out the whims of her husband.

Based on these accounts by depressed women, it is understandable that a negative evaluation of selflessness can be reached. Being selfless, it seems, brings the promise of intimacy, yet the reality of further isolation and an experience of having lost a "true" sense of oneself. Of course, it also seems apparent that finding fault with selflessness in this instance requires us to value both intimate connection and what Jack (1987, 1991, 1999) has called authenticity, or the free expression of one's interior thoughts, feelings, and desires, as being core to the good life. After all, to deny some aspect of the self is, by definition, contradictory to the aims of authenticity.

Jack (1991) explicitly states her valuation of both intimacy and this free, authentic expression, but presents them as universal facts, rather than as moral
preferences. Specifically, she refers to intimacy and authenticity as “necessities for healthy adult development,” and argues that “[t]he tasks of intimacy and identity coincide when one is able to be a growing, changing self within ongoing relationships, when intimacy facilitates the developing authentic self and the developing self deepens the possibilities of intimacy” (p. 48). What is left unsaid, but what is clearly evident, is that intimacy and the expression of one’s individual interests and desires, are deemed to be of high value. They are viewed as good things in and of themselves, and because it is expected that they enable one another. In this sense, Jack reflects the perspective, commonly held among modern North Americans, that a personally satisfying marriage or other love relationship is one of the key ingredients to a fulfilling, worthwhile life, and that the ability to freely express oneself within such relationships is a hallmark of a “good” or “healthy” marriage (Bellah et al., 1985; Richardson et al., 1999).

It is not difficult to see the individualism in the proposal that intimate connection with one other person—the smallest number possible—can both facilitate, and be facilitated by, the ever-important expression of the unique interior. As is often the case, the promise of individualism to produce a meaningful life falls short when it comes to the reality of everyday existence. From the narratives of depressed women, we are left to wonder if it is ever possible to see both intimacy and authenticity realized. Jack (1991) does not herself provide any indication of how this can take place, but acknowledges that the two are often “in conflict” (p. 48), and that the quest for intimacy often results in the “silencing of the authentic self” (p. 141). Thus, we are left with a
paradoxical understanding of intimacy and individualism. On one hand, according to Jack, intimacy and authenticity are both “necessities for healthy adult development” (p. 48); on the other, these goals inevitably conflict, and no guidance is provided regarding how this conflict might be resolved.

Selflessness and Possibility in Women’s Narratives

Given the presence and problems of individualism revealed through the narratives, we might wish to reconsider what it is we believe makes up the good life, and how selflessness might fit into that different vision. Consistent with hermeneutic ontology, I propose that the good life is achievable through active participation in a community. It is difficult to understand this possibility by looking at the narratives, or Jack’s (1991) interpretations of them, where the quest for a meaningful life is almost always framed in terms of attempts to secure intimacy with another individual. Nonetheless, some of Jack’s participants mention that personal meaning in their lives can be found through a selfless orientation within a family collective. These moments where selflessness is presented in a positive light occur in the context of the women’s discussions of their families of origin.

For example, Maya describes the closeness, unity and love present in her family of origin, and her internalization of the necessity of creating the same in her own family:

There’s a lot of love in my family, we did a lot of activities and lots of vacations together, and it was stressed to both my sister and I that to maintain a family, unity in the family was really important
and that the other people needed to be considered, even above ourselves. (Jack, 1991, p. 115)

Maya then describes the apparent harmony in her family, as she recalls, “a mom and dad very happily married, never any arguments, and they never fought” (p. 115). From the moral perspective of collectivism, this description sounds virtuous, in that the family is strengthened by the participation of all members, and by their dedication to maintaining the harmony of the whole. The family appears to thrive precisely because the various members sacrifice for one another. The result, reportedly, is a happy and harmonious family.

Susan, meanwhile, relates how her mother modeled and voiced a clear valuation of selflessness in their family: “[y]ou don’t desert somebody just because they have a weakness or a sickness. There again, you be the servant or the keeper or the brother or we must be serving of one another.... [n]ever, ever dare think about yourself” (Jack, 1991, p. 155). Through this moral lesson, Susan was provided with concrete guidelines about how to participate in a collective: her family in this case. In addition, the lesson itself sounds quite virtuous if we value altruism and the contribution of all members for the good of the collective. Of course, our individualistic sensibilities may be bothered by the notion that individuals in this family neglect to think of themselves, but this passage depicts a family situation where one’s needs are taken care of by others in the family. Indeed, Susan’s desire for closeness was apparently easily realized while growing up: “I was always so close to my mother... I was used to that all through my childhood, having an intimate closeness...someone that shared my feelings, my
fears, my doubts, my happiness, my achievements, my failures” (p. 4). In these depictions of their families of origin, therefore, both these women report that they were exposed to moral imperatives to put others first for the good of the collective, to be selfless in the face of the needs of others. The result, it seems, were families strengthened by unity and harmony, and individual family members who benefited from the clear structure and mutual support derived from the collective.

