THE RISE AND TRIUMPH
of the MODERN SELF

Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism,
and the Road to Sexual Revolution

CARL R. TRUEMAN

"*The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* is perhaps the most significant analysis and evaluation of Western culture written by a Protestant during the past fifty years. If you want to understand the social, cultural, and political convulsions we are now experiencing, buy this book, and read it for all it is worth. Highly recommended."

Bruce Riley Ashford, Professor of Theology and Culture, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; coauthor, *The Gospel of Our King*

"Carl Trueman has a rare gift for fusing the deep social insights of a Philip Rieff, a Christopher Lasch, or an Augusto Del Noce with a vital Christian faith and marvelously engaging style. Psalm 8 names the central question of every age, including our own: 'What is man?' In explaining the development of the modern self and the challenges it poses to human identity and happiness, Trueman makes sense of a fragmenting world. This book is essential reading for anyone concerned for sustaining the Christian faith in a rapidly changing culture."

Charles J. Chaput, Archbishop Emeritus of Philadelphia

"This is a characteristically brilliant book by Carl Trueman, helping the church understand why people believe that sexual difference is a matter of psychological choice. Indeed, Trueman shows how the story we tell ourselves about normalized LGBTQ+ values is false and foolish. With wisdom and clarity, Trueman guides readers through the work of Charles Taylor, Philip Rieff, British Romantic poets, and Continental philosophers to trace the history of expressive individualism from the eighteenth century to the present. The rejection of *mimesis* (finding excellence by imitating something greater than yourself) for *poiesis* (finding authenticity by inventing yourself on your own terms), in addition to the Romantic movement's welding of sexual expression as a building block of political liberation, ushers in the modern LGBTQ+ movement as if on cue. This book reveals how important it is for thinking Christians to distinguish virtue from virtue signaling. The former makes you brave; the latter renders you a man pleaser, which is a hard line to toe in a world where there are so few real men left to please."

Rosaria Butterfield, Former Professor of English, Syracuse University; author, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*

"Moderns, especially Christian moderns, wonder how our society arrived at this strange moment when nearly everything about the self and sexuality that our grandparents believed is ridiculed. This genealogy of culture, clearly and elegantly written, will help all of us understand how we got to where we are, so that we can plot our own futures with more clarity and confidence. This book is a must-read for Christians and all others who are disturbed by the dictatorship of relativism that surrounds us."

Gerald R. McDermott, Former Anglican Chair of Divinity, Beeson Divinity School

"Carl Trueman is a superb teacher. Sharp, perceptive, and lucid, this book is the worthy fruit of learnedness and insight. But more than a teacher, Trueman also has the voice of a prophet. He speaks truth masterfully, with power. In bringing clarity on how we got to our present desert wilderness as a culture, Trueman helps us understand our crooked ways—and situates us to make straight the way of the Lord."

Adeline A. Allen, Associate Professor of Law, Trinity Law School

"This is an amazing piece of work. Blending social commentary with an insightful history of ideas as well as keen philosophical and theological analyses, Carl Trueman has given us what is undoubtedly the most accessible and informed account of the modern self and how it has shaped and informed the cultural battles of the first quarter of the twenty-first century. It is a fair-minded, carefully wrought diagnosis of what ails our present age. This book is essential reading for all serious religious believers who rightly sense that the ground is shifting underneath their feet, that the missionaries for the modern self are not content with simply allowing believers to practice their faith in peace but see these believers and their institutions as targets for colonization and involuntary assimilation. For this reason, every president of a faith-based college or university should read *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* more than once."

Francis J. Beckwith, Professor of Philosophy and Church-State Studies and Associate Director of the Graduate Program in Philosophy, Baylor University

"Those looking for a light read that provides escape from the cares of the world will not find *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* their book of choice. But this volume will richly reward readers who don't mind thinking hard about important (though sometimes unpleasant) topics. Christians have been taken off guard by how rapidly cultural mores have changed around them, but Carl Trueman demonstrates that radical thinkers have long been laying a foundation for these developments. Readers should press on to the end—the final paragraphs are among the best."

David VanDrunen, Robert B. Strimple Professor of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics, Westminster Seminary California

"Carl Trueman's gifts as an intellectual historian shine in this profound and lucid book. *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* needs to be read by anyone who wants to understand our current cultural distempers."

R. R. Reno, Editor, *First Things*

"Carl Trueman has written an excellent book: ambitious in its scope yet circumspect in its claims and temperate, even gentlemanly, in its tone. *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* will prove indispensable in moving beyond the superficiality of moralistic and liberationist interpretations to a deeper understanding and should be required reading for all who truly wish to understand the times we live in or are concerned about the human future. I very much hope it receives the wide readership it deserves."

Michael Hanby, Associate Professor of Religion and Philosophy of Science, Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at the Catholic University of America

Our culture did not simply wake up one morning and decide to reject sexual mores that have held civilization together for millennia. The sexual revolution that has overthrown basic human and teleological assumptions over the past sixty years has a history. With the adroit skill of an intellectual historian, the patience and humility of a master teacher, and the charity and conviction of a Christian pastor, Carl Trueman offers us this necessary book. We cannot respond appropriately to our times unless we understand how and why our times are defined such as they are. Trueman's work is a great gift to us in our continuing struggle to live in the world but be not of the world."

John D. Wilsey, Associate Professor of Church History and Philosophy, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *God's Cold Warrior* and *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion*

The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self

Other Crossway Books by Carl R. Trueman

The Creedal Imperative

Histories and Fallacies: Problems Faced in the Writing of History

Luther on the Christian Life: Cross and Freedom

The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self

Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism,
and the Road to Sexual Revolution

CARL R. TRUEMAN

Foreword by Rod Dreher

To
Matt and Gwen Franck
and
Fran and Suann Maier

There is nothing on this earth to be
more prized than true friendship.

THOMAS AQUINAS

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Foreword

Rod Dreher

In his 1983 Templeton Prize address, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn offered this summary explanation for why all the horrors of Soviet communism came to pass: "Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened."[1]

This answer is also a valid explanation for the crises enveloping the West today, including the widespread falling away from faith, the disintegration of the family, a loss of communal purpose, erotomania, erasing the boundaries between male and female, and a general spirit of demonic destruction that denies the sacredness of human life. Because men have forgotten God, they have also forgotten man; that's why all this has happened.

We have to go deeper. The *ways* in which men have forgotten God matter. We have to understand *how* and *why* they have forgotten God if we are to diagnose this sickness and to produce a vaccination, even a cure. Unfortunately, the gaze of most Christians cannot seem to penetrate the surface of postmodernity. Many regard the collapse moralistically, as if the tide could be turned back with a robust reassertion of Christian doctrine and ethical rigor.

Three cheers for robust reassertions of doctrinal orthodoxy and ethical rigor! But it's not enough. Ordinary Christians need—desperately need—

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1. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "'Men Have Forgotten God': Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's 1983 Templeton Address," *National Review*, December 11, 2018, https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/12/aleksandr-solzhenitsyn-men-have-forgotten-god-speech/.

a more profound and holistic grasp of the modern and postmodern condition. It is the water in which we swim, the air that we breathe. There is no escaping it, but we can figure out how to live in it and through it without losing our faith. Yet any proposed Christian solution to the crisis of modernity will fail if it does not address the core causes of the Great Forgetting.

Some secular thinkers have produced analyses that are an unappreciated gift to the church in this post-Christian era. The late sociologist and critic Philip Rieff (1922–2006) was an agnostic Jew who understood with unusual perceptiveness how the psychologization of modern life, and its manifestation in the sexual revolution, was the poison pill that was killing our religion and therefore our civilization. Rieff's prose, though, is not easy to read. Some years ago, as I worked on my book *The Benedict Option*, I asked my friend Carl Trueman, who shares my view of Rieff's importance and who is a thinker and writer of impressive lucidity, to write a book about Rieff that explains to the laity why we need his insights to build a defense.

Trueman has written that book—you're holding it in your hands—but he has given us something much more valuable than a layman's handbook on Philip Rieff. Indeed, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* is an indispensable guide to how and why men have forgotten God. Trueman's tour de force analyzes the roots of the crisis in the thought and writing of men like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud—the usual suspects, you might say—but he also factors in figures like nineteenth-century English poets, who taught elites how to think and feel in radically different ways.

By the time the reader arrives at the book's conclusion, which explains why transgenderism is not simply a quirky offshoot of identity politics but rather the ultimate expression of the spirit of modernity, the reader will grasp why the trans phenomenon has been so readily accepted by contemporaries—and why the church's efforts to resist it and the sexual revolution of which it is a part have been so feeble and ineffective.

Trueman's book is in no way a standard conservative Christian polemic against modernity. Those are a dime a dozen. Nor is it a pietistic

exhortation to prayer, study, and sober living, of which we have countless examples. Rather, it is a sophisticated survey and analysis of cultural history by a brilliant teacher who is not only an orthodox Christian but also a pastor who understands the actual needs of the flock—and who, unlike so many intellectuals, can write like a dream. I can't emphasize strongly enough how *practical* this book is and how useful it will be to pastors, priests, and intellectually engaged Christians of all denominations.

So many Christian books seek to explain the church to the modern world. But in these pages, Carl Trueman explains modernity to the church, with depth, clarity, and force. The significance of *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, arriving at this late hour, is hard to overstate. In his 1983 Templeton Prize address, Solzhenitsyn also said,

> Today's world has reached a state which, if it had been described to preceding centuries, would have called forth the cry: "This is the Apocalypse!"
>
> Yet we have grown used to this kind of world; we even feel at home in it.[2]

Yes, even Christians. Carl Trueman's prophetic role is to reveal to the church today how that happened, so that even now, we might repent and, in so doing, find ways to keep the true light of faith burning in this present darkness, which comprehends it not.

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2. Solzhenitsyn, "'Men Have Forgotten God.'"

Preface

Every book I have written has involved incurring significant debts to numerous people, and none more so than this one. Rod Dreher floated the idea in his column at the *American Conservative* that someone should write an introduction to the thought of Philip Rieff, and Justin Taylor at Crossway picked up on this and asked if I would be willing to do so. Rod's enthusiasm that I say yes closed the deal. What started as an idea for a modest introductory book has morphed into something much more ambitious, but without Rod and Justin, this work would never have been written. I am, of course, honored that Rod agreed to write the foreword.

This is the fourth book I have published with Crossway, and once again, the experience has been a delightful one for me. All the team deserves thanks, and especially David Barshinger, Darcy Ryan, Lauren Susanto, and Amy Kruis.

I did much of the research for the book during a yearlong sojourn at Princeton University during 2017–2018, where I was the William E. Simon Fellow in Religion and Public Life in the James Madison Program. It was without doubt the high point of my academic life, and I will be forever grateful to Professors Robert P. George and Bradford P. Wilson for granting me such a privilege and to Debra Parker, Ch'nel Duke, Evelyn Behling, and Duanyi Wang, whose hard work made the year so pleasant. I am also indebted to all the 2017–2018 Madison fellows. I always felt that I was by far the stupidest person in the room at the Tuesday coffee discussions over which Robby and Brad presided, but I like to think that at the end I left a little less stupid than when I first

arrived. The presentation of chapter 3 to the fellows and of a synopsis of the book to an undergraduate seminar, chaired by my dear friend and fellow Madisonian John Wilsey, were also very important to forming my opinions on the relevant topics.

Numerous friends have offered thoughtful critiques of sections of the book: Nathan Pinkoski gave of his time when we were both at Princeton to help me better understand Alasdair MacIntyre and then kindly read and commented on the MacIntyre section of the manuscript. Matt Franck and Adeline Allen both generously shared their expertise in constitutional law. Any flaws in the final product are, of course, my fault.

