If not overdone, laughter is generally approved by biblical commentary in the Talmud—the Jewish canonical text that comments on the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible or Old Testament Scripture). “Moderation in hilarity” (Aboth 85). A laugh of derision at the hubris or folly of the promise might have been expected. In fact most of the laughter in the Abrahamic sacred texts is the laughter of derision (Morreall Taking Laughter Seriously 9).

In a related biblical anecdote, Sarah too laughs, but to herself. Although she is self-critical of her own laughter and tries to deny the fact of her laughter in the face of the divine messengers, no divine punishment is dispensed to either Abraham or Sarah and the matter is textually dropped.

Deuteronomic religion was, then, the first stage of Israelite religion that proclaimed unequivocal monotheism, but only in relation to, and in tension with, the concept of the unitary individual. There seems no reason, then, not to posit that the deuteronomistic religion, in fact, posits a unity of the believer, as well as of his God. The discovery of the individual, i.e., the indivisible, united self, was, in Israel, an achievement of the deuteronomistic covenant religion and its prophetic sponsors. The individualism added an element that immediately stood in tension with the older collectivist viewpoints.

Once individual identity is presumed and separated from the supernatural powers, the concept of subjectivity also becomes necessary to sustain meaning in life. Paul de Man, discussing Nietzsche, joins the army recognizing that subjectivity is a metaphor, a fiction, and an imaginative geste that each of us needs to sustain our lives:

...the idea of individuation, of the human subject as a privileged viewpoint, is a mere metaphor by means of which man protects himself from his insignificance by forcing his own interpretation of the world upon the entire universe, substituting a human-centered set of meanings that is reassuring to his vanity for a set of meanings that reduces him to being a mere transitory accident in the cosmic order.

In addition to the recognition that subjectivity is a site for independent thinking and moral choices came the recognition that the world of language, in the form of symbols and narratives, plays a large role in the formation of the individual human view of itself.

Giambattista Vico claimed that language itself configures subjectivity. According to Vico, subjectivity is formed within a cultural landscape where all kinds of symbols, stories, and imaginative tools formulate and reinforce who we think we are. Many followers, including several discussed in this essay, embraced Vico’s project. One such follower, Isaiah Berlin, summarizes the weight Vico places on language as the site for human cognitive development:

[T]he notion that there can be a science of mind which is the history of its development, the realization that ideas evolve, that knowledge is not a static network of eternal, universal, clear truths, either Platonic or Cartesian,

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5 Ibid., 295–300.
7 Giambattista Vico, 1668–1744, a professor of rhetoric at the University of Naples.