Jack (1991), however, does not give voice to the possibility that selflessness might produce positive outcomes. In the case of Maya, Jack sidesteps the themes of unity, love, closeness, and harmony. Instead, she focuses on the apparent “abdication” of individual family members’ “values,” and interprets the absence of conflicts as reflecting Maya’s mother’s “need to avoid conflict.” Maya, in turn, “learned that disagreements were somehow forbidden and dangerous to relationships” (p. 115). Similarly, Jack responds to the excerpt from Susan by pointing out the imposition of a moral system that dares to ask this woman to put the needs of the weaker members of her family before her own:

Susan learned that pleasing others, giving to others (sic) was more important, more good (sic), than listening to herself. She learned that thinking about herself, or asking for her needs to be met, was “selfish” and by implication, bad. (p. 173, italics in original)

In this passage, Jack is explicit about the moral impositions that facilitate a selfless approach to relationships with others. At the same time, however, Jack does not attend to the apparently positive dimensions of selflessness also
embedded within Susan’s narrative, including the facilitation of meaningful connection such selflessness can provide. It is possible that this omission stems from an unquestioned commitment to individualism implicit in STST, where selflessness is viewed as an inherently stifling and limiting imposition on the individual self.

It is important to note that Jack’s (1991) individualistic interpretations of positive depictions of selflessness can largely be traced to the individualism of her participants themselves. Maya, for example, wonders if the notion that her parents’ married life was “always… going smoothly” was “a real rose-colored view of life” (p. 115). However, Maya reflects on this possibility in the wake of her second divorce, and it may be that a home life of unity and harmony did not adequately prepare her for marriages characterized by a dearth of shared meaning. Indeed, Maya insists that,

“[i]f I had known, if I had seen them argue or get upset with one another—I mean really upset, then I would have been able to stand up for more in my marriages. I would have known it would have been okay to have a disagreement or to argue at some point. (p. 115)

While it may be true that witnessing open conflict in her family of origin might have provided a model by which conflict in her own marriages could have been handled, this is not to say that such conflict was suppressed in Maya’s parents’ relationship, nor that such conflict is necessarily a good thing. It may be, for example, that the presence of overt conflict would shatter the unity, harmony, and
closeness that Maya herself claimed to have characterized her family of origin. From an individualistic perspective, or at least the individualistic perspective present in STST, the loss of this collective cohesion would not be considered a loss at all. Jack (1991) considers the voice of the collective to be expressed through the Over-Eye. In other words, the collective is considered to directly impede, rather than enable, the potentialities of the individual. From the standpoint of hermeneutic ontology, however, such a loss is quite concerning, in that the harmony and unity helps to create strong tradition, which in turn, can facilitate meaning in individual members’ lives.

While Maya seems to question the possibility of such harmony and unity in a family, Susan implicitly challenges the necessary selflessness that the harmony entails. Specifically, Susan points out that her mother was “a giver, giver, giver type person” (Jack, 1991, p. 152), who “never, never dared rock the boat or express needs or say, ‘I want this’” (p. 155). In spite of such selflessness, Susan’s mother was unable to secure intimate connection with Susan’s father. Rather, according to Susan’s report, Susan’s father “was always scolding her [Susan’s mother] and blaming her for things” (p. 152). Susan reports being “mad at her [Susan’s mother] for her subservience in her relationship with my father,” and is convinced that her mother “may have been very weak, too, in some areas…. I think she had a lot of fears, maybe of loneliness and being without my dad” (p. 153).

What is missing from Susan’s account, as well as from Jack’s (1991) interpretation of these narratives, is any consideration of the possibility that the
goals of altruism, harmony, unity, love and closeness, are worthwhile, provided they are not geared to the exclusive privilege of one individual, namely the patriarch of the household. In the context of an intimate relationship, it is worth considering whether women’s depression stems not from a selfless orientation towards the needs of others, but from the fact that those others do not, in turn, respond to women’s needs. Elsewhere, Jack (1987) comes close to acknowledging this point:

Because these women measure their effectiveness from the perspective of others (being there for others, nurturing others, pleasing others), they begin to listen to others’ demands and requirements more than to their own feelings and needs. When this occurs without mutuality or reciprocity, they experience a loss of self— they feel disconnected, unsupported, and self-alienated. (p. 167, italics added)

