



I Identify As...

ISSUE ONE: "I IDENTIFY AS..."





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The Tragedy of Unreality

EIRIK STEENHOFF

Anthony Esolen, *Sex and the Unreal City: The Demolition of the Western Mind* (Ignatius Press, 2020).

Anthony Esolen is not only a scholar and translator of English and Italian literature; he is perhaps the most formidable Catholic apologist writing in English today. I mean that in the best possible sense. The term “apologist” is usually used these days to designate much lesser writers. Esolen should rather be placed in the tradition after G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. His latest offering, *Sex in the Unreal City*, is yet another display of his striking prose, exuberant wit, and keen cultural analysis.

It comes at a time when the world has gone just a bit madder since the last time Esolen published a book. The unraveling of societal norms and intelligent thinking seem to happen at a lightning-fast pace. Esolen’s main claim in this book is that modern culture is founded on “unreality.” It opens with an appreciation of *Century Magazine*, the now mostly forgotten late-19th-century American periodical. *Century* gave the reader captivating feature stories, poetry, and novellas and essays by the likes of Chesterton and Mark Twain. In Esolen’s words, *Century* was marked by a “muscular excitement” about the innovations and discoveries of the era, but along with “plenty of warning voices.” The magazine’s outlook was progressive, he says, yet “looked more than kindly upon the Christian faith” because there can be “no culture without a felt encounter with the divine. It is a contradiction in terms.”

All of this has since been lost. A sense of the reality of things, of man’s fundamental connection with nature and with God: “The most fundamental thing that separates its readers from us is that even a rich man in 1892 has daily encounters with the sweet and stubborn rocks and trees of reality.” And this, to Esolen, is what *Century Magazine* represents.

[T]he dramatic difference between then and now is not simply that we have lost a form of thought, and thus a certain way of living, but that we have discarded the very possibility of thought. Having lost access to reality in itself, we are left to make it up ourselves.

I think there is something very important to be learned by this seemingly straightforward observation. Even a couple of generations ago, people had a healthy sense of reality and also the goodness of norms and traditions. There were things you should do and should not do. Chesterton famously called tradition the “democracy of the dead”: It refuses to submit to the tyranny of the people who happen to be among the living. And today, everyone is a tyrant, because the individual is seen as the creator and arbiter of his own identity and destiny.

Esolen analyzes the origins of our unreality over the course of the book’s five chapters, which read

more like separate essays rather than as a systematic argument. The second chapter, “The Body Unreal,” is my favorite. Here Esolen writes about the difference between the sexes, now lost on us, and the evils of divorce and the near-universal collapse of human sexual mores. I find his connection between Darwinism and modern feminism especially insightful. It is a connection that too few dare to make, given the privileged position of Darwinian biology in modern culture, even in the Church.

Darwinism has a tendency not only to reduce the human person but also to render thinking itself nearly impossible. According to Esolen, this is because it involves an implicit denial of the truth of the *species* that we see. It tells us to believe in a theory we can never witness in reality. It is an attempt not to understand reality but precisely to evade it. Darwinism, as it is commonly understood in our scientific culture, is death to philosophical *realism*, in the technical sense. A handful of theologians, like Michael Hanby, Larry Chapp, and Conor Cunningham, have written perceptively about this problem.

Esolen writes: “In the old way of looking at things, by what has been called the *philosophia perennis*, the philosophy that does not go out of date with the years, we see that a dog is a dog and not a cat, and that fact determines our language. The species are real.” Language—a subject about which Esolen, the English professor, knows a great deal—has now become a victim of what he calls the “spectral” thinking of deconstruction and feminism. The unreality of transgenderism, he writes, “depends for its existence upon the supposition that realities depend upon words, so that whoever controls the language controls the universe.”

This analysis ties in, of course, with what he writes about *Century Magazine*. If he were simply making a chronological point—the past is good and the present is bad—the argument would be less interesting and, indeed, less convincing. But the problem is precisely this: If there exists such a thing as a perennial philosophy, that is, a way of thinking about reality which is by definition always true and does not change with the times, the dramatic difference between then and now is not simply that we have lost a *form* of thought, and thus a certain way of living, but that we have discarded the very possibility of thought. Having lost access to reality in itself, we are left to make it up ourselves.