I am also thankful to Archbishop Charles Chaput and Fran Maier not only for their personal kindness and friendship toward me but also for introducing me to the work of Augusto Del Noce via a seminar given by Carlo Lancelotti at the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

A number of the ideas that appear in the book were first tested in lectures and discussions. I am thankful to Patrick Berch, David Hall, Todd Pruitt, Mike Allen, Scott Swain, Scott Redd, Chad Vegas, Reformed Theological Seminary, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Princeton University, and Grove City College for providing venues for testing out some of my arguments. Aimee Byrd brought my attention to some important literature. Rosaria Butterfield provided fascinating insights into what it was like to be in the LGBTQ+ community. In addition, I am also grateful to Rusty Reno, Matt Schmitz, Julia Yost, and Ramona Tausz for allowing me to engage with the kind of cultural topics at the core of this book via the *First Things* website and magazine. Julia and Ramona deserve particular thanks for consistently proving that I have never been edited without improvement. Ryan T. Anderson, Serena Sigilitto, and R. J. Snell have also been very kind in allowing me to publish at *Public Discourse*, another wonderful venue for refining arguments and floating theories. I should also thank Ryan and Serena for permission to reuse material on Rieff for chapters 1 and 2 that first appeared in *Public Discourse*.

At the end of my Princeton fellowship, I had the great pleasure of taking a position at Grove City College. I am thankful to President Paul J.

McNulty for encouraging my work and to Paul Kengor, Jeff Trimbath, and Robert Rider, of the Institute for Faith and Freedom, for providing me with research assistants. Lorenzo Carrazana did great work during the 2018–2019 academic year. Then, in the summer of 2019, Kirsten Holmberg took over and provided truly outstanding feedback, corrections, and commentary on a number of central chapters. It is good to have a student assistant who is unafraid to offer probing criticism of her professor's work.

As always, Catriona provided a wonderful home environment and tolerated my academic daydreaming far beyond the call of duty. It is a blessed man indeed who has such a life partner.

Finally, I dedicate this book, with gratitude, to four dear friends: Matt and Gwen Franck and Fran and Suann Maier.

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Carl R. Trueman
Grove City College
Pennsylvania
August 2019

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Introduction

And worse I may be yet; the worst is not
So long as we can say "This is the worst."

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *KING LEAR*

Why This Book?

The origins of this book lie in my curiosity about how and why a particular statement has come to be regarded as coherent and meaningful: "I am a woman trapped in a man's body." My grandfather died in 1994, less than thirty years ago, and yet, had he ever heard that sentence uttered in his presence, I have little doubt that he would have burst out laughing and considered it a piece of incoherent gibberish. And yet today it is a sentence that many in our society regard as not only meaningful but so significant that to deny it or question it in some way is to reveal oneself as stupid, immoral, or subject to yet another irrational phobia. And those who think of it as meaningful are not restricted to the veterans of college seminars on queer theory or French poststructuralism. They are ordinary people with little or no direct knowledge of the critical postmodern philosophies whose advocates swagger along the corridors of our most hallowed centers of learning.

And yet that sentence carries with it a world of metaphysical assumptions. It touches on the connection between the mind and the body, given the priority it grants to inner conviction over biological

reality. It separates gender from sex, given that it drives a wedge between chromosomes and how society defines being a man or a woman. And in its political connection to homosexuality and lesbianism via the LGBTQ+ movement, it rests on notions of civil rights and of individual liberty. In short, to move from the commonplace thinking of my grandfather's world to that of today demands a host of key shifts in popular beliefs in these and other areas. It is the story of those shifts—or, perhaps better, of the background to those shifts—that I seek to address in subsequent chapters.

At the heart of this book lies a basic conviction: the so-called sexual revolution of the last sixty years, culminating in its latest triumph—the normalization of transgenderism—cannot be properly understood until it is set within the context of a much broader transformation in how society understands the nature of human selfhood.[1] The sexual revolution is as much a symptom as it is a cause of the culture that now surrounds us everywhere we look, from sitcoms to Congress. In short, the sexual revolution is simply one manifestation of the larger revolution of the self that has taken place in the West. And it is only as we come to understand that wider context that we can truly understand the dynamics of the sexual politics that now dominate our culture.

Such a claim needs not only justification—that is the task of the rest of this book—but also clarification as to the meaning of the terms employed in making it. While many readers probably have some understanding of what is meant by *sexual revolution*, the idea of the *self* may prove somewhat more elusive. Yes, we have probably all heard of the

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1. I am aware that LGBTQ+ people object to the term *transgenderism* as indicating a denial of the reality of transgender people and therefore as a pejorative term. Nonetheless, I use it in this book to point to the underlying philosophical assumptions that must be regarded as correct if a person's claim to be transgender is to be seen as coherent. If it is legitimate for LGBTQ+ theorists and advocates to use terms such as *cisgenderism* to refer to the ideology that underlies opposition to the transgender movement, then it is also legitimate to use *transgenderism* to refer to the ideology that underpins it. For the meaning and use of *cisgenderism* as a term, see Erica Lennon and Brian J. Mistler, "Cisgenderism," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, nos. 1–2 (2014): 63–64, https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2399623. It is also worth noting that the term *transgenderism* was itself used by transgender groups in the 1970s: see Cristan Williams, "Transgender," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, nos. 1–2 (2014): 232–34, https://doi .org/10.1215/23289252-2400136. The anathematizing of the term is a good example of how one group uses language to privilege its own position and delegitimize that of its critics, an accusation usually aimed at conservatives but clearly no monopoly of one particular side.

sexual revolution, and we no doubt consider ourselves to be *selves*. But what exactly do I mean by these terms?

The Sexual Revolution

When I use the term *sexual revolution*, I am referring to the radical and ongoing transformation of sexual attitudes and behaviors that has occurred in the West since the early 1960s. Various factors have contributed to this shift, from the advent of the pill to the anonymity of the internet.

The behaviors that characterize the sexual revolution are not unprecedented: homosexuality, pornography, and sex outside the bounds of marriage, for example, have been hardy perennials throughout human history. What marks the modern sexual revolution out as distinctive is the way it has normalized these and other sexual phenomena. It is not therefore the fact that modern people look at sexually explicit material while earlier generations did not that constitutes the revolutionary nature of our times. It is that the use of pornography no longer carries the connotations of shame and social stigma it once did and has even come to be regarded as a normal part of mainstream culture. The sexual revolution does not simply represent a growth in the routine transgression of traditional sexual codes or even a modest expansion of the boundaries of what is and is not acceptable sexual behavior; rather, it involves the abolition of such codes in their entirety. More than that, it has come in certain areas, such as that of homosexuality, to require the positive repudiation of traditional sexual mores to the point where belief in, or maintenance of, such traditional views has come to be seen as ridiculous and even a sign of serious mental or moral deficiency.

The most obvious evidence of this change is the way language has been transformed to serve the purpose of rendering illegitimate any dissent from the current political consensus on sexuality. Criticism of homosexuality is now *homophobia*; that of transgenderism is *transphobia*. The use of the term *phobia* is deliberate and effectively places such criticism of the new sexual culture into the realm of the irrational and points toward an underlying bigotry on the part of those who hold such views.

As I highlight in chapter 9, this kind of thinking underlies even decisions in the Supreme Court. It is also evident in the artifacts of popular culture: no one today needs to be told that a movie with the title *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* is a comedy. The very idea of someone reaching the age of forty with no experience of sexual intercourse is inherently comic because of the value society now places on sex. To be sexually inactive is to be a less-than-whole person, to be obviously unfulfilled or weird. The old sexual codes of celibacy outside marriage and chastity within it are considered ridiculous and oppressive, and their advocates wicked or stupid or both. The sexual revolution is truly a revolution in that it has turned the moral world upside down.

The Nature of the Self

The second term that needs clarification is that of the self. We all have a consciousness of being a *self*. At base, this connects to our sense of individuality. I am aware that I am me and not, say, George Clooney or Donald Trump. But in this book I use the term to mean more than simply a basic level of self-consciousness. For me to be a self in the sense I am using the term here involves an understanding of what the purpose of my life is, of what constitutes the good life, of how I understand myself—my *self*—in relation to others and to the world around me.

In this context—and as will become very clear in subsequent chapters—I am deeply indebted to the work of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, particularly as found in his book *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*.[2] In that work, Taylor highlights three points of significance in the modern development of what it means to be a self: a focus on inwardness, or the inner psychological life, as decisive for who we think we are; the affirmation of ordinary life that develops in the modern era; and the notion that nature provides us with an inner moral source.[3] These developments manifest

2. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).
3. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, x.

themselves in numerous ways. Most significant for my argument in this book, they lead to a prioritization of the individual's inner psychology—we might even say "feelings" or "intuitions"—for our sense of who we are and what the purpose of our lives is. To leap ahead, transgenderism provides an excellent example: people who think they are a woman trapped in a man's body are really making their inner psychological convictions absolutely decisive for who they are; and to the extent that, prior to "coming out," they have publicly denied this inner reality, to that extent they have had an inauthentic existence. This is why the language of "living a lie" often appears in the testimonies of transgender people.

Another way of approaching the matter of the self is to ask what it is that makes a person happy. Is happiness found in directing oneself outward or inward? For example, is job satisfaction to be found in the fact that it enables me to feed and clothe my family? Or is it to be found in the fact that the very actions involved in my work bring me a sense of inner psychological well-being? The answer I give speaks eloquently of what I consider the purpose of life and the meaning of happiness. In sum, it is indicative of how I think of my *self*.

To return to my earlier statement, that the sexual revolution is a manifestation of a much deeper and wider revolution in what it means to be a self, my basic point should now be clear: the changes we have witnessed in the content and significance of sexual codes since the 1960s are symptomatic of deeper changes in how we think of the purpose of life, the meaning of happiness, and what actually constitutes people's sense of who they are and what they are for. The sexual revolution did not cause the sexual revolution, nor did technology such as the pill or the internet. Those things may have facilitated it, but its causes lie much deeper, in the changes in what it meant to be an authentic, fulfilled human self. And those changes stretch back well before the Swinging Sixties.

Thinking Clearly about the Sexual Revolution

Having defined the basic terms of discussion, I want to highlight a couple of typical mistakes that individuals, particularly those who are

committed to strong religious views, can make in approaching a subject like the sexual revolution. Given the contentious nature of such subjects, and often the deeply personal convictions that they involve, there is a tendency to do one of two things. First, one can so emphasize a universal, metaphysical principle to which one is committed that one fails to understand the particulars of what one is analyzing. Second, one can become so preoccupied with the particulars that one fails to see the significance of the more general context.

To illustrate the former point, in teaching history I often begin my courses by asking students the following question: "Is the statement 'The Twin Towers fell down on 9/11 because of gravity' true or false?" The correct response, of course, is that it is true—but as my students quickly realize, that answer actually explains nothing of any significance about the tragic events of that day. To do that with any degree of adequacy, one needs to address other factors, from American foreign policy to the rise of militant Islam. The point I am making in asking the question is simple: the universal law of gravity explains why everything in general falls toward the earth, but it explains no specific incident of such a fall with any degree of adequacy.

Those who hold to grand schemes of reality can all tend this way. The Christian might be tempted to declare that the reason for the sexual revolution was sin. People are sinful; therefore, they will inevitably reject God's laws regarding sexuality. The Marxist might declare that the reason for the Russian Revolution was class struggle. Rich people exploit the poor; therefore, the poor will inevitably rise up in rebellion. Within the framework of each belief system, the answer is true, but in neither case are such blunt statements capable of explaining the particulars of the events in question—why the sexual revolution has thus far legitimated homosexuality but not incest, for example, or why the workers' revolution happened in Russia and not in Germany. To answer those questions, one needs to address specific matters of context.