Here, Jack (1987) appears to suggest that putting another before oneself is not necessarily problematic, unless the favor is not returned. However, Jack does not go so far as to argue that the “others,” namely men in close relationships, should be engaging in selfless acts as well. To hear such a recommendation, we need once again to consider the words of the women interviewed by Jack. In the passage below, Cathy envisions how mutual selflessness might play out in the context of an intimate relationship, as she describes a hypothetical scenario wherein a woman had worked and supported [her husband] while he got through college. And I think the question that was being raised was now shouldn’t he help
her reach her goal. Or should she just follow what he wants to do. And... I don’t
know, I think what would be ideal would be that the husband would really, really
want her to reach her goal and do his best to support her. And even give up
something to help her. I think it should be mutual that way. (Jack, 1991, p. 82)
Jack responds to this narrative by suggesting that the ‘ideal’ of equality,
reciprocity, and mutuality” cannot easily be achieved when “the relationship is
one of inequality” (p. 82). Once again, however, Jack does not challenge men to
reform the inequality in their relationships, nor to give of themselves willingly for
the benefit of others. In the horizon of individualism, selflessness runs counter to
the deepest held value of always being true to one’s own needs, feelings, interests,
and desires. By failing to acknowledge the potentially positive dimensions of
selflessness, even when her own participants endorse it in particular contexts, and
when selflessness for both genders could confront gender inequality, Jack’s STST
is reflective of this individualistic horizon.

An Individualistic Critique of Individualism

At the same time that Jack’s (1991) interpretation of many of her
participants’ narratives reflects and reinforces an individualistic ideology, she
seems to approach several other narratives fully cognizant of the detrimental
impact of individualism. Specifically, Jack (1999) notices how modern women
are impacted not only by a morality geared towards the betterment of others at the
expense of the self, but also, by a morality focused on the pursuit of individual
achievement above all other ends. In her analysis of the narratives of depressed
physicians, Jack (1999) demonstrates how the latter moral structure particularly
impacts professional women. Professional women, Jack argues, are required to
demonstrate “self-reliance, aggressiveness, integrity and self-esteem” (p. 224).
Note how similar this description sounds to the pervasive individualism that I
have argued impacts both the creator of STST and many of the depressed women
whose narratives Jack interpreted to form the theory. Self-reliance, for example,
implies a sharp differentiation between self and other, while aggressiveness hints
at a path intentionally ignorant of the needs of others. At other points, Jack (1999)
suggests that the achievement orientation requires “self-full” behavior— in
contrast to selfless behavior— (p. 224), and consists of competition and self-
assertion (p. 235). All of these features similarly connote strong individualism.

Beyond merely recognizing how the presence of this drive to succeed
impacts the lives of women, Jack (1999) points out how such expectations run
counter to the view of the selfless matriarch, and how both expectations exist
simultaneously for women. Jack picks up on the language of one of her
participants as she describes how women are left with a “superwoman” image to
which they must strive (p. 233). In this sense, Jack recognizes the moral
impositions of both the traditional expectations of women and the image of the
modern, successful professional. In the case of one physician, Jack even
highlights how an individualistic, achievement-oriented morality can directly
inhibit what she has called the authentic self. This physician, Sue, describes her
struggle with being a woman in a profession dominated by men:

All the attributes that are traditionally womanly are discouraged
and belittled. I was even once told by one of my residents to “be a
man."... Be decisive. Be aggressive.... They don't want you to have any womanly virtues. They don't want you to be compassionate or caring, or loving, or humble or emotional. (Jack, 1999, pp. 236-237)

Jack responds to this narrative by pointing out the value of Sue's moral orientation towards the "womanly" virtues of compassion, care, love, humility and emotionality, and laments that the medical profession denigrates these attributes without ever considering how they might better serve the profession (p. 237). The insistence on being "decisive" and "aggressive" fits with the tenets of individualism, and Jack is aboard to criticize these traits.

Interestingly, Sue's desire to express care or humility appears quite similar to the themes from women's narratives discussed above. In the earlier depictions, both Jack (1991) and her participants seemed to view such selfless giving as an impediment to the authentic self. In the case of this physician, however, Jack (1999) does not hesitate to identify this pull to care for others as being authentic to the self. In the process, collectivism, connectedness, and even selflessness, suddenly become associated with authenticity, while narrow individualism is associated with a moral imposition from without.

We cannot, however, interpret Jack's (1999) criticisms of the achievement orientation as a comprehensive censure of individualism, nor as the point at which Jack tempers her own individualistic leanings. Despite the fact that we can recognize this orientation towards personal achievement and competition as part of an individualistic morality, it is not explicitly recognized as such in STST.
Quite the contrary, Jack’s endorsement of “womanly virtues” such as care and humility is connected to the perception that another cold and unfeeling institution, in this case the male-dominated medical profession, is limiting the individual’s authentic feelings and proclivities. Jack even attributes the internalized values of achievement, aggressiveness, and decisiveness to the dominating presence of the Over-Eye (p. 237). As we have seen, the Over-Eye represents the presence of moral authorities that are introjected from culture and are thought to be foreign to the authentic self.