We then become victims of the many sad phenomena Esolen describes in his book, like free sexuality (really a form of slavery), a vacuous news and entertainment culture (which is neither informative nor entertaining), and a politics which promotes not the common good but precisely a truncated vision of life as an accrument of individual rights and economic prosperity.

The book is at its wittiest when Esolen dissects certain items of pop culture. For instance, the pornographic display of “nastiness and spitefulness” that is the Super Bowl halftime show. That sad spectacle, writes Esolen, “sells to Americans what Americans envision themselves to be. It is a frightful thought.” We find the same garishness in politics and the media, which really are one and the same (he calls it the “Stereopticon”): “We have polls about polls, and news about polls, and polls about news, and news about news, and there is not enough reality in the lot of it to get caught under a small boy’s fingernail.”

In this connection, Esolen takes the godfather of modern American liberalism, John Rawls, to task. According to Rawls, there exists a “veil of ignorance” that keeps all members of society on an even footing. Justice can be truly impartial and fair only if we remain ignorant of each other’s socio-economic and religious backgrounds. This is related to the idea that one cannot operate in the public square with what Rawls calls one’s “comprehensive doctrine.” This doctrine consists of the ideas we have about life, love, and politics and may or may not include religious beliefs. Such comprehensive doctrines cannot, Rawls writes, attain to the level of public reason, because they make claims about

reality that transcend the limits of its own logic.

Esolen's description of this is the best I have read, and it is worthy of a longer citation:

[Rawls] asks us—nay, he demands it of us, under pain of banishment from civic discourse—that we pretend that we are not sons and daughters, fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, neighbors and members of a community, in *this place* and not another, worshiping God in this church and in these ways, and devoted to a certain vision of the good [...]. He requires us, in short, not to be human at all....

The politics of unreality means that the most important things are now rendered the least important. Our religion and most deeply held convictions become private options, rather than the foundation of a true politics of the common good. Politics itself becomes a battle of rights, which are deprived of their intrinsic relation to the good of the person.

In the last two chapters, Esolen writes about the spiritual and theological aspects of unreality. Evil itself is a kind of unreality, a *privatio boni* (privation of the good). It means to choose the void over the radical goodness of Creation. In our time, he says, people continually “embrace untruth” and end up as wraiths, a “shell of humanity.” What is different now is that people no longer feel the “good, solid, dependable foundation of this God-created reality” under their feet. Against this profession of unreality stands the Apostles’ Creed of the Christian faith, which he explores in the last chapter. “God either exists, or he does not,” writes Esolen. “If he exists, he has either revealed himself fully in Christ, or he has not.” The deepest reason for the unreality of our age, then, is that people no longer believe in God and, therefore, not in the goodness of his creation.

I agree with this as an analysis of our culture. And yet I find that there is something missing. In words that are perhaps well-known to readers of this journal, Hans Urs von Balthasar, in his editorial article launching *Communio*, writes of Christ’s descent into the “dereliction of the absence of God which is that of all egoists, all spiritual privateers, and the dropouts of every community.” Balthasar’s point is not to absolve the fools of their foolishness, but to emphasize the priority of the “all-embracing communion” to which all men belong by virtue of Christ’s redemption over the task of “criticism” (from *krinein*, which means both to “separate” and “judge”).

The harshness and sometimes personal nature of some of Esolen’s criticism could have benefitted from this perspective. Balthasar at least allows us to make the following point: Cultural criticism is tricky, because cultures consist of people with certain ideas about the world, and very often of foolish people with foolish ideas; but, then again, all these cultures and fools partake in a redemption which has already been wrought for them (and which they probably will never even hear about). Esolen’s college staff member may well be a “ridiculous fool,” but a redeemed fool. Ignorant, yes, but perhaps invincibly so. Deserving not simply of scorn, but of profound pity—the kind that moved Our Lord “by the bowels.”