This approach also manifests itself in more subtle and nuanced ways. There is a tendency among social conservatives to blame expressive individualism for the problems that they regard as currently putting strain

on the liberal Western order, particularly as it manifests itself in the chaos of identity politics. The difficulty with this claim is that expressive individualism is something that affects us all. It is the very essence of the culture of which we are all a part. To put it bluntly: we are all expressive individuals now. Just as some choose to identify themselves by their sexual orientation, so the religious person chooses to be a Christian or a Muslim. And this raises the question of why society finds some choices to be legitimate and others to be irrelevant or even unacceptable. The answer to that is to be found not by simply repeating the phrase "expressive individualism" but by looking at the historical development of the relationship between society at large and individual identity.

But there is an opposite problem to the temptation presented by overgeneralized explanatory schemes that one must also avoid. That is the tendency to treat symptoms in isolation. This is harder to articulate, but the speed of the transformation of sexual mores over the last two decades provides a good example. Many Christians were amazed at how swiftly society moved from a position where in the early 2000s a majority of people were broadly opposed to gay marriage to one where, by 2020, transgenderism is well on its way to becoming more or less normalized. The mistake such Christians made was failing to realize that broader, underlying social and cultural conditions made both gay marriage and then transgender ideology first plausible and then normative and that these conditions have been developing over hundreds of years. They are therefore by now very deep seated and themselves an intuitive part of life. Acceptance of gay marriage and transgenderism are simply the latest outworking, the most recent symptoms, of deep and long-established cultural pathologies.

The basic principle is this: no individual historical phenomenon is its own cause. The French Revolution did not cause the French Revolution. The First World War did not cause the First World War. Every historical phenomenon is the result of a wide variety of factors that can vary from the technological to the political to the philosophical. Without the development of atomic technology, there could have been no bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Without the Second World War, there would

have been no reason to drop a bomb on Hiroshima. And without a certain philosophy of war, there would have been no justification for dropping a bomb on Hiroshima.

It is the same with the sexual revolution. It has a context—a broader revolution in how the self is understood—and emerges from a specific historical matrix. Developments in technology, in philosophy, and in politics are just three of the factors that serve to make it possible, plausible, and finally actual. They also serve to give it decisive shape and help explain why it has taken the form that it currently has. I cannot give an exhaustive account of this causal context, but what I offer in this book is an account of the intellectual shifts, and their popular impact, that have facilitated the revolution in sexual practices and thinking that now dominates key aspects of the public square.

The Argument

Part 1 of this book sets forth in two chapters some of the basic concepts that I subsequently use for exploring the historical narrative. Of particular importance here are the ideas of three philosophers of the modern condition: Philip Rieff, Charles Taylor, and Alasdair MacIntyre. Rieff developed some very useful concepts—the triumph of the therapeutic, psychological man, the anticulture, and deathworks—which I use at various points throughout parts 2 and 3. Taylor is extremely helpful both in understanding how the modern notion of the expressive self has emerged and also how this connects to the wider politics of society. His contributions on the dialogical nature of selfhood, on the nature of what he calls "the social imaginary," and on the politics of recognition allow for answers to the question of why certain identities (e.g., LGBTQ+) enjoy great cachet today while others (e.g., religious conservatives) are increasingly marginalized. Finally, MacIntyre is useful because in a series of books starting in the early 1980s, he has repeatedly argued that modern ethical discourse has broken down because it rests ultimately on incommensurable narratives and that claims to moral truth are really expressions of emotional preference. These insights are extremely helpful in understanding both the fruitless nature and the extreme polarizing

rhetoric of many of the great moral debates of our time, not least those surrounding matters of sex and identity.

Part 2 of the book looks at some important developments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, starting with the thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, examining the contribution of a number of figures associated with Romanticism, and ending with discussion of the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and Charles Darwin. The central point here is that with the era of Rousseau and Romanticism a new understanding of human selfhood emerged, one focused on the inner life of the individual. This thinking finds its significant critical corollary in a view of society/culture as oppressive. In Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Blake in particular, this aspect of culture is identified above all with society's Christian sexual codes and particularly with the normative status of lifelong, monogamous marriage.

This suspicion about society/culture receives added power and philosophical depth in the work of Nietzsche and Marx, who in different ways argue that the history of society is a history of power and oppression and that even notions such as human nature are constructs designed to reinforce and perpetuate this subjugation. Indeed, along with Darwin, they deal lethal blows, philosophically and scientifically, to the ideas that nature has an intrinsic meaning and that human beings have special significance or an essence that determines how they should behave. In the hands of Nietzsche, Marx, and Darwin, the world loses its innate teleology. These three effectively strip away the metaphysical foundations for both human identity and for morality, leaving the latter, as Nietzsche is happy to point out, a matter of mere taste and manipulative power games. The Romantics grounded ethics in aesthetics, in the cultivation of empathy and sympathy, confident that a universal, shared human nature provided a firm foundation for such. Nietzsche sees such arguments from taste as a manipulative means by which the weak subjugate the strong, and Marx sees them as a means of oppression by the dominant class. The groundwork for rejecting traditional morality, both philosophical and scientific, is therefore in place by the end of the nineteenth century. With Nietzsche's genealogical approach to morality and Marx's

dialectical materialism, the foundations have also been laid for an iconoclastic view of the past—for seeing history as a tale of oppression and for making its victims into the real heroes of the narrative.

If part 2 deals with the psychologizing of the self, part 3 deals with the sexualizing of psychology and the politicizing of sex. The central figure here is that of Sigmund Freud. It is Freud, more than any other figure, who made plausible the idea that humans, from infancy onward, are at core sexual beings. It is our sexual desires that are ultimately decisive for who we are. And this belief shaped Freud's own theory of civilization: society/culture is the result of a trade-off between the anarchic sexual drives of human beings and the necessity for them to live together in communities. When Freud's thought is then appropriated by certain Marxist thinkers, most notably Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse, the result is a heady mix of sex and politics. The New Left that emerges from this synthesis sees oppression as a fundamentally psychological category and sexual codes as its primary instruments. The theoretical—and the rhetorical—background to the sexual revolution is therefore established.

Part 4 engages with a number of different areas of contemporary society in order to demonstrate how deeply the conceptual developments of parts 2 and 3 have come to transform modern Western culture. In chapter 8, I outline the rise to prominence of the erotic with examples from both high culture, in the form of surrealism, and pop culture, in the form of pornography. My conclusion is that the triumph of the erotic does not simply involve an expansion of the boundaries of acceptable sexual behavior or of notions of modesty but actually requires the abolition of such in their entirety. In chapter 9, I address three particular areas of relevance, the Supreme Court judgment on gay marriage, the ethics of Peter Singer, and the culture of protest on college campuses. I argue that each is a function of the broader revolution of the self that I describe in parts 2 and 3. Then, in chapter 10, I address the history of the LGBTQ+ movement, arguing that it is not the result of intrinsic affinities shared by its component parties but an alliance of historical and political convenience rooted in a shared sexual iconoclasm. I also make the case that it increasingly reveals the inherent instability of the

broader project of the sexual revolution, as is clear from the current conflict that transgenderism has precipitated among feminists.

In conclusion, I offer some reflections on possible futures that we might have to face, from the difficulties posed by transgenderism and the prospects for religious freedom to ways in which the church should prepare for the challenges that are coming.

What This Book Is Not

Before moving to the main body of the argument, three further comments are necessary to clarify my purpose in writing. First, this book is not intended as an exhaustive account of how the present normative understanding of the self has emerged and come to dominate public discourse. As with all historical accounts, the narrative and analysis that I present here are both limited and provisional. I indicate in the conclusion that other factors play into the shaping of modern selfhood and the sexual revolution, not least those associated with developments in technology. Such things are beyond the scope of this book but still relevant to the phenomena that I seek to describe. My task here is limited: to demonstrate how many of the ideas now informing both the conscious thinking and the instinctive intuitions of Western men and women have deep historical roots and a coherent genealogy that helps explain why society thinks and behaves the way it does. I want to help the reader see that the debates about sexuality that increasingly dominate our public square need to be set in a much broader and deeper context than we typically acknowledge—and that all of us are to some extent implicated. It is therefore primarily a history that reveals the intellectual background of the modern revolution in selfhood with a view to showing *that* the ideas of key figures stretching back centuries have come to permeate our culture at all levels, from the halls of academe to the intuitions of ordinary men and women; it is not an exhaustive account of *how* those ideas came to do so.

Second, this book is not a lament for a lost golden age or even for the parlous state of culture as we now face it. Lamentation is popular in many conservative and Christian circles, and I have indulged in it a

few times myself. No doubt the Ciceronian cry "O tempora! O mores!" has its therapeutic appeal in a therapeutic time like ours, whether as a form of Pharisaic reassurance that we are not like others, such as those in the LGBTQ+ movement, or as a means of convincing ourselves that we have the special knowledge that allows us to stand above the petty enchantments and superficial pleasures of this present age. But in terms of positive action, lamentation offers little and delivers less. As for the notion of some lost golden age, it is truly very hard for any competent historian to be nostalgic. What past times were better than the present? An era before antibiotics when childbirth or even minor cuts might lead to septicemia and death? The great days of the nineteenth century when the church was culturally powerful and marriage was between one man and one woman for life but little children worked in factories and swept chimneys? Perhaps the Great Depression? The Second World War? The era of Vietnam? Every age has had its darkness and its dangers. The task of the Christian is not to whine about the moment in which he or she lives but to understand its problems and respond appropriately to them.

Third, I have written this book with the same principle in mind that I have tried to embody in the classroom for well over a quarter century: my task as a historian is first to explain an action, an idea, or an event in context. Only when that hard work has been done can the teacher move to any kind of critique. While I cannot claim to have always attained this ideal in everything I have said or written, it seems to me that giving an accurate account of one's opponents' views, however obnoxious one may consider them to be, is vital, and never more so than in our age of cheap Twitter insults and casual slanders. There is nothing to be gained from refuting a straw man. In the accounts I give of, among others, Rousseau, the Romantics, Nietzsche, Marx, Darwin, Freud, the New Left, surrealism, Hugh Hefner, Anthony Kennedy, Peter Singer, Adrienne Rich, Judith Butler, and LGBTQ+ activism, I have therefore tried to be as careful and dispassionate as possible. Some readers might find this odd, given my personal dissent from much of what they each represent. But truthfulness is not optional. My hope is that I have represented the views of these groups and individuals in such a manner that, were they to read

this book, they might demur to my conclusions but at least recognize themselves in my account of their thought. All historians owe that much to the subjects of their inquiries.

What I offer here is essentially a prolegomenon to the many discussions that Christians and others need to have about the most pressing issues of our day, particularly as they manifest themselves in the variety of ways in which the sexual revolution affects us—personally, culturally, legally, theologically, ecclesiastically. My aim is to explain how and why a certain notion of the self has come to dominate the culture of the West, why this self finds its most obvious manifestation in the transformation of sexual mores, and what the wider implications of this transformation are and may well be in the future. Understanding the times is a precondition of responding appropriately to the times. And understanding the times requires a knowledge of the history that has led up to the present. This book is intended as a small contribution to that vital task.

Part 1

ARCHITECTURE OF THE REVOLUTION

1

Reimagining the Self

You see, but you do not observe.

SHERLOCK HOLMES, *A SCANDAL IN BOHEMIA*

I noted in the introduction that the underlying argument of this book is that the sexual revolution, and its various manifestations in modern society, cannot be treated in isolation but must rather be interpreted as the specific and perhaps most obvious social manifestation of a much deeper and wider revolution in the understanding of what it means to be a self. While sex may be presented today as little more than a recreational activity, sexuality is presented as that which lies at the very heart of what it means to be an authentic person. That is a profound claim that is arguably unprecedented in history. How that situation comes to be is a long and complicated story, and I can address only a few of the most salient aspects of the relevant narrative in a single volume. And even before I attempt to do so, it is first necessary to set forth a number of basic theoretical concepts that provide a framework, a set of what we might describe as architectural principles, for structuring and analyzing the personalities, events, and ideas that play into the rise of the modern self.