In failing to recognize the inherent individualism of the achievement orientation, STST once again becomes vulnerable to the theory’s own built-in individualistic structure. Women, Jack (1999) claims, come to tap into their authenticity when they are able to isolate themselves from both family and work commitments, and listen to the voice that is unencumbered by these outside influences. Let us consider the example of Sue again to see how this plays out in Jack’s interpretation of an actual narrative:

[T]he perspective that emerges when she is “by herself,” is that of the authentic self. As Sue describes it, when experiencing her authentic self ‘I can just be who I am’ and not struggle over whose needs are more important or ‘whether my needs are valid and okay.’ …. When Sue enacts the perspective of her authentic self, she does not silence herself…. to create compliance with the perceived expectations of others. (p. 238)
Far from exemplifying authenticity, this excerpt appears to demonstrate the emptiness that Cushman (1990, 1995) has related to an unquestioned individualistic turn. While it is clear that being by herself enables Sue to push away a number of undesirable influences (indicated above by her not struggling, not worrying, not silencing, and not feeling self-alienated or self-condemning), very little information is provided in terms of the personal meanings that are left. Jack (1999) and Sue can only trust Sue’s declaration that “I can just be who I am” and that she can act on the basis of her own needs. There is no indication of the nature of the “I,” nor an explanation of the particular individual needs in this case. All we know from Sue is that she desires a chance to demonstrate compassion, care, and humility, and to be an advocate, listener, and “hand-holder” (p. 237). It is left unclear how such a longing for interpersonal connection can be achieved when one’s only source for the “true” self stems from experiences in isolation from others. Here again we are tapping into the problem that ontological hermeneuts have noted with a narrow individualism: we derive our personal meaning from our cultural context and to strip away this context is to eliminate the basis of our humanity (Richardson et al., 1999). Yet being influenced as we are by the individualistic tradition, it is simply taken for granted that an individual in isolation from her social context will be far more in touch with her authenticity than will an individual embedded in the practices and traditions of her culture.

We are left with something of a conundrum with respect to Jack’s (1999) analysis of the achievement orientation. On the one hand, Jack seems to understand the problems with a narrow focus on one’s professional advancement
and criticizes the individualistic elements of this morality. On the other hand, Jack’s understanding of the process by which women internalize standards of achievement, self-reliance, and competition is itself profoundly individualistic. We can resolve this seeming contradiction if we realize that Jack’s objections to the achievement orientation, Jack’s endorsement of isolating oneself from the voices of culture, and indeed, the entire body of STST, are all situated firmly in the Romantic tradition of expressive individualism (Bellah et al., 1985). As we have seen, this tradition holds that the expression of one’s personal feelings and desires is the ultimate end to which one must strive. This upholding of the subjective individual emotional experience is maintained regardless of the feelings that emerge, even, as in the case of Sue, if one desires deep connection to others. As Bellah et al. (1985) point out:

this core (of unique feeling and intuition), though unique, is not necessarily alien to other persons or to nature. Under certain conditions, the expressive individualist may find it possible through intuitive feeling to “merge” with other persons, with nature, or with cosmos as a whole. (p. 334)

If Jack is a critic of individualism at all, she is a critic of utilitarian individualism (Bellah et al., 1985), or the perspective that individuals should always carry out actions that will lead to the maximization of personal pleasure and profit, and the minimization of personal pain and loss. Jack’s (1991) depiction of individualism as an outgrowth of capitalism, which “requires autonomously functioning, independent individuals making economic determinations in their
own self-interest” (p. 8) certainly falls within the utilitarian rubric. As we have seen, the achievement orientation is similarly focused on the means by which power and wealth can be rapidly accumulated, and is criticized by Jack precisely because it is incompatible with the expressive desires of the individual. Bellah et al. (1985) even notice how utilitarian individualism can run counter to the expressivist notion of authenticity, which happens to be the very core of STST. As Bellah et al. (1985) put it, “(m)oney, work and social status are not central to the authentic self, which instead consists of the experience and expression of feelings” (p. 102). Thus, the rejection of the pursuit of utilitarian individual gain can exist within an expressive individualistic framework, and does so in the case of Jack’s challenging of the achievement orientation.

Yet STST cannot even be said to provide a wholesale rejection of utilitarian individualism. Aside from cases where it threatens one’s authentic feelings, a moral system bent on personal self-interest is also ubiquitous in STST. To realize the pervasiveness of the utilitarian individualism of STST, we must first recall the numerous, seemingly contradictory ways, in which the orientation towards caring and connection to others is presented in the theory. In the introduction to the theory, Jack (1991) presents an ontology of the female self that is relational and social. In the context of this perspective, Jack argues that an understanding of the self as separate from others and the environment is not an accurate depiction of women’s experience. Later, Jack understands the pull to care for, and connect with, others to be reflective of a gender-based morality that prevents the authentic nature of women from being expressed. Finally, as we have
seen in this section, the desire to connect with others in a loving, nurturing way can be understood to be a representation of a woman’s authentic self as well (Jack, 1999).