I do not mean this sentimentally. There is a great tragedy in being placed right in the middle of God’s wonderfully made reality and not knowing it. But that is a tragedy that has befallen most of humanity throughout most of history. This tragic element is somewhat lost on the satirist. He makes his observations from a certain distance. For all the brilliance and vigor of Esolen’s cultural analysis, I cannot shake the feeling that part of the problem—not just in the book, but for all of us—is precisely a lack of a basic identification not so much with the culture, but with all the other people who are the participants or victims of that culture (and we are too!). That means it is part of our task as Christians to help people experience reality in its fullness, which was so important to someone like Luigi Giussani.

And Giussanian *education* into reality is arguably primarily communal rather than critical.

And while I agree with Esolen's suggestion that our kind of unreality was unthinkable in the era of *Century Magazine*, one might argue whether or not the progressivism of that era did not contain within itself some of the same presuppositions whose ultimate effects we are now witnessing. There is a hint of a wistfulness for a bygone age in this book. But as Esolen himself indicates, the problem of culture and history is ultimately spiritual and theological rather than chronological. My hope is that in his next book, he will take us a step beyond criticism, and deeper into the wonders of reality.

Eirik Steenhoff received an MA in Theology and Church History in 2018 and an MTS in Biotechnology in Ethics from the Pontifical John Paul II Institute in Washington, D.C. He is currently presenting JPII's Catechesis on the Theology of the Body in a podcast series for St. Rita Radio, a Norwegian Catholic radio station.

The Uses of Identity

MARC BARNES

Mary Eberstadt, *Primal Screams: How the Sexual Revolution Created Identity Politics* (Templeton Press, 2021).

Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

Identity politics has a therapeutic function. As much as it is used to protect existing social groups from ostracization or outright attack, it is also used to create the identities it defends. Populists like Donald Trump, for instance, do not merely seek to protect the white working class from powers and people inimical to its common good; they rhetorically forge that white working class into being, uniting disparate people with various grievances into single a family bound by a common enemy: a Once-Great America known in and through the globalizing market forces and elitist exclusions that have smothered its greatness.

Here, violence does not simply afflict a given group of people, it confirms them as a group, affirms them as a particular culture, and lends to each member a profound sense of belonging. Oppression becomes creative, and so the identity group comes to need its oppressor. This coronation of violence as the creator of identity was literalized in a recent argument within feminist thought, which argued there was no unity to the identity “woman” besides the particular experience of violence and oppression which women have historically experienced at the hands of men. This would seem to exclude so-called trans identities from the identity of “woman,” insofar as “trans women,” prior to their transition, had no experience of this identity-forging violence. The common rebuttal to this view was not, as one might imagine, that “woman” was an identity constituted by some definite content besides the violence turned against its members. Rather, it was that “trans women” experienced their own oppression by a “cisgender” and heteronormative culture, uniting both oppressed groups into a singular social category. What remains vital, in either case, is that for the broad identity category “woman” to exist, a definite, oppressing force was required to craft it, uniting its various members into a single, collective, lived experience.

If identity politics has a therapeutic effect—and it certainly appears as a life-giving source of meaning, power, and purpose for those who take it up—then what is the disorder? In her book *Primal Screams*, Mary Eberstadt argues that “our macropolitics have become a mania about identity, because our micropolitics are no longer familial.” The therapeutic need to bind oneself against an enemy and to an identity is the political activity of *genuine* victims, in this case, victims of a larger cultural monster than the particular monsters they cry foul against: the devastation of the family following the sexual revolution of the sixties.

Identity politics ... cannot affirm the individual as individual any more than faith can be affirmed apart from works. It can only affirm such an unreal, asocial creature

insofar as it creates and sustains it as a negative subtraction from society, cursing the whole to clearly establish the worth and dignity of the part.