In this task, the writings of three analysts of modernity are particularly useful: Charles Taylor, the philosopher; Philip Rieff, the psychological sociologist; and Alasdair MacIntyre, the ethicist.[1] While all three have different emphases and concerns, they offer accounts of the modern world that share certain important affinities and also provide helpful insights into understanding not simply how modern Western society thinks but how and why it has come to think the way that it does. In this chapter and the next, therefore, I want to offer an outline of some of their key ideas that help set the scene for the interpretation of our contemporary world offered in the subsequent account of how the concept of the modern psychologized and sexualized self has emerged.

The Social Imaginary

To return to the questions I posed in the introduction: How has the current highly individualistic, iconoclastic, sexually obsessed, and materialistic mindset come to triumph in the West? Or, to put the question in a more pressing and specific fashion, as I did earlier, Why does the sentence "I am a woman trapped in a man's body" make sense not simply to those who have sat in poststructuralist and queer-theory seminars but to my neighbors, to people I pass on the street, to coworkers who have no particular political ax to grind and who are blissfully unaware of the rebarbative jargon and arcane concepts of Michel Foucault and his myriad epigones and incomprehensible imitators? The statement is, after all, emblematic of a view of personhood that has almost completely dispensed with the idea of any authority beyond that of personal, psychological conviction, an oddly Cartesian notion: I think I am a woman, therefore I am a woman. How did such a strange idea become the common orthodox currency of our culture?

To make some attempt at addressing the issue, it is useful to take note of a helpful concept deployed by Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor in his analysis of how societies think, that of the *social imaginary*. Taylor is interesting because he is a philosopher whose work also engages with

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1. MacIntyre is discussed in chap. 2.

broader historical and sociological themes. In *A Secular Age*, he offers a major analysis of the way modern society in general, and not just the intellectual classes, has moved away from being permeated by Christianity and religious faith to the point that such are no longer the default for the majority of people but actually are rather exceptional. In the course of his argument, he introduces the idea of the social imaginary to address the question of how theories developed by social elites might be related to the way ordinary people think and act, even when such people have never read these elites or spent any time self-consciously reflecting on the implications of their theories. Here is how he defines the concept:

> I want to speak of "social imaginary" here, rather than social theory, because there are important differences between the two. There are, in fact, several differences. I speak of "imaginary" (i) because I'm talking about the way ordinary people "imagine" their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, it is carried in images, stories, legends, etc. But it is also the case that (ii) theory is often the possession of a small minority, whereas what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. Which leads to a third difference: (iii) the social imaginary is that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.[2]

As Taylor describes it here, the social imaginary is a somewhat amorphous concept precisely because it refers to the myriad beliefs, practices, normative expectations, and even implicit assumptions that members of a society share and that shape their daily lives. It is not so much a conscious philosophy of life as a set of intuitions and practices. In sum, the social imaginary is the way people think about the world, how they imagine it to be, how they act intuitively in relation to it—though that is emphatically not to make the social imaginary simply into a set of identifiable ideas.[3]

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2. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 171–72. Taylor has devoted an entire book to discussing the concept: *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

3. "The social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather, it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society." Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 2.

It is the totality of the way we look at our world, to make sense of it and to make sense of our behavior within it.

This is a very helpful concept precisely because it takes account of the fact that the way we think about many things is not grounded in a self-conscious belief in a particular theory of the world to which we have committed ourselves. We live our lives in a more intuitive fashion than that. The fact that "I am a woman trapped in a man's body" makes sense to Joe Smith probably has far less to do with him being committed to an elaborate understanding of the nature of gender and its relationship to biological sex than to the fact that it seems intuitively correct to affirm someone in his or her chosen identity and hurtful not to do so, however strange the particulars of that self-identification might have seemed to previous generations. We might perhaps say that, looked at from this angle, the social imaginary is a matter of intuitive social taste. And the question of how the tastes and intuitions of the general public are formed is the question of how the social imaginary comes to take the shape that it does.

Sometimes, as Taylor notes, the theories of the elite do infiltrate these imaginaries.[4] For example, the ideas of Luther on church authority came to grip the popular imagination in sixteenth-century Saxony and beyond through myriad popular pamphlets and woodcuts designed to have an impact on everyday people. And one might add that sometimes the theories of the elite have an affinity with elements of the existing social imaginary that reinforces them, that provides them with an idiom by which they might be expressed or justified, or that transforms them. Sexual identity politics might be a good example, whereby sex outside the ideal of monogamous heterosexual marriage has always occurred but has only recently become much easier to transact (with the advent of cheap and efficient contraception). It has also moved from being primarily personal in significance to also being political, given the debates that swirl around abortion, birth control, and LGBTQ+ matters. The way this occurred is fairly simple to discern:

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4. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 172.

first, there was the promiscuous behavior; then there was the technology to facilitate it, in the form of contraception and antibiotics; and, as technology enabled the sexually promiscuous to avoid the natural consequences of their actions (unwanted pregnancies, disease), so those rationales that justified the behavior became more plausible (and arguments against it became less so), and therefore the behavior itself became more acceptable.

Any account of the sexual revolution and of the underlying revolution in the understanding of the self, of which the sexual revolution is simply the latest iteration, must therefore not simply take into account the ideas of the cultural elite but must also look at how the intuitions of society at large have been formed. Ideas in themselves are only part of the story. The notion of the self that makes transgenderism plausible certainly has its theoretical and philosophical rationales. But it is also the product of much wider cultural phenomena that have shaped the intuitions of those who are blissfully unaware of its various intellectual origins and metaphysical assumptions.

Mimesis and Poiesis

A second useful element in Taylor's work that connects to the social imaginary and to which we will have recourse is the relationship between *mimesis* and *poiesis*. Put simply, these terms refer to two different ways of thinking about the world. A mimetic view regards the world as having a given order and a given meaning and thus sees human beings as required to discover that meaning and conform themselves to it. Poiesis, by way of contrast, sees the world as so much raw material out of which meaning and purpose can be created by the individual.

Both of Taylor's major works—*Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age*—are narratives that tell the story of the move in Western culture from a predominantly mimetic view of the world to one that is primarily poietic. Various matters characterize this shift. As society moves from a view of the world as possessing intrinsic meaning, so it also moves away from a view of humanity as having a specific, given end. Teleology is thereby attenuated, whether it is that of Aristotle, with his view of man as a

political animal and his understanding of ethics as an important function of that, or that of Christianity, with its notion that human life in this earthly sphere is to be regulated by the fact that humanity's ultimate destiny is eternal communion with God.

Again, the story of this shift is not simply one that can be told in terms of great thinkers and their ideas. It is true that individuals such as René Descartes and Francis Bacon served to weaken the significance of the connection between the divine and the created, and therefore of a teleological understanding of human nature, which one finds in the thought of a thinker such as Thomas Aquinas.[5] But for a poietic view of reality to eclipse the mimetic in the social imaginary, other factors must be at play.

To make this point more clearly, one might reflect on the nature of life in medieval Europe, a predominantly agrarian society. Given that agricultural technology was then, by today's standards, relatively primitive, farming was utterly dependent on geography and the seasons. These were givens; while the farmer would plough up the ground and scatter the seed, he had no control over the weather, minimal control over the soil, and thus comparatively little control over whether his endeavors would succeed. That might well have meant for many that they had no control over life or death: they were entirely at the mercy of the environment.

In such a world, the authority of the created order was obvious and unavoidable. The world was what it was, and the individual needed to conform to it. Sowing seed in December or harvesting crops in March was doomed to failure. Yet with the advent of more-advanced agricultural technology, this given authority of the environment became increasingly attenuated. The development of irrigation meant that water could be moved or stored and then used when necessary. Increased knowledge of soil science and fertilizers and pesticides meant that the land could be manipulated to yield more and better crops. More controversially, the recent development of genetics has allowed for the production of foods

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5. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 97–99.

that are immune to certain conditions or parasites. I could go on, but the point is clear: whether we consider certain innovations to be good or bad, technology affects in profound ways how we think about the world and imagine our place in it. Today's world is not the objectively authoritative place that it was eight hundred years ago; we think of it much more as a case of raw material that we can manipulate by our own power to our own purposes.

This has much broader significance than matters such as agriculture. The development of the automobile and then the aircraft served to shatter the previous authority of geographical space. If distance is ultimately a matter of time, then the distance from Philadelphia to London today is now less than that from Philadelphia to Chicago was a mere two hundred years ago. And once modern telecommunications and information technology entered the picture, the situation was even more radically altered—and that by human inventions. Had I immigrated to the United States in 1850, I might well have said goodbye forever to my relatives and friends left in England. Today, I can not only speak to them whenever I wish, I can even see them on my phone or computer whenever the fancy takes me.

To this, one should add the developments in medical technology. Again, old authorities have been challenged and found wanting. Diseases that were in past ages untreatable are now no longer death sentences. What were once deadly infections can be dispatched as so much trivia because of antibiotics. Childbirth no longer poses the serious risk to women's health that was routine in earlier ages. And all these developments have served to weaken the authority of the natural world and persuade human beings of their power.

In saying this, I am not making an evaluation of technology as good or bad. It can clearly be both. The point I am making is that we all live in a world in which it is increasingly easy to imagine that reality is something we can manipulate according to our own wills and desires, and not something that we necessarily need to conform ourselves to or passively accept. And this broader context makes intuitive, for example, those philosophical claims of Friedrich Nietzsche, in which human beings are

called to transcend themselves, to make their lives into works of art, to take the place of God as self-creators and the inventors, not the discoverers, of meaning. Few people have read Nietzsche, but many intuitively think in Nietzschean ways about their relationship to the natural world precisely because the highly technological world in which we now live—a world in which *virtual* reality *is* a reality—makes it so easy to do so. Self-creation is a routine part of our modern social imaginary.

And that is simply another way of saying that this is also a significant component of how we imagine our personal identities, our *selves*. Again, to return to that statement I highlighted in the introduction—"I am a woman trapped in a man's body"—such a statement is plausible only in a world in which the predominant way of thinking is poietic rather than mimetic. And a poietic world is one in which transcendent purpose collapses into the immanent and in which given purpose collapses into any purpose I choose to create or decide for myself. Human nature, one might say, becomes something individuals or societies invent for themselves.

Philip Rieff and the Nature of Culture

Philip Rieff, the late professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, is significant for this study because of his application of psychology to the patterns and pathologies of cultural change in the last one hundred years. In his book *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1966), Rieff used Sigmund Freud as his starting point for a theory of culture that he then proceeded to explicate by examining the work of subsequent thinkers, such as Carl Jung, D. H. Lawrence, and Wilhelm Reich. Rieff took as basic Freud's argument that civilization was the result of sublimating sexual desire in a manner that left human beings perennially discontented but remarkably creative, and he developed this notion into a broad theory of culture and a means of critiquing the shifts that he saw developing at a rapid rate in the mid-twentieth century.[6] To read Rieff's book today is a fascinating experience, mainly because the claims that he

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6. Freud's most famous expression of this argument is his monograph *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989). For further discussion of Freud's theory, see chap. 6.

makes about the direction of society, and the implications these would have for how people would come to think of themselves, are so startlingly prescient that it is very hard to dismiss his underlying analytical framework. The work has a prophetic quality to it that is likely to impress any reader who is willing to persevere through his rather opaque prose style.[7]

Rieff's approach to culture is characterized by a number of ideas. Foremost is his notion that cultures are primarily defined by what they forbid. This is a basically Freudian concept: if sexual taboos drive civilization, then civilization is really defined at its base by a negative idea, by that behavior that it denounces and renounces as unacceptable. This in turn has institutional implications: a culture's vitality depends on the authority of those institutions that enforce or inculcate these renunciations and thus communicate them from one generation to the next. As Rieff expresses it,

> A culture survives principally . . . by the power of its institutions to bind and loose men in the conduct of their affairs with reasons which sink so deep into the self that they become commonly and implicitly understood.[8]

This connects to the second important aspect of culture for Rieff: culture, at least historically, directs the individual outward. It is in communal activities that individuals find their true selves; the true self in traditional cultures is therefore something that is given and learned, not something that the individual creates for himself. This insight allows us to connect the thinking of Rieff to that of Charles Taylor in a constructive manner, via the affinity that exists between Rieff's concept of psychological man and Taylor's concept of the expressive individual.