Jack (1999) leaves us with a bottom line that is consistent with all these diverse views and that situates her firmly in the utilitarian individualistic camp: “silencing one’s needs in order to give to others does not always lead to self-alienation and depression. The context within which the giving occurs and the giver’s ability to choose when, how, and in what form to care are critical” (p. 236). In phrasing such an argument, Jack appears to be taking the stance that giving to others is only acceptable in situations where no harm can come to oneself, or better yet, where pleasure for oneself is attained in the process. Ironically, dedication to others becomes contingent on the individual gain that is expected to result, a move that reveals the pervasive utilitarian individualistic nature of STST.

*Individualism and Inequality*

We have seen that individualism is pervasive in STST, even on occasions when other moral possibilities are presented and when problems with individualism are raised by Jack’s (1991, 1999) participants, or even by Jack herself. STST does not provide recognition of the possibility that the feelings of depression, emptiness, loneliness, isolation experienced by these women may be due to the absence of community and traditions, rather than to an insufficient focus on the self. As a result, STST reinforces the ideology of narrow individualism as the only way to be, and perhaps contributes to the depression
experienced by women who are unable or unwilling to venture down a strictly individualistic path.

Yet while STST is technically a theory of depression, it is, in a larger sense, a challenge to the inequality built into gender relations. In fact, Jack (1991) points out that depression follows directly from women’s experience of occupying devalued roles in society. STST does not explicitly promote a political agenda, but the strong encouragement for women to attend to the feelings, needs, desires, and interests of themselves, instead of those of others, suggests that Jack is promoting gender equality in its most literal sense. Gender equality evidently can be achieved if the woman acts exactly like the unmistakably self-focused male.

However, such a vision of equality is extremely limiting. First, it presents no challenge to individualism itself, which, as we have seen, is highly problematic in its failure to provide people with coherent meaning in their lives, and in the pervasive emptiness, isolation, loneliness, and depression that individualism promotes. Second, the form of equality implicitly espoused by Jack (1991) assumes that the manner in which men live their lives is an ideal to which all individuals should strive. While men are not more “depressed” than women, in the strict sense of the DSM-IV definition, we do engage in more criminal activity, including violence to strangers and family members (Lips, 1997, chap. 14), commit suicide more often (Real, 1997), have higher rates of alcohol and substance abuse (APA, 2000), and more frequently engage in extramarital affairs (Atkins, Jacobson, & Baucom, 2001; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). STST, of course, does not imply that women should be engaging in these
activities, but there is an alarmingly uncritical view of men’s lives, represented by the implication that male individualism is universally preferable.

This leads us to the third, and perhaps most concerning problem with the solution to inequality available through STST. The requirement for change, and the problematic current state, is ascribed to women. After all, the theory holds that it is individual women who are silencing their own selves (Thompson, 2001), even if this silencing is based on the adoption of societal moral codes. In addition, the standard to which women must strive is one that men apparently have no trouble with: the pursuit of self-interest above all other interests. In effect, and entirely unintentionally, STST presents an image of the female as inadequate and incomplete, and the male as whole and desirable. In this sense, Jack is reproducing the very problem that she noticed in women who conform to society’s expectations for femininity, and fail to exert themselves in relationships. Jack (1991) argues that women “absorb the male practice of discounting femininity itself—its knowledge, its perspectives, its values” (p. 33). Given that STST proposes that women’s depression stems from their failure to achieve their own self-interest, and that women are oriented towards care and connection to others, STST also appears to be joining in the process of “discounting femininity.”

In calling into question Jack’s (1991, 1999) uncritical rejection of a selfless mode of being in favor of the type of narrow self-interest typically seen in men, I am not suggesting that selflessness in the form expressed by these women is necessarily a good thing. Jack is right, I believe, to join with feminist critics in
decrying female actions that are designed exclusively to serve the privilege of men. What we must keep in mind, however, is that both a selfless orientation in service of a man's needs, and an exclusive focus on oneself, are two sides to the same individualistic coin. In this sense, it may not be selflessness itself that is problematic, but rather selflessness for the purposes of fostering unequal balances of power within interpersonal relationships. As we have seen, Jack's participants often reveal that there are many reasons to believe that a willingness to give up personal needs and desires in favor of stronger connection to one's familial, community and cultural contexts, is of inalienable value to the lives of individuals. The individualistic orientation of STST, however, is unable to separate selflessness that is genuinely geared towards participation in a collective, and selflessness that represents the domination of one individual over the other. In STST, and indeed in any strictly individualistic theory, it is the sacrificing of one's own interests for the sake of others that is perceived to be problematic, regardless of the outcomes such actions produce. This stands in stark contrast to the hermeneutic approach from which I have approached this analysis, in which participation in a collective, including selflessness for the good of the whole, is the very means by which one's selfhood may be realized.
Section Five: Discussion, Implications and Future Directions

