

Modern Selfhood

Summarizing Carl Trueman's *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* (Crossway, 2020).

- "I'm a woman trapped in a man's body." How did this become a statement that most of our culture finds not only coherent but an important thing to defend?
- Trueman's thesis: if you want to understand the present moment, you need to realize that the roots go way back to the early 1800s. And you need to understand that the church's differences with modern culture are not first of all about differences in sexual morals, but about what is a person, a *self*.

I. How our culture defines a self

- Our culture: we are defined by how we feel about ourselves.
 - Charles Taylor: "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" (23).
 - *Expressive individualism*: "each of us finds our meaning by giving expression to our own feelings and desires" (46).
 - We are the makers of our identities. Each person has their own way of realizing their humanity. We must not conform to anything outside of ourselves, or we are inauthentic.
- Our culture: we are defined by our sexuality; sex is the center of our identity.
 - "To be sexually inactive is to be a less-than-whole person, to be obviously unfulfilled or weird" (22).
- Our culture: our purpose is our own sense of wellness and satisfaction.
 - "To be free is to be sexually liberated; to be happy is to be affirmed in that liberation" (268).

II. Cultural ramifications

- New definition of morality:
 - Philip Rieff: "the abandonment of a sacred order leaves culture without any foundation. The culture with no sacred order therefore has the task ... of justifying itself only by reference to itself" (77).
 - Alasdair MacIntyre: *emotivism*: "the doctrine that ... all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling" (85). There is no transcendent framework to ground good and bad in morals (88).
 - Thus saying "homosexuality is wrong" means to a modern person: "I personally disapprove of it, and you should do likewise."
- The new great virtues:
 - Being true to your own sense of well-being: "The only moral criterion that can be applied to behavior is whether it conduces to the feeling of well-being in the individuals concerned" (79). Now, sexual morality is just a matter of pragmatic considerations: "Will this make me happy? How can I attenuate the risks? Does it harm someone else's psychological well-being" (79)?
 - The victim: "for the Marxist, the history of humanity is a history of oppression and victimhood" (267).
- The new great evil: the person who does not affirm your identity.
 - Tolerance is not enough. Not baking a cake for a gay wedding causes psychological harm because you're denying their identity (54).

- New definition of marriage:
 - The purpose of marriage in the Christian tradition (summarized in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer): lifelong companionship, mutual sexual satisfaction, and procreation (84).
 - In contrast, now it is defined as “for the mutual pleasure and satisfaction of the consenting parties, and that is all. It is, one might say, a sentimental union, and once the pleasurable sentiments that it stimulates have dissipated, it should be dissolved at the will of the contracting parties” (hence no-fault divorce) (154).
 - As Christians we cannot blithely accept no-fault divorce and then complain about Obergefell: both of these have the same definition of marriage in view (389–90)

III. How we got here

- Rousseau (1712–1778): people are innocent from birth; society is what corrupts people; morality is all about having the right feelings.
- Shelley (1792–1822): [quote] “religion and morality, as they now stand [i.e., sex only within marriage], compose a practical code of misery and servitude: the genius of human happiness must tear every leaf from the accursed book of God ere man can read the inscription on his heart” (155).
- Darwin (1809–1882): humans have no special significance or purpose (185).
- Nietzsche (1844–1900): [summary] “To kill God ... the Enlightenment effectively tore out the foundations from under the polite bourgeois morality that it wished to maintain. You cannot do this, says Nietzsche. You have unchained the earth from the sun ... By doing so, you have taken away any basis for a metaphysics that might ground either knowledge or ethics. In killing God, you take on the responsibility—the terrifying responsibility—of being god yourself, of becoming the author of your own knowledge and your own ethics. You make yourself the creator of your world” (170).
- Marx (1818–1883): radical materialism; the world has no meaning; it can only be given it by human beings (191–192).
- Freud (1856–1939): [summary] “If happiness depends on the fulfillment of personal sexual desires, then to the extent that such desires are curbed and thereby frustrated, to that extent the individual will be unfulfilled and unhappy” (219).
- The 20th century and the rise of critical theory: in a nutshell, “the world is to be divided up between those who have power and those who do not; the dominant Western narrative of truth is really an ideological construct designed to preserve the power structure of the status quo; and the goal of critical theory is therefore to destabilize this power structure by destabilizing the dominant narratives that are used to justify—to ‘naturalize’—it” (226).
- One important instance of critical theory: Reich (1897–1957): [summary] “the traditional patriarchal family is a unit of oppression” and must be destroyed (234).
- Modern feminism: it is no longer obvious that human beings exist as two sexes with differences and distinctions clearly rooted in biology (254).
- Bruce Jenner: [quote] “I look at it this way. Bruce [was] always telling a lie. He’s lived a lie his whole life about who he is. And I can’t do it any longer” (351). For Jenner, gender is all about an inner sense of psychological well-being. [Summary] “Bruce was a construct, an inauthentic construct, imposed on Caitlyn, on the inner female self, by society” (353).