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7. Rieff was not unique in criticizing modern society as therapeutic. Leszek Kołakowski also saw essentially the same pathology as distinguishing the contemporary era, although he labeled it "the culture of analgesics." See his *The Presence of Myth*, trans. Adam Czerniawski (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 83–109.

8. Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*, 40th anniversary ed. (1966; repr., Wilmington: ISI Books, 2006), 2. While discussion of institutions is beyond the scope of this book, it is worth noting here that the world in which we now live is characterized by what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has called "liquidity," a state of constant change and flux. Given this liquidity, Rieff's statement here points to a significant problem that contemporary societies now face: if cultures depend on strong institutions, then when those institutions are weakened or thrown into chaos, those cultures, too, are weakened or thrown into chaos. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000); also Zygmunt Bauman and Carlo Bordoni, *State of Crisis* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014).

Psychological Man and Expressive Individualism

Rieff describes the outward direction of traditional culture as follows: "Culture is another name for a design of motives directing the self outward, toward those communal purposes in which alone the self can be realized and satisfied."[9] This is an important point: culture directs individuals outward. It is greater than, prior to, and formative of the individual. We learn who we are by learning how to conform ourselves to the purposes of the larger community to which we belong. This is of great significance for understanding Rieff, since it is this emphasis on culture as that which directs the individual outward toward communal purposes that underlies his schematization of human history in terms of representative types, figures whom he regards as embodying the spirit of their age. It also allows us to understand why Rieff was convinced that his (and now our) age represented something dramatic and innovative in cultural history.[10]

First, Rieff argues, there was the culture of political man, of the sort set forth as an ideal in the thought of Plato and Aristotle. In contrast to the idiotic man (literally, the private man), the political man is the one who finds his identity in the activities in which he engages in the public life of the *polis*. Aristotle, in his *Politics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*, offers perhaps the classic description of political man. He attends the assembly, frequents the Areopagus, is deeply immersed in what one might call civic community life. That is where he is who he is; the outwardly directed activity of political life is where he finds his sense of self.

Eventually, political man gave way to the second major type, that of religious man. The man of the Middle Ages was precisely such a person, someone who found his primary sense of self in his involvement in religious activities: attending mass, celebrating feast days, taking part in religious processions, going on pilgrimages. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is a classic representation of this type of culture. Who are the characters in the book? Each obviously has his or her own individual existence

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9. Rieff, *Triumph of the Therapeutic*, 3.

10. Rieff first develops the following scheme in *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist* (New York: Viking, 1959). A helpful summary is provided in his essay "Reflections on Psychological Man in America," in Rieff, *The Feeling Intellect: Selected Writings*, ed. Jonathan B. Imber (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 3–10.

and profession, but above all, they are pilgrims who find their sense of identity in a communal context as they participate in a religiously motivated journey to Canterbury. I might also add that so much of the way medieval society is structured—from the dominance of its church buildings to the liturgical calendar, which marks time itself in religious terms—points toward religion as the key to culture during this time.

In Rieff's historical scheme, religious man was eventually displaced by a third type, what he calls economic man. Economic man is the individual who finds his sense of self in his economic activity: trade, production, the making of money. Rieff himself saw economic man as an unstable and temporary category, and given Karl Marx's perceptive observations on the dramatic way that capitalism constantly revolutionizes society's means of production, this would seem to be a reasonable assumption. And economic man thus gives way to the latest player on the historical stage, that which Rieff dubs "psychological man"—a type characterized not so much by finding identity in outward directed activities as was true for the previous types but rather in the inward quest for personal psychological happiness.

As a historical framework, Rieff's scheme is far too simplistic. The idea that one can chart human history through the rise and fall of these four distinct types of human being is far fetched at best. For a start, the apostle Paul's development of the concept of the will is what facilitates the rise of inner psychological narrative as a means of reflecting on the self. In the fourth century, Paul's intellectual heir Augustine produced the *Confessions*, the first great Western work of psychological autobiography, which indicates the existence of life understood in terms of inner mental space long before Freud. And one can scarcely look at the Middle Ages or the early modern era and neatly abstract the religious from the political or, indeed, the psychological: Martin Luther is only the most obvious example of this complexity. He was an Augustinian friar whose life would have revolved around religious observances and yet whose introspective angst played a key role in the birth of the modern age. Nevertheless, if the historical scheme is greatly oversimplified, the significance of the rise of psychological categories as the dominant factor

in how Westerners think of themselves and who they consider themselves to be is surely a persuasive insight. One does not need to agree with Rieff on how society came to be dominated by the therapeutic to agree with him that such domination did emerge in the latter part of the twentieth century and currently shows no signs of abating.

Indeed, in characterizing the modern age as that of psychological man, Rieff makes a point very similar to that of Charles Taylor in his understanding of the human self: that psychological categories and an inward focus are the hallmarks of being a modern person. This is what Taylor refers to as *expressive individualism*, that each of us finds our meaning by giving expression to our own feelings and desires. For Taylor, this kind of self exists in what he describes as a *culture of authenticity*, which he defines as follows:

> The understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late eighteenth century, that each of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.[11]

This shift to psychological man and to expressive individualism is far reaching in its implications, as I argue in future chapters. Taylor, for example, rightly sees it as underpinning the consumer revolution that took place after the Second World War.[12] At this point, it is simply worth noting that it involves a very different way of thinking about and relating to the world around us.[13]

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11. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 475.
12. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 474.
13. Roger Scruton notes the shift in the understanding of selfhood relative to forms of dance. Commenting on earlier forms of dancing, he observes that such typically assumed live music, formal steps that needed to be learned, and a meaning or pleasure derived from the individual being part of a coordinated whole, a social group. Such dancing was thus deeply social, and the ways in which the individual expressed his or her identity was communal. He contrasts this with modern nightclub-style dancing, in which the individual simply—to use the colloquial phrase—does his or her own thing. The former, he says, involves dancing *with* others, the latter *at* others (which, incidentally, has also involved a sexualizing of dancing's purpose consonant with the sexualizing of society). "Dancing Properly," in *Confessions of a Heretic: Selected Essays* (Widworthy, UK: Notting Hill Editions, 2016), 50–64.

Take, for example, the issue of job satisfaction, something that is significant for most adults. My grandfather left school at fifteen and spent the rest of his working life as a sheet metal worker in a factory in Birmingham, the industrial heartland of England. If he had been asked if he found satisfaction in his work, there is a distinct possibility he would not even have understood the question, given that it really reflects the concerns of psychological man's world, to which he did not belong. But if he did understand, he would probably have answered in terms of whether his work gave him the money to put food on his family's table and shoes on his children's feet. If it did so, then yes, he would have affirmed that his job satisfied him. His needs were those of his family, and in enabling him to meet them, his work gave him satisfaction. My grandfather was, if anything, a Rieffian economic man whose economic production and the results of that for others (i.e., his family) were key to his sense of self. If I am asked the same question, my instinct is to talk about the pleasure that teaching gives me, about the sense of personal fulfillment I feel when a student learns a new idea or becomes excited about some concept as a result of my classes. The difference is stark: for my grandfather, job satisfaction was empirical, outwardly directed, and unrelated to his psychological state; for members of mine and subsequent generations, the issue of *feeling* is central.

Rieff sees two historic reversals underlying this new world of psychological man. The first is a transformation of the understanding of therapy. Traditionally, the role of the therapist in any given culture was to enable the patient to grasp the nature of the community to which he belonged. So in a religious world, the task of the religious therapist, the priest, was to train individuals in the rituals, the language, the doctrines, and the symbols of the church by which they might then participate in the community. These are the things that promote commitment to the community, which is prior to, and more important than, any particular individual.[14]

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14. See, for example, Rieff's comments on the medieval church: "In the Middle Ages, this tradition [of therapy] was institutionalized in a church civilization, with the therapeutic functions reserved to functionaries of the churches. . . . Ultimately, it is the community that cures. The function of the classical therapist is to commit the patient to the symbol system of the community, as best he can and by whatever techniques are sanctioned (e.g., ritual or dialectical, magical or rational)." *Triumph of the Therapeutic*, 57.

This view depends on an understanding of the wider community as a positive good for those individuals who constitute it. That, as I note in parts 2 and 3, is an idea that has come under vigorous criticism, beginning in the eighteenth century with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who regarded the community as a hindrance to the full expression of the authentic individual, a point picked up and given artistic expression by the Romantics. In Freud, Rieff's intellectual source and himself an admirer of Rousseau (albeit supplementing Rousseau with the much darker view of nature found in the Marquis de Sade), the notion of the community as a good is also placed under pressure and significantly qualified. A charitable reading of his cultural theory allows that the repressed community we have is at best merely preferable to the bloodthirsty chaos that the alternative offers. For Marx and for Nietzsche (though for very different reasons), the present community is one that needs to be overthrown in order for humanity to reach its full potential. And once we have the fusion of the thought of Marx and Freud in figures such as Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse, the community as it now exists becomes not simply repressive but oppressive and in need of revolutionary change specifically in terms of its sexual codes. In short, the basic thrust of much modern thinking serves to shatter the idea of the individual as one whose best interests are served by being educated to conform to the canons and protocols of society. And that is the intellectual foundation for the first reversal, whereby therapy ceases to serve the purpose of socializing an individual. Instead, it seeks to protect the individual from the kind of harmful neuroses that society itself creates through its smothering of the individual's ability simply to be herself.

This then leads to the second reversal. In the worlds of political, religious, and economic man, commitment was outwardly directed to those communal beliefs, practices, and institutions that were bigger than the individual and in which the individual, to the degree that he or she conformed to or cooperated with them, found meaning. The ancient Athenian was committed to the assembly, the medieval Christian to his church, and the twentieth-century factory worker to his trade union and working man's club. All of them found their purpose and well-being by being

committed to something outside themselves. In the world of psychological man, however, the commitment is first and foremost to the self and is inwardly directed. Thus, the order is reversed. Outward institutions become in effect the servants of the individual and her sense of inner well-being.

In fact, I might press this point further: institutions cease to be places for the formation of individuals via their schooling in the various practices and disciplines that allow them to take their place in society. Instead, they become platforms for performance, where individuals are allowed to be their authentic selves precisely because they are able to give expression to who they are "inside." Rieff characterizes the values of modern society and the person in such terms:

> Reticence, secrecy, concealment of self have been transformed into social problems; once they were aspects of civility, when the great Western formulary summed up in the creedal phrase "Know thyself" encouraged obedience to communal purposes rather than suspicion of them.[15]

For such selves in such a world, institutions such as schools and churches are places where one goes to perform, not to be formed—or, perhaps better, where one goes to be formed by performing.[16]

This helps explain in part the concern in recent years over making the classroom a "safe place"—that is, a place where students go not to be exposed to ideas that may challenge their deepest beliefs and commitments (part of what was traditionally considered to be the role of education) but to be affirmed and reassured. While hostile commentators berate this tendency as that caused by the hypersensitivity of a generation of "snowflakes," it is actually the result of the slow but steady psychologizing of the self and the triumph of inward-directed therapeutic categories over traditional outward-directed educational philosophies. That which hinders my outward expression of my inner

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15. Rieff, *Triumph of the Therapeutic*, 17.