In the process of undertaking a critique of a particular theory, it is rather easy to get carried away, and to reject absolutely the theory in question in favor of the one that is being proposed in lieu. As I embarked on the present analysis of silencing the self theory (Jack, 1987, 1991, 1999), it was precisely this sort of outright rejection that I wished to avoid. Indeed, many of the central tenets of STST have proven to be of value in shaping the present critique. First, STST provides a unique approach to depression, one that emphasizes moral themes that lead to symptoms of depression, rather than the symptoms themselves. I have followed a similar path in this thesis, in that I have been concerned primarily with ideologies of the good life. I have been concerned only secondarily with individual reactions, such as depressive symptoms, that can follow from adhering to particular ideologies. Second, I am in complete agreement with Jack’s understanding of the moral understandings typically adhered to by women of mainstream Western culture. Both of our accounts have relied on the assumption that women are geared towards the needs of others, even at the expense of their own needs. I have referred to this moral orientation as selflessness throughout this thesis. In short, Jack’s STST provides persuasive arguments about the centrality of moral themes in women’s depression.

It is important to emphasize, however, that I frequently have expressed disagreements with the explicit, but more often, implicit understandings of morality present in STST. I particularly am concerned that Jack’s exemplary understanding of the link between women’s moral orientation and depression
seems to lead Jack to paint morality—i.e., “externally” imposed notions of “right” and “wrong” and of “good” and “bad”—as a universally undesirable thing. This can be seen in Jack’s (1991) notion of the moralizing Over-Eye silencing the decontextualized interests of the individual, or the authentic self. At no point does Jack indicate the ways in which morality might foster meaning in one’s life. Nor does she note the moral aspects of her own approach. Because of these omissions, the impression is left that Jack believes that morality can and should be subtracted from one’s life, lest the authentic self be threatened.

Ironically, however, in the sense that the inner self is thought to be distinct from the “moralizing” collective, and that the inner self is assumed to be authentic, Jack reveals her own unacknowledged allegiance to an individualistic moral ideology—one that valorizes an interior, bounded, and masterful self and its fulfillment.

As I have described, this ideology is dominant and largely invisible in mainstream Western society, and in psychology. In the course of this thesis, we have been exposed to the possibility that selflessness shows up as problematic when it is interpreted from within this individualistic context. Selflessness in our individualistic era usually entails the foregoing of one person’s needs, namely those of the woman, for the exclusive benefit of another person, namely her male partner. As a result, the individualistic interests of men are served, but in a context of inequality, and with the cost of a woman’s anger, resentment, sense of “loss of self,” and depression.
Thus, it appears that selflessness is a problematic attribute in an era where the pursuit of individual interest is held as the ultimate end. As I have argued, however, this does not mean that selflessness is universally undesirable. Rather, it is my contention that selflessness may constitute a worthwhile moral pursuit in other contexts. I envision selflessness that takes place for the benefit of a collective that values the rights, dignity, and equality of all members, to be the means by which a meaningful life can ensue. After all, reinstating strong, commonly held traditions may provide a direct challenge to the emptiness that Cushman (1990, 1995) has argued constitutes the modern configuration of the self. Meanwhile, ensuring that these collectives place a high priority on social justice may help to avoid the historical problem with oppressive institutions that inspired the radical turn towards individualism in the first place. Finally, selflessness can be argued to be the ideal mode of participation in the collective. If each individual puts the interests of other members and the collective before one’s own, the unity and integrity of the collective will be strengthened, and each member will reap the benefits of many others looking after her or his needs. In such a selfless and collective mode of being, the interests of individual and collective become virtually interchangeable.

Of course, I am aware that there are many barriers to seeing such utopian results come about in practice. It is one thing to claim that a collective can uphold individual rights, yet quite another to see this actually occur. We do not have to look very far to see examples of individuals, women in particular, subjected to abuse, torture, and death in order to uphold the principles of a religious collective.
However, if we truly are motivated to become reacquainted with the traditions that we have largely foregone, we are likely to engage in what Gadamer (1960/1975) has referred to as a fusing of horizons. We will consider the benefits of the collective in question in light of the liberalist— and individualistic— premium on human dignity and individual rights and freedoms, rather than adopt the principles of the collective wholesale.

Yet while our individualism can prevent the incorporation of a strong collective tradition from becoming pernicious, this very same individualism presents another obstacle in the realization of a selfless dedication to a collective in the first place. The taken for granted individualism of the modern age assumes, by definition, that individuals’ free expression and pursuit of self-interest constitute a meaningful existence; in addition, it is held that the collective is separate from, and limiting of, the individual’s potential. Being selflessly dedicated to a collective runs counter to this important element of the individualistic ideology. Thus, while individualism can facilitate the means by which a selfless dedication to a collective tradition can be implemented justly, it also constitutes the most significant challenge to such a moral turn.

