

THE “ON — ING” SERIES · A LYRIC ESSAY

On Being

*The word **individual** once meant **indivisible**. A reading, through the quantum lens, of what it is to be oneself.*



Jamison Johnson

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To my pets, my muses.

To all the fur babies of the world that keep us sane. From the cats in Egypt that had men bowing to them like gods, to the cute lil puppies who love us unconditionally, and every pet in between. If you're reading this, give your pet some love for me. Send them a J from me personally.

On Being

We use the word to mean alone. *Individual*: the single one, the unrepeatable, the self set apart from every other self—a person narrowed to a point, distinct and uncuttable, standing where no one else can stand. We reach for it when we want to say *separate*, and the word answers to that name. It has learned to. But hold it up to the light and it says the opposite of what we ask of it.

In the Latin, *individuus* means *not divided*—*in-*, not, and *dividuus*, divisible. The indivisible. When Cicero needed a word for the atom of the Greek philosophers—*átonon*, the uncuttable, the thing no blade can halve—he reached into the same root and made *individuum*.¹ The individual was, first of all, the thing that could not be split. In the medieval schools, when Porphyry drew the tree of being branching down from the highest genus through every species, the last branch—the place where dividing finally had to stop—was the *individuum*.² And in the oldest English uses the word belonged to the Trinity—three persons and one God, held in a unity nothing could divide.³ For most of its life, *individual* did not mean apart. It meant unable to be torn in two.

Somewhere in the seventeenth century the word turned inside out. The indivisible whole became the separate part; the unity became the unit. We kept the spelling and mislaid the meaning, and now we say *individual* and hear *alone*.⁴



Through the quantum lens, a word like this is not a mistake to be corrected but a superposition to be kept open. Two readings live inside it at once—separate one and undividable whole—and they do not cancel. The ego is the observer that collapses the wave: look at the word wanting it to mean apart, and it gives you apart. But the other state was never gone. Loosen the looking and the word spreads back into its full reading, holding both meanings together, the way anything unobserved holds all of what it is.

And consider what the whole word actually contains. *In-divi-dual*. It opens on *I*—the ego, the capital letter that stands first and stands alone. But the word does not end at the *I*. It carries, folded into its own body, *dual*: the two. Not divided—and two. An indivisible duality. The self the word describes was never an atom after all. It was always a pair that cannot be pried apart. (The philology, I grant, runs only on the first half of that; the rest is the art. But the art is the part I trust.)

Jung built a life's work on the first half and arrived at the second. He called the slow labor of becoming whole *individuation*, and he was careful—almost stubborn—about the hyphen: to individuate is to become an “in-dividual,” an undivided one.⁵ Not to wall the self off, which he warned was the opposite error, but to stop being split—to let the I that performs and the deeper self that watches stop their quarrel and become one figure. We contain multitudes, as Whitman said—and he was not embarrassed by the arithmetic. A mirror-ball is a single sphere and is made of nothing but the many faces it turns toward the light; it is most itself when it is showing you every version of you at once. The duality is not a flaw in the unity. It is how the unity is built.

This is what it might mean to remove the I from the ego—not to erase the self, but to loosen its grip on being the only one in the room. The grasping I insists on the point: here, now, only this, only me. It seizes each moment fresh and holds it alone, so that a life becomes a chain of severed nows, each cut off from the last. Let that grip ease, and something stranger and truer comes into view. The self is not a point. It is a duration—a wave with a shape, drawn across time.

Boethius, in his cell, waiting on a death he could already see, defined eternity not as endless clock-time but as the whole of one's life possessed at once, complete and entire.⁶ That is what it would be to be aligned in time: not living pinned inside a single seized instant, but standing indivisible across your own duration—past and future held as one coherent trace, intent leaving its legible ripple forward through the years. To be aligned in time is to stop being divided from yourself by the minute hand. It is to be one continuous being, rather than a person re-deciding, moment to moment, who to be.

So return the word to its title. *On being myself.* To be me is not to be a single uncut stone set apart from the world, defended and alone. It is to be a duality that refuses to divide: the one who acts and the being of the act; the particle that is here and the wave that is everywhere I have been and will be; the I, and the trace the I leaves through time. Remove the grasping I from the ego and nothing is lost. The self does not vanish. It widens. It comes into alignment. It becomes what the word meant all along.

An indivisible duality.

On being me.



Notes

1. Latin *individuus*, ‘undivided, indivisible’: *in-* (‘not’) + *dividuus* (‘divisible’), from *dividere*, ‘to divide.’ Cicero adopts *individuum* to render the atomists’ Greek *átomon*, ‘the uncuttable’ (e.g. *De Natura Deorum* I.66).
2. In Porphyry’s *Isagoge*, transmitted to the Latin West by Boethius, the descent from genus through species terminates in the *individuum*: the point past which no further division is possible.
3. The earliest English uses (15th c.) apply *individual* to the indivisible unity of the Trinity; that sense is now obsolete. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. ‘individual.’
4. The modern sense—‘single, separate, distinct’—emerges across the 17th century and displaces the original ‘indivisible.’ (*OED*.)
5. C. G. Jung, ‘Conscious, Unconscious, and Individuation,’ in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (Collected Works 9, pt. 1). Jung glosses individuation as becoming an ‘in-dividual’—an undivided whole—and expressly distinguishes it from egoism or isolation.
6. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Bk. V, pr. 6: eternity as *interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio*—‘the complete and simultaneous possession of unending life.’

Resonances

light parallels — voices the piece leans toward, not citations it rests on

Cicero & the atomists *Democritus · Lucretius*

Individuum coined to render *átomon*, the uncuttable — the indivisible at the root of the word.

Porphyry · Boethius *the Isagoge, the tree of being*

Division descends through genus and species and stops, at last, at the individual.

C. G. Jung *individuation*

Becoming whole as becoming an ‘in-dividual’ — undivided, and expressly not isolated.

Walt Whitman *Song of Myself*

The self that contains multitudes, unembarrassed by its own arithmetic.

Boethius *Consolation V.6*

Eternity as a whole life possessed at once — the ground for being aligned in time.

Niels Bohr *complementarity*

Wave and particle held together: two descriptions, both true, that do not cancel.



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XIII • On Living

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XV • On Remembering

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XVIII • On Seeing

XIX • On Teaching

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you are reading **On Being**



On Being

Set in warm paper and deep indigo, with a single amber thread and two overlapping circles — the in-dividual: an indivisible duality.

Jamison Johnson · June 2026

Set in Fraunces & EB Garamond

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