16. This point has recently been made by Yuval Levin: "We have moved, roughly speaking, from thinking of institutions as molds that shape people's character and habits toward seeing them as platforms that allow people to be themselves and to display themselves before a wider world." *A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus: How Recommitting to Our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 33–34.

feelings—that which challenges or attempts to falsify my psychological beliefs about myself and thus to disturb my sense of inner well-being—is by definition harmful and to be rejected. And that means that traditional institutions must be transformed to conform to the psychological self, not vice versa.

This could also be described, using Taylor's terminology, as the triumph of expressive individualism and of poiesis over mimesis. If education is to allow the individual simply to be himself, unhindered by outward pressure to conform to any greater reality, then the individual is king. He can be whoever he wants to be. And rejecting the notion of any external authority or meaning to which education is to conform, the individual simply makes himself the creator of any meaning that there might be. So-called "external" or "objective" truths are then simply constructs designed by the powerful to intimidate and to harm the weak. Overthrowing them—and thus overthrowing the notion that there is a great reality to which we are all accountable, whether that of the *polis*, of some religion, or of the economy—becomes the central purpose of educational institutions. They are not to be places to form or to transform but rather places where students can perform. The triumph of the therapeutic represents the advent of the expressive individual as the normative type of human being and of the relativizing of all meaning and truth to personal taste.

Two Key Questions

If, as I argue in future chapters, it is true that we now live in a world in which the therapeutic needs of Rieff's psychological man stand at the center of life, it would then perhaps be possible to offer an explanation as to why human identity has become so plastic and statements such as "I am a man trapped in a woman's body" come to make sense. If the inner psychological life of the individual is sovereign, then identity becomes as potentially unlimited as the human imagination. Yet this would still leave some questions unresolved, questions that have a particular urgency in our current political climate. Why, for example, have the politics of sexual identity become so ferocious that any dissent from the

latest orthodoxy is greeted with scorn and sometimes even legal action? A moment's reflection would seem to suggest that this is, on the surface at least, a rather odd phenomenon. What does it matter, to borrow a phrase oft used in the gay marriage debate surrounding the Supreme Court case of *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 US ___ (2015), what people do in private? Why should my agreement or disagreement with what consenting adults do behind closed doors be of any great public importance? If two men have a sexual relationship in the privacy of their bedroom, my disagreement with such behavior neither picks their pockets nor breaks their legs, as Thomas Jefferson would say. So why should disagreement with current sexual mores be regarded as somehow immoral and intolerable in the wider public sphere?

Such questions miss an important point. If it were just sexual activity that were at issue, passions would likely not run so deep. But far more than codes of behavior are at stake here. In addressing the behavior that has come to prominence through the sexual revolution, we are actually not so much speaking of practices as we are speaking of identities. And when we are speaking of identities, the public, political stakes are incredibly high and raise a whole different set of issues.

To anticipate the argument of later chapters, for the sexual revolutionaries who follow the line of Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse—for example, the feminist thinker Shulamith Firestone—the answer as to why dissent from the sexual revolution is to be eradicated is a simple one of political liberation. The oppressive nature of bourgeois society is built on repressive sexual codes that maintain the patriarchal nuclear family as the norm. As long as this state of affairs holds, there can be no true liberation, political or economic. Shattering sexual codes is therefore one of the principal emancipatory tasks of the political revolutionary. But few people have read Reich or Marcuse or Firestone. Fewer still perhaps accept the Marxist-Freudian metanarrative on which their politicized view of sex rests. But some of the ideas of these thinkers and philosophies are now part of the broader social imaginary of the West and have become the intuitive orthodoxy of much of society (for example, that oppression is primarily a psychological category enforced through sex and gender

codes). That is part of the world of psychological man or expressive individualism, where personal authenticity is found through public performance of inward desires. And as the most powerful inward desires of most people are sexual in nature, so identity itself has come to be thought of as strongly sexual in nature.

Yet here I come to an important phenomenon requiring that I qualify the notion of the modern self simply as psychological man or the expressive individual: even now in our sexually libertarian world, certain sexual taboos remain in place, pedophilia being perhaps the most obvious. Not all expressions of individuality, not all behaviors that bring about a sense of inner psychological happiness for the agent, are regarded as legitimate. Whether any given individual notices it or not, society still imposes itself on its members and shapes and corrals their behavior.[17]

Now, while we might hope and pray that things such as pedophilia and incest remain taboo, we cannot be sure that such will be the case because sexual codes have changed so dramatically over the last few decades, and as I argue in chapter 9, the grounds on which one might mount a compelling argument against them have already been conceded by our culture. Nevertheless, even if the current sexual taboos rest on very shaky legal and philosophical foundations, they do reveal something important that must be taken into account when we are talking about psychologically constructed identity: not all psychological identities are considered to be legitimate, because society will not allow for the expression of every particular form of sexual desire, and therefore, not all sexual minorities enjoy the protection either of the law or of the general cultural ethos.

And so I arrive at two key questions that need to be answered: Why is it important that identity is publicly acknowledged? And why is it that the public acknowledgment of some identities is compulsory and of others is forbidden? There are two parts to this answer, one drawn from

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17. There is some evidence that attitudes toward pedophilia might be changing: see Dorothy Cummings McLean, "TEDx Speaker: 'Pedophilia Is an Unchangeable Sexual Orientation,' 'Anyone' Could Be Born That Way," July 18, 2018, https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/ted-speaker-pedophilia-is-an-unchangeable-sexual-orientation-anyone-could-b.

Rieff (the analytic attitude) and one drawn from Taylor (the importance and nature of recognition).

The Analytic Attitude

At first glance, the concepts of psychological man or expressive individualism would not seem in themselves to offer an answer to the question of why public acknowledgment of the validity of particular identities is important or of why certain identities become respectable and others do not. For example, one could easily argue that expressive individualism really only requires freedom for me to be who I think I am, as long as that does not interfere with the lives of others. If I declare myself to be gay, it would seem that as long as that does not prevent me from holding a job, voting, receiving an education, or availing myself of the necessities of life, there is little reason for me to want anything more. Why would I need my neighbors to affirm my homosexuality as a good thing? To use the matter of cake baking: Mr. Bun, the Christian cake baker, may not be willing to make a cake for my gay wedding, but he will sell me his baked goods in general and will even recommend to me a baker who will fulfill my wedding requirements. His policy on wedding cakes is not going to cause me to starve or even require that I travel great distances to avail myself of baked goods. Why should such amicable tolerance of my homosexuality not suffice? Surely a situation whereby my identity is tolerated by others in a manner that allows me to go about my daily business would seem to be a reasonable state of affairs?

Yet the history of the sexual—or perhaps better, identity—revolution has clearly not played out in quite such a fashion. In fact, precisely such a scenario as that outlined above led to one of the most contentious and divisive Supreme Court cases of recent years.[18] It is clearly indisputable that mere tolerance of sexual identities that break with the heterosexual norm has not proved an acceptable option to the sexual revolutionaries. Nothing short of full equality under the law and full recognition of the legitimacy of certain nontraditional sexual identities by wider society has

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18. Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission, 584 U.S. ___ (2018).

emerged as the ambition of the LGBTQ+ movement. It is not enough that I can buy a wedding cake somewhere in town. I must be able to buy a wedding cake from each and every baker in town who ever caters for weddings. Why is this the case?[19]

One could build an answer to this question on one aspect of Philip Rieff's definition of traditional culture—that it normally directs the self outward to communal purposes in which it can find satisfaction but that this direction has clearly been reversed in the era of psychological man. Satisfaction and meaning—authenticity—are now found by an inward turn, and the culture is reconfigured to this end. Indeed, it must now serve the purpose of meeting my psychological needs; I must not tailor my psychological needs to the nature of society, for that would create anxiety and make me inauthentic. The refusal to bake me a wedding cake, therefore, is not an act consistent with the therapeutic ideal; in fact, it is the opposite—an act causing me psychological harm.

There is therefore an outward, social dimension to my psychological well-being that demands others acknowledge my inward, psychological identity. We all as individuals still inhabit the same social spaces, still interact with other individuals, and so these other individuals must be coerced to be part of our therapeutic world. The era of psychological man therefore requires changes in the culture and its institutions, practices, and beliefs that affect everyone. They all need to adapt to reflect a therapeutic mentality that focuses on the psychological well-being of the individual. Rieff calls this societal characteristic *the analytic attitude*.

Once society starts to manifest the analytic attitude, there is, to borrow a phrase from Nietzsche, a transvaluation of values.[20] That which was

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19. For an analysis of how the LGBTQ+ movement has progressed from demands for tolerance to demands for equality, see Darel E. Paul, *From Tolerance to Equality: How Elites Brought America to Same-Sex Marriage* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018).

20. Nietzsche planned four books under the general title of "A Transvaluation of Values," although only one, *The Anti-Christ*, was completed. In this book, he attacks the morality of Christianity (and its expression in the work of Immanuel Kant), demanding that the metaphysical death of God requires a thoroughgoing revision (rejection) of traditional morality. As he declares in chap. 47, "What sets us apart is not that we recognize no God, either in history or in nature or behind nature—but that we find that which has been reverenced as God not 'godlike' but pitiable, absurd, harmful, not merely an error but a *crime against life.* . . . We deny God as God." *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 2003), 174–75. Nietzsche's point is that claims to transcendent moral codes are oppressive of the individual and deny true life.

previously deemed good comes to be regarded as bad; that which was previously regarded as healthy comes to be deemed sickness. The turn to the psychological self is fundamentally iconoclastic with regard to traditional moral codes as they are now seen to be part of the problem rather than the solution. Emphasis on what we might call the "right to psychological happiness" of the individual will also have some obvious practical effects. For example, language will become much more contested than in the past, because words that cause "psychological harm" will become problematic and will need to be policed and suppressed. To use pejorative racial or sexual epithets ceases to be a trivial matter. Instead, it becomes an extremely serious act of oppression. This explains why so much outrage in the public square is now directed at what one might call speech crimes. Even the neologism *hate speech* speaks to this. While earlier generations might have seen damage to body or property as the most serious categories of crime, a highly psychologized era will accord increasing importance to words as means of oppression. And this represents a serious challenge to one of the foundations of liberal democracy: freedom of speech. Once harm and oppression are regarded as being primarily psychological categories, freedom of speech then becomes part of the problem, not the solution, because words become potential weapons. Rieff's understanding of the current situation thus stands very close to that offered by Reich and Marcuse, who saw oppression as a primarily psychological phenomenon and the demolition of sexual codes and the dispatching of freedom of speech as necessary elements of the political revolution, even as (unlike them) Rieff laments these realities as signifying the death of culture rather than the birth pangs of the coming liberated utopia.

Yet Rieff's approach still leaves open the pressing question of why some identities are acceptable and their acceptance compulsory and enforced, and other identities do not enjoy such privilege. The foot fetishist, too, surely suffers psychological harm when he is denied the right to proclaim his proclivities in public and receive acclamation and even legal protection for so doing. Yet few if any care to take up his cause. Why not? He would seem to have just as much a claim to being a marginalized sexual minority as anyone in the LGBTQ+ movement. And

no cake baker is being sued for refusing to bake cakes that glorify incest or the Ku Klux Klan. Again, why not? Rieff certainly offers a plausible framework for understanding the psychological nature of oppression in the therapeutic world, but he does not allow us to discern why some marginal identities gain mainstream acceptance and others remain (at least for the present) beyond the pale.

Charles Taylor and the Politics of Recognition

The question of why some identities find acceptance and others do not is simply a version of the question of how identity is formed in the first place. Much of this book focuses on the rise of the psychological self. The turn to epistemology in the Enlightenment and the work of men such as Rousseau led to an emphasis on the inner life as characterizing the authentic person. Yet before I address the historical narrative of the rise of the modern plastic, psychological, expressive self, it is necessary to note that for all psychological man's inward turn, individual personal identity is not ultimately an internal monologue conducted in isolation by an individual self-consciousness. On the contrary, it is a dialogue between self-conscious beings. We each know ourselves as we know other people.