Clearly, if we hope to promote a vision of the good life that is based on selflessness and collectivism, a considerable shift in the moral terrain of the modern age needs to take place. Hermeneutics provides a vision for how such a shift can take place. Specifically, the study of a particular, such as the present analysis of Jack’s (1987, 1991, 1999) theory of women’s depression, can help to illuminate the taken for granted moral beliefs of the whole. We have seen that
many of the women interviewed by Jack are impacted negatively by the pervasive individualism of their era, and that STST itself may contribute to this individualism. Future research into moral themes of women’s depression must therefore be fully cognizant of the moral position that drives the research itself. In addition, the working definition of morality must be expanded to include any implicit or explicit ideology of the good life, including themes of selflessness, collectivism, individualism, and liberalism. Finally, such research must consider that morality both enables and constrains an individual’s ability to make meaningful sense of her or his life. We have seen this double-sided nature of morality in our specific exploration of selflessness. Being selfless, it seems, can lead to an isolating existence of being manipulated and unappreciated when dedicated to the privilege of another individual. On the other hand, I also have considered the possibility that selfless morality might facilitate stronger bonds to a collective, from which personal meaning can be derived.

With these different understandings of morality in place researchers also can explore moral themes in depression in many of the populations that have been inadequately addressed in research on STST. As I discussed earlier, these populations include men, non-Caucasian women, and gay and lesbian populations. Men are of particular research interest, given the individualism that appears to characterize the moral directives of this group. I have argued that we men, far more than women, are driven by calls to live for our own self-interest, and to establish clear divisions between ourselves and others. A number of authors (e.g., Real, 1997; Pollack, 1998a, 1998b) have suggested that this image
of the separate, self-interested, independent male is responsible for men’s vulnerability to problems in living such as depression, addictions, and violent practices. Therefore, interviews with men struggling with such psychological or behavioral problems might be particularly effective in exposing the ways in which the moral imperatives of individualism negatively impact individuals.

However, if we wish to explore how selflessness may facilitate a meaningful life based on participation in a collective, it is necessary to expand our research horizons beyond individuals who struggle with problems in living, and beyond research methods that focus only on individual interviews. It is likely that individuals who experience symptoms of depression have a difficult time identifying their lives as being meaningful, so it is probably even more difficult to have them identify the components of a good, meaningful life. It also seems evident that it is difficult to make claims about the mutual influence of a collective and individual, when we only include the individual in our research design. To more appropriately address the question of how selfless dedication to a collective can facilitate a good, meaningful life for individuals, it may be helpful to carry out ethnographic studies of tightly knit families, or ethnic or religious communities. Consistent with the focus of this thesis, we also might be particularly interested in collectives of women. If women are, in fact, morally driven to be selfless, and are influenced by this imperative while participating in the collective, we may see a real-life example of my vision of a meaning-making community full of selfless, yet satisfied, participants.
In the wake of research that allows us to explore the possibilities associated with selflessness in a collectivist context, we may wish to reconsider how to help women who reportedly are “depressed.” In the discipline of psychology, problems in living are usually dealt with by prescribing individual psychotherapy. Such an approach is highly individualistic. The client-therapist dyad that forms the structure of individual psychotherapy presupposes the ability of the individual client to remedy problems in living on her or his own, with only minimal guidance from a skilled facilitator. With only the individual, and not the entire social context, brought into the therapy room, therapeutic interventions not surprisingly are geared at the level of the individual. Clients are encouraged to express feelings in order to have corrective emotional experiences, restructure faulty cognitions, and modify reinforcement schedules in order to alter their self-defeating behavior. To the extent that these interventions are successful in reducing undesirable symptoms, the paradigm that the isolated, decontextualized, individual is primarily responsible for effecting change in her life is reinforced. Similarly, Jack (1991) takes for granted that therapy is the only means by which professional psychology can help women overcome depression. In true individualistic form, Jack argues that the goal of such therapy is to help a woman discover “her own power to correctly name and confront that which has the ability to rob her of her very self” (p. 188).

Of course, as we have seen, women’s depression, or any problem in living for that matter, are manifestations not only of the individual’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, but also of particular social arrangements that create and reinforce
such problems (Cushman, 1995). Jack herself acknowledges as much by pointing out that being indoctrinated in a socially prescribed moral belief in selflessness is catalytic in the onset of depression. I have argued a similar point, but have suggested that selflessness is problematic insofar as it enables the individualistic interests of men, while providing little benefit to women. Both my and Jack’s perspectives claim that the moral properties of the collective are inseparable from the psychological manifestations of individuals. Addressing psychological problems, therefore, also must involve the confrontation of sociopolitical arrangements that allow such problems to emerge in the first place—that is, political action is required. Jack pays very little attention to the possibility that, in addition to individual psychotherapy, these women could benefit from participation in political action (Thompson, 2001).