A simple example of why this is important to understand is provided by Descartes's famous idea that in the act of doubting my own existence, I have to acknowledge that I do exist on the grounds that there has to be an "I" that doubts.[21] As plausible as that sounds, a key question that Descartes fails to ask is, What exactly is this "I" that is doing the doubting? Whatever the "I" might be, it is clearly something that has a facility with language, and language itself is something that typically involves interaction with other linguistic beings. I cannot therefore necessarily grant the "I" the privilege of self-consciousness prior to its engagement with others. The "I" is necessarily a social being.[22]

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21. See René Descartes, *Discourse on Method; and, Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993).

22. This is the argument of Charles Taylor in *The Language Animal* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016). For Taylor's criticism of Descartes, with particular attention to the essentially monological nature of the self his philosophy assumes, see esp. 64–65.

Building on this basic insight in his analyses of the rise of the modern self, Charles Taylor has done much to show that expressive individualism is a social phenomenon that emerges through the dialogical nature of what it means to be a person. As he expresses it,

> One is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it.[23]

Elsewhere, he offers a more elaborate, though still succinct, summary of his position:

> The general feature of human life that I want to evoke is its fundamentally dialogical character. We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining an identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression. . . . I want to take "language" in a broad sense, covering not only the words we speak but also other modes of expression whereby we define ourselves, including the "languages" of art, of gesture, of love and the like. But we are inducted into these in exchange with others. No one acquires the languages needed for self-definition on their own. We are introduced to them through exchanges with others who matter to us.[24]

Taylor is here pointing to the fact that who we think we are is intimately connected to those to whom we relate—family, friends, coworkers. When asked who I am, for example, I do not respond by pointing the inquirer to my DNA code or to such generalities as my gender. I would typically define myself in relation to other people and other things—the child of John, the husband of Catriona, a professor at Grove City College, the author of a particular book. Circumstances would influence the specific content, but the reply would likely touch on my relationship with others.

This also connects to another point: the human need to belong. If our identities are shaped by our connection to and interaction with significant others, then identity also arises in the context of belonging. To have an identity means that I am being acknowledged by others.

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23. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 35.
24. Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, ON: Anansi, 1991), 32–33.

To wander through a town and to be ignored by everyone I encounter would understandably lead me to question whether they considered me to be a nonperson or at least a person unworthy of acknowledgment. If I am treated by everyone I encounter as if I am worthless, I will probably end up feeling that I am worthless.

The Amish practice of shunning provides an example of this. When someone has committed some act that dramatically contradicts or defies the practices of the community, he can then be shunned. In extreme cases, this can mean that he is completely ignored by the Amish community. In this way, community identity is maintained by denying practical membership to the transgressor. The person ceases to be recognized as Amish by other Amish. While that individual continues to exist, his identity within the Amish community is effectively erased.[25]

Individual identity is thus truly a dialogue: how a person thinks of himself is the result of learning the language of the community so that he can be a part of the community. It also explains the basic human need to belong: the idea of the isolated Rousseauesque man of nature, living all by himself and for himself, may be superficially attractive, but a moment's reflection would indicate how strange, if not completely absurd, it would be.[26] In fact, to conduct such a thought experiment is likely to induce a kind of intellectual vertigo precisely because so much of who we are and how we think of ourselves is tied up with the people with whom we interact. To remove them from the picture is in a sense to remove ourselves, at least ourselves as we know ourselves. Again, if I ask what it would be like to be me if I had been born not in Dudley, England, to English parents but rather in Delhi to an Indian mother and father, the question is really impossible to answer for a very simple reason: I would then have been not me but someone completely different.

This dialogical dimension of identity also points to another aspect of modern selfhood. There is, for sure, a deep desire in the modern West

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25. See "Why Do the Amish Practice Shunning?," Amish America, accessed February 14, 2019, http://amishamerica.com/why-do-the-amish-practice-shunning/.
26. On Rousseau, see chap. 3.

for self-expression, to perform in public in a manner consistent with that which one feels or thinks one is on the inside. That is the essence of authenticity as I will note in the thought of Rousseau in chapter 3. It is also the idea of authenticity that dominates the contemporary cultural imagination. Yet the desire to belong to some larger whole, to find unity with others, is also characteristic of modern selfhood. One might note a comparatively trivial example of this: the teenager who dresses in a particular way to express her individuality and yet at the same time ends up wearing more or less the same clothes as every other member of her peer group. Her clothing is both a means of self-expression and a means of finding unity with a larger group at one and the same time.

Taylor's own attitude to this issue is rooted in his appropriation of the thought of the nineteenth-century German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel. Frederick Neuhouser summarizes Taylor's approach to Hegel in terms that make the latter's relevance obvious:

> [Taylor's argument is] that Hegel's social philosophy attempted to satisfy two aspirations bequeathed to us by the Enlightenment and its Romantic successors: aspiration to radical autonomy and to expressive unity with nature and society.[27]

In short, Hegel is useful because he is the key philosopher who wrestled with the quintessential problem of identity in the modern era: how to connect the aspiration to express oneself as an individual and to be free with the desire for being at one with (or belonging to) society as a whole. How can I simultaneously be myself and belong to a larger social group? This is where Hegel's thought is of great contemporary relevance.

Hegel begins the most famous section of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, on the relationship between master and slave, with the following statement: "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged."[28] What Hegel means by this is that self-consciousness is found only in a

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27. Frederick Neuhouser, preface to Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), vii.
28. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 111.

fully developed form where two such self-consciousnesses recognize each other as mutually recognizing each other. That is a rather convoluted and inelegant way of saying that a human being is most self-conscious when she knows that other people are acknowledging her as a self-conscious being.

A trivial example might help elucidate this idea further. Children often play improvised team sports in the schoolyard during recess. Typically team captains—normally a couple of the stronger leadership types in the playground pecking order—take it in turns to select players for their team. The moment of being selected often gives the one chosen a thrill, a feeling of excitement, of satisfaction, and, perhaps more negatively, of superiority relative to those who have not yet been picked. That is a moment of being *recognized*, of being acknowledged as valuable, by another—and, crucially, of knowing oneself that one has been so acknowledged. One imagines that this experience is somewhat different from that of, say, a Jack Russell terrier whose master comes home after work and calls him to sit on his lap. The Jack Russell may well be thrilled by the return of his master and by the fact that he has been acknowledged or recognized in such a way, but unlike the child picked for the playground team, he will lack the self-consciousness necessary to reflect on the fact that he has been so acknowledged. One might describe the Jack Russell's reaction as simply instinctive.

This idea—that identity requires recognition by another—is a vital insight into the subject I am exploring in this book. It also points toward the way identity can thus become contentious. Hegel himself points to this conflict in his chapter on the master-slave dialectic.[29] In a meeting of two primitive self-consciousnesses, recognition or acknowledgment of another self-consciousness requires a setting aside or a denial of oneself. The ultimate form of this dynamic is that the one self-consciousness comes to dominate the other totally, to negate it entirely. That is, if I meet someone else, the greatest way that my existence can be recognized by him is for me to fight and kill him. Recognition thus becomes a life-and-death struggle. But because death is also somewhat self-defeating

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29. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 111–19.

from the victor's standpoint—once the other person is dead, he cannot give me the recognition I desire—real life means that a compromise situation holds, whereby the one person comes to hold a superior position to the other who yet remains alive. A hierarchy of master and slave is thereby established, whereby the stronger receives from the weaker the recognition he desires.

To return to the playground example, one sees this hierarchical form of recognition at play in the action of team selection. The fact that the teams are picked by leaders indicates that a number of the children are recognized as such by the rest. The captains are captains because the other children acknowledge them as their superiors in some way. Recognition thus always stands in potential relationship to hierarchy and therefore to potential struggle and conflict. Again, playgrounds provide a good example, that of the school bully. The bully is one who establishes his dominant role in a particular hierarchy by the use of power to subjugate those who are weaker. The recognition they grant him is vital to his own self-consciousness but is extracted from others in a way that negates them to some significant degree, such that they know themselves to be below him in the hierarchy of power, to be somehow "less" than him.

Clearly, the dialogical nature of identity creates the possibility for tension not simply between individuals but also between the desires of the individual and the concerns of the community and, of course, between one community and another. Hegel was aware of this, and it forms an important part of his understanding of the political culture of the modern state.[30] And this is where the issue becomes complicated. It is also where one can begin to construct an answer to the question as to why only certain identities appear to enjoy legitimacy and widespread social privilege. To put the matter another way, it helps explain why some identities find recognition in society while others do not.

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30. "Fully developed self-consciousness, according to Hegel, is to be found only where such recognition is mutual, indeed, where two (or more) self-consciousnesses '*recognise* themselves as *mutually recognising* one another,' as, for example, in the modern constitutional state." Stephen Houlgate, *An Introduction to Hegel: Freedom, Truth and History*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 68.

Here it is helpful to note a concept that Taylor draws from Hegel, that of *Sittlichkeit*. This term cannot be captured by a single English word, and so Taylor retains the original German in his work but offers this explanation of its precise meaning:

> *Sittlichkeit* refers to the moral obligations I have to an ongoing community of which I am part. These obligations are based on established norms and uses, and that is why the etymological root in *Sitten* is important for Hegel's use. The crucial characteristic of *Sittlichkeit* is that it enjoins us to bring about what already is. This is a paradoxical way of putting it, but in fact the common life which is the basis of my *sittlich* obligation is already there in existence. It is in virtue of its being an ongoing affair that I have these obligations; and my fulfilment of these obligations is what sustains it and keeps it in being. Hence in *Sittlichkeit* there is no gap between what ought to be and what is, between *Sollen* and *Sein*.[31]

What this means is that society itself is an ethical community. What it implies is that the individual finds her self-consciousness in being recognized by that society, and this occurs because she is behaving according to the conventions of that society. In short, there is a need for the expressive individual to be at one with the expressive community.

One can rephrase this idea using an analogy with language. For people to be self-conscious and to express themselves to others, they need to be able to speak the language of the community to which they belong or to which they wish to speak, to use its vocabulary and to follow its grammatical and syntactical rules. Of course, it is individuals who use the language, but the language is not something they invent for themselves. If that were the case, it would not be a language in the commonly understood sense of the word. Rather, it is something prior to them and that they have to learn. Further, it is as individuals use language that both the language has reality and its existence is sustained.

Again, a trivial example makes this point clear. Anyone who has ever traveled in a country where they could not speak the native language

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31. Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, 81. See also the discussion in Craig Browne and Andrew P. Lynch, *Taylor and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 70–72.

and the local population could not speak that of the traveler will know the personal frustration this involves. Such a person is alienated from the society in which she happens to find herself and is not able to be a proper part of the community. It is only as the traveler acquires the local language that she is able to give expression to her personal identity in a way that is recognized by the locals and that allows her in some sense to belong.

What is vital to notice is that recognition is therefore a social phenomenon. It is important to me to have my identity recognized, but the framework and conventions both for expressing my identity and for that identity being recognized are socially constructed, specific to the context in which I find myself. The Roman soldier dresses in a certain way and is recognized by the populace as who and what he is because he dons a particular uniform. To wear that uniform today might indicate nothing more than the fact that one is going to a fancy dress party. At worst it might be a sign of insanity. It will certainly not mean that one is recognized as the brave member of a military unit. And so it is with other forms of dress and behavior. We might wish to express ourselves, but we typically do so in ways that are sanctioned by the modern society in which we happen to live.

When applied to the question of identity, specifically the kind of identities that the sexual revolution has brought in its wake, one can conclude that those that are considered legitimate—summed up by the LGBTQ+ acronym—are legitimate because they are recognized by the wider moral structure, the *Sittlichkeit*, of our society. The intuitive moral structure of our modern social imaginary prioritizes victimhood, sees selfhood in psychological terms, regards traditional sexual codes as oppressive and life denying, and places a premium on the individual's right to define his or her own existence. All these things play into legitimizing and strengthening those groups that can define themselves in such terms. They capture, one might say, the spirit of the age. This helps explain why these identities are recognized and others are not. Pedophiles, for example, are currently unpersuasive as a victimized class, given the fact that they appear more as victimizers, however iconoclastic they are with

regard to traditional sexual codes. Gay men, however, as consenting adults, are not seen as victimizers and can call on a long history of social marginalization and victimhood. They can thus claim a right to recognition, a recognition that is connected to a further aspect of the modern moral imagination, that of dignity.

The Question of Dignity

One of the underlying themes of this book, following Rieff, Taylor, and MacIntyre, is that psychological man and expressive individualism shape the dominant understanding of what it means to be a human self in this present age. Yet given the argument of the previous section, for these to be the controlling notions of the self demands that society itself embody certain assumptions. For the expressive individual to receive recognition means that the assumptions of expressive individualism must be the assumptions of society as a whole. For the individual to be king, society must recognize the supreme value of the individual.

Taylor argues that central to this thinking is the shift from a society based on the notion of honor to that based on the notion of dignity.[32] The former is built on the idea of a given social hierarchy. The medieval feudal lord was owed honor by his vassals simply by virtue of his birth. The world in which he lived considered him to be intrinsically superior to those below him. The same applied to the samurai in Japan. Their position in the social hierarchy meant that they were automatically considered superior to those who sat below them in the hierarchy. The English class system retains vestiges of this idea, and the Hindu caste system is perhaps its most obvious embodiment in the modern age.

This framework for recognition has been effectively demolished by two dramatic developments. First, technological and economic changes have over the centuries broken down the old hierarchical structures of society. To give an exhaustive account of this process is beyond the scope of this study, but it is worth briefly noting a number of factors that have

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32. See Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 225–56.

fostered this shift. Second, certain intellectual developments have proved lethal to traditional, hierarchical ways of thinking.

The rise of technology is clearly important to the demolition of old hierarchies, changing the relationship of human beings to their environment and transforming economic relationships between individuals. The rise of industrialism and the importance of capital in nineteenth-century England, for example, meant that the traditional nobility ceased to be as socially and politically important as it once had been. Power came to reside not so much in the ownership of traditional landed estates but in money, in capital, in that which could be invested in factories, and in the production and distribution of goods. This shift also fueled the growth of cities and in many places transformed local populations through both emigration and immigration in a manner that subverted traditional local hierarchies. I might also add that the kind of skills technology demanded—and still demands—came to favor the young, who were able to learn and adapt more easily. One has only to look at how the current IT industry is often dominated by young, free-thinking, entrepreneurial types to see how even the former (but still relatively recent) hierarchies of the business world have been attenuated and even rendered superfluous. Rigid social hierarchies that embodied and enforced honor codes have been made impractical and implausible in modern capitalist society, as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels observed long ago in *The Communist Manifesto*.[33]

As noted above, the assault on hierarchies was not simply the result of changing technological and economic conditions. Intellectual developments in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries also proved lethal to old hierarchical ways of thinking. For example, while the epistemology of Descartes might not at first glance appear to have great political significance, it effectively moved the individual knowing subject to the center. And this move surely found its most eloquent psychological expression in the work of Rousseau, for whom society and culture were the problems, the things that corrupted the individual and prevented

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33. For Marx and Engels, see chap. 5.

him from being truly authentic. Given that the hierarchies of honor-based societies would be examples of precisely the kind of corrupting conventions that the egalitarian Rousseau would have regarded with disdain, the clear notion is that all human beings are created intrinsically equal. As Rousseau famously expressed it at the start of *The Social Contract*, "Man is born free and everywhere is in chains." And the implication of this thinking is that all human beings therefore possess equal dignity.[34]

Rousseau's key ideas were picked up and reinforced by the subsequent Romantics: the individual is at his most authentic before he is shaped (and corrupted) by the need to conform to social conventions. Thus, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, identity turns inward, a move that is fundamentally antihierarchical in its implications. Society's structure is no longer regarded as reflecting the intrinsic superiority or inferiority of particular individuals and particular groups. Indeed, to make the claim that society's actual structure does reflect the intrinsic superiority or inferiority of individuals represents a very significant moral problem, one that needs to be overcome in some way. And if such hierarchies seek to manifest themselves by the granting or withholding of recognition, then that particular issue needs urgently to be addressed. Equal dignity relativizes the importance of the external circumstances. As noted above, hierarchies are the product of society and are therefore corrupting. They are what make the individual inauthentic.

This confluence of changing material conditions, social and economic practices, and intellectual developments served to shatter the old hierarchies of medieval and early modern Europe and paved the way for a more egalitarian view of humanity. And this is a critically important development because it goes to the very heart of the issue of recognition since it fundamentally changes the terms of the dialogical nature of personal identity. In the past, a person's identity came from

34. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 41.

without, the result of being set within a fixed social hierarchy. One might perhaps say that belonging, or being recognized, was therefore a question of understanding one's place in that preexisting social hierarchy into which one had been born. One simply had to learn to think and to act in accordance with one's position within that hierarchy. For example, the peasant had to understand his place in relation to the lord. Failure to do so would make the peasant a rebel against the social order, and this would call forth punitive measures against him from the lord. The lord had to act in order to reassert the importance of the given hierarchical order. This was exactly what the notion of honor represented.

The net result of the collapse of traditional hierarchies is that notions of honor no longer shape the pattern of social engagement and, therefore, of recognition in today's society. That role is now played by the notion of dignity, which each and every human being possesses not by virtue of their social status but simply by being human. This egalitarian concept changes everything in theory, and as it therefore comes to change everything in practice, it almost inevitably involves conflict, for it brings us back to that important point concerning the *Sittlichkeit* of society: How does society understand identity, and what range of identities does it consider to be legitimate? If I am to be recognized and if I am to belong, then there needs to be conformity between that social reality and my personal reality. And sometimes that conformity needs to be realized through conflict, whereby the ethics of one group or era are consciously defeated by those of another.

To take one example, in 1954 the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 US 483 (1954), that the segregation of white and African American children in public schools was unconstitutional. The language of the ruling offers insights into the importance of recognition:

> To separate [African American children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of

inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.[35]

Two things are worthy of note here. First, there is the psychological language: school segregation generates *feelings* of inferiority in African American children. The judgment is clearly operating within a world in which the psychological turn regarding selfhood has struck deep roots. This is emphatically not a criticism at this point, merely an observation. One of the big problems with "separate but equal" as regarded by the Supreme Court is the deleterious psychological effects that it has. And the Supreme Court clearly views this as a legitimate criterion for a legal ruling—a point that offers insights into the kind of culture in which the justices are operating.

Second, there is in this judgment the nature of the recognition (or lack thereof) that segregation represents: it generates feelings of *inferiority*. And it is surely obvious as to why this should be the case. For all the rhetoric of "separate but equal" that the proponents of segregation had used, it is quite clear that the white denial of integration to African Americans represented a refusal to recognize them as possessing equal dignity. This denial of recognition constituted a declaration in terms of social practices that the African American community was inferior to that of the whites, that it did not measure up to the criteria necessary for being recognized. The only way to rectify this situation was therefore to legislate integration and thereby to require that educational institutions did accord the African American community the recognition necessary for full equality, not simply before the law but via the law in the *Sittlichkeit* of modern America.

This observation is important in enabling us to understand why, for example, in a society where sexuality is foundational to personal identity, mere tolerance of homosexuality is bound to become unacceptable. The issue is not one of simply decriminalizing behavior; that would certainly mean that homosexual acts were tolerated by society,

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35. Text available at "Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)," Justia, accessed February 22, 2019, https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/347/483/.

but the acts are only a part of the overall problem. The real issue is one of recognition, of recognizing the legitimacy of who the person thinks he actually is. That requires more than mere tolerance; it requires equality before the law and recognition by the law and in society. And that means that those who refuse to grant such recognition will be the ones who find themselves on the wrong side of both the law and emerging social attitudes.

The person who objects to homosexual practice is, in contemporary society, actually objecting to homosexual identity. And the refusal by any individual to recognize an identity that society at large recognizes as legitimate is a moral offense, not simply a matter of indifference. The question of identity in the modern world is a question of dignity. For this reason, the various court cases in America concerning the provision of cakes and flowers for gay weddings are not ultimately about the flowers or the cakes. They are about the recognition of gay identity and, according to members of the LGBTQ+ community, the recognition that they need in order to feel that they are equal members of society.

For this reason, the appropriation by the LGBTQ+ community of the civil rights language of the 1950s and 1960s cannot be understood as a simple, cynical move to appropriate the history of the suffering of one community in order to advance the political ambitions of another. It is certainly the case that calling on the language of "Jim Crow" and segregation provides powerful rhetorical ammunition for the LGBTQ+ cause and indeed makes public criticism of its political demands very, very difficult. Yet the civil rights movement of the 1950s and the sexual identity rights movement of the present day, in fact, rest on different, even antithetical, premises, the former grounded in a notion of dignity based on a universal human nature, the latter on the sovereign right of individual self-determination. But they do share this in common: they represent demands for society to recognize the dignity of particular individuals, particular identities, and particular communities in social practices, cultural attitudes, and, therefore, legislation.

Concluding Reflections

The various concepts outlined in this chapter present facets of the overall narrative that will occupy the historical section of this book. Central to understanding the world in which we live is the idea of the social imaginary. This concept highlights that the tremendous changes we are witnessing can be interpreted through a variety of lenses. First, it is important to understand that most of us do not think about the world in the way we do because we have reasoned from first principles to a comprehensive understanding of the cosmos. Rather, we generally operate on the basis of intuitions that we have often unconsciously absorbed from the culture around us. Second, we need to understand that our sense of selfhood, of who we are, is both intuitive and deeply intertwined with the expectations, ethical and otherwise, of the society in which we are placed. The desire to be recognized, to be accepted, to belong is a deep and perennial human need, and no individual sets the terms of that recognition or belonging all by himself. To be a self is to be in a dialogical relationship with other selves and thus with the wider social context.

That observation then raises the question of the nature and origin of the expectations and intuitions that constitute the social imaginary. Here of great importance are both the emergence of a picture of the world as lacking intrinsic meaning and authority and the notion that what meaning it possesses must therefore first be put there by us as creative human agents. While it might seem far fetched to connect, say, Descartes's grounding of certainty in his consciousness of his own doubting to the claims of a contemporary transgender activist that sex and gender are separable, in fact both represent a psychological approach to reality. How the world moves from one to the other is a long, complicated story, but the two are connected. And one does not have to have read Descartes—or Judith Butler—to think intuitively about the world in terms for which they provide the theoretical rationale.

Rieff and Taylor are both correct in seeing psychological man and the expressive individual as the result of a long historical process and as the normative types in this present age. The psychologized, expressive individual that is the social norm today is unique, unprecedented, and

singularly significant. The emergence of such selves is a matter of central importance in the history of the West as it is both a symptom and a cause of the many social, ethical, and political questions we now face. To use another of the concepts outlined above, this new view of the self also reflects and facilitates a distinct move away from a mimetic view of the world as possessing intrinsic meaning to a poietic one, where the onus for meaning lies with the human self as constructive agent. But before we turn to the narrative of how this new understanding of self-hood emerged, and why it tilts so strongly in a sexual direction, we need to outline some of the other pathologies that shape our contemporary culture. Indeed, we need to understand why Rieff describes our current situation not as a culture but rather as an anticulture.

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