Of course, given the pervasive individualism of STST, and of the social context of our Western civilization, it makes sense that political action is not prescribed. When we conceptualize ourselves as individual entities, separate from connections with other people and traditions, it also follows that the problems we experience as individuals are not dealt with in a political arena. We assume our problems to be personal, apolitical, and solvable through our own efforts, and look to psychotherapy to sharpen our skills in being able to accomplish such goals. Perhaps political action is particularly unappealing since, to be effective, it requires participation in a collective, and probably some sacrificing of one’s personal interests in the process. To be political is to perceive oneself as connected to, and dependent on a collective, rather than as separate from and
primary to a collective. In this respect, being political is anathema to individualism. The treatment of problems in living such as depression is therefore limited to the purview of psychotherapy, rather than to participation in collective political action, where social change could be effected. Here again, we see cause for recognizing and deconstructing the narrow individualism that colors our psychological theories and modern age.

Yet we might ask how, as individual psychotherapists, we can hope to reinstate the collective. The profession of psychotherapy is unwittingly designed, it appears, to promote individualism. However, just as theory and research in psychology benefits from recognition of the inherently moral nature of psychology, so too might psychotherapeutic approaches to working with depressed women. We may, for example, engage in a dialogue with our female clients about the various voices that tell women what they “should” be doing. As Cushman (1995) argues, if we engage in this moral explication honestly, we will come to see the ubiquity of moral dictates, even in the apparent sanctuary of a psychotherapist’s office. By being quite explicit about the moral structure of everyday life, we might begin to help female clients see that their moral orientation towards selflessness is not necessarily bad in and of itself. Rather, therapist and client could discuss the possibility that difficulties arise only when selflessness is manipulated to maintain the privilege of select individuals. In the process, clients might consider how selflessness can enhance, rather than impede, the meaningfulness of their lives, particularly if it is directed away from individual men, and towards collectives or relationships where the selfless favor is
returned. Once collectivism is valued, and the hidden injustice of individualistic gender relations revealed, women also might be more likely to pursue the political action that is necessary to facilitate social change.

In contemplating future theoretical, research-based, and practical explorations of selflessness, it is worthwhile to consider the desirability of the term “selflessness.” In this thesis, I have utilized selflessness to depict a focus on other people before oneself, even to the point of causing pain or discomfort to oneself. However, the term implies that if one is attentive to the needs of others, one will somehow destroy the self. Thus, the very word selflessness reflects the individualistic assumption that attending to the needs of others always come at the cost of the self. By contrast, I have argued that focusing on other people, particularly in the context of a meaningful collective, can be the means by which selfhood is realized. For this reason, it may be more appropriate that future research utilize an alternative term to describe a moral orientation towards the needs of others, one that does not contain an implicit individualistic bias. One such possibility emerges from cross-cultural psychology. Berry, Poortinga, Segall, and Dasen (1992) have suggested the use of the term “allocentric,” which means literally “centered on others.” In considering this alternative terminology, we can better step beyond the confines of our individualistic horizon, which evidently shapes the very words we choose.

Over the course of this thesis, I have attempted to understand the individualism that is pervasive in STST, relying in large measure on ontology and morality inspired by hermeneutics. Through this analysis, we have come to a
different, and perhaps better understanding of STST and the moral directive of selflessness. Consistent with the assumptions of the hermeneutic circle, however, it also appears that this particular case study reveals many of the features of the individualistic whole that might not have been readily apparent beforehand. For one, we have seen how powerful and invisible the individualistic ideology can be. We have even seen how the very word selflessness, which was presented in this thesis in contradistinction to individualism, relies on certain individualistic assumptions as well. STST explicitly acknowledges and criticizes individualism in general, and the tenets of the "separate self" in particular, yet is still driven by an assumption that the individual is separable from, primary to, and harmed by, the influences of the collective. In addition, it has become apparent that individualism is entangled in large measure, with gender inequality. As we have seen, valued individualism has been linked to the male self, while women are expected to selflessly cater to the needs of male individuals. Of course, as I have discussed explicitly in this section, such selflessness (or allocentrism) may in fact provide us with the means to temper the stifling individualism that colors our age. It is this possibility associated with a focus on others that is perhaps the most important insight into individualism gained through this analysis. When faced with the contradictions, emptiness, isolation, alienation, injustice, and other problems associated with individualism, it is a comforting thought indeed that there exists a moral imperative in our midst that could be used to challenge many of these very problems. Time, and perhaps future research, will tell us the extent to which such change can take place.
References