The argument makes a good deal of sense. Historically, the family has answered the question “Who am I?” with as much force as the nation or the Church. The capacity to point to one’s relations, to one’s status as a daughter to a father, a daughter to a mother, a sister to a brother, and so forth—all of this fixes the individual in a place and with a people, the networks of which ultimately encompass the entire human family and, indeed, the entire cosmic order. With the advent of contraception, abortion, easy divorce, and reproductive technologies—to pick a few from the usual litany—these constitutive relations become weak, reduced in number and variety. Children born today are more likely than ever before to grow up not knowing their father or never having a sibling of the opposite or same sex. If it is the case that the individual is a singular point, constituted within a web of relations, then more and more people are trying to find and express their individual selves with less and less of a relational web through which to do it. To cite an especially poignant, representative example, Eberstadt shows that about two-thirds of children conceived through sperm donation “agreed with the statement, ‘My sperm donor is half of who I am.’” As the author perceptively notes, “That is half a self left hanging in limbo.” The survey yielded other surprising results: “More than half say that when they see someone who resembles them, they wonder if they are related. Almost as many say they have feared being attracted to or having sexual relations with someone to whom they are related.”

The children of sperm donation are unique, but their loss of identity is not. We live in a world in which brothers are replaced by half-brothers, fathers by live-in boyfriends, mothers by surrogates, and extended families by a passing crowd of acquaintances halfheartedly miming the positions, and often the names, of “uncle,” “aunt,” and “cousin.” When identity is so split between multiple and often oppositional families, it is hardly a jump to argue that the therapy of identity politics may salve a deeper wound than whatever racism, sexism, or transphobia the patient declares himself to suffer, however real and painful the latter may be. Finding a political identity feels like finding a name, a fact often lost on those who already have such warm, familial belonging, which, as a real and holistic security, is rarely noticed as a “need.”

To the degree that this therapeutic goal is a real motivation within the practitioners of identity politics, it is a doomed exercise. The achievement of recognition, and the protection of a particular group’s dignity that it entails, might secure the goals of justice, but in doing so, fails to shore up a secure sense of identity. For, even as tolerance and acceptance rids a group of the affliction of injustice, it also rids that group of a clear enemy, and thus whatever identity a common enemy granted it. If, for instance, people were not sexist, “women,” considered as an oppressed identity, would no longer exist. If we stopped being racist, those who feel their racial identity in oppositional terms would be disappointed to find their identity watered-down into near-nothingness. In short, if group identity isn’t grounded in a substantial, positive reality, it is insecure.

Success, within identity politics, always seems to inaugurate a “changing of the guard.” Those who participate because they despise injustice are satisfied at the destruction of whatever they perceived as unjust, while those who need that injustice to continuously lend them their identity begin to take pains to show how, despite appearances, the injustice remains. This latter group includes the former in its antagonistic purview: whites who protested against racism yesterday are transformed into the unwitting promoters of white supremacy today, a fall which does not occur by any particular sin, but by the academic postulate that they are still, by virtue of being white, complicit in systemic racism—an accident of color which assures their continued presence as the enemy, however friendly they may

seem. This retention of the enemy has been more obviously seen within the politics of sexual identity, where those who advocated for gay and lesbian rights have become, as Andrew Sullivan has noted, pariahs within the diversifying LGBT+ scene: “Suddenly we’re not just being told homosexuality is ‘problematic’ by the religious right, we’re being told it by the woke left,” for whom the categories of “male” and “female,” which make homosexuality intelligible, have become *verboten*.

Of course, such an internal splintering can be described at face-value as a difference in opinion between generations of thinkers. But this difference seems to be relentlessly repeated, whether in feminist, antifeminist, racist, or antiracist thought. A coalition constituted in their identity by their opposition to an apparently unjust enemy tends to divide itself into smaller and smaller units who claim for themselves a special degree of purity vis-à-vis the unjust other, which grows larger and larger as it appears to envelop and corrupt more and more would-be radicals; not just the heterosexuals, but sexual-difference presuming gays, lesbians, and bisexuals swell the ranks of the beast, dwindling the number of the elect.

The result is apparent: identity politics tends towards weakness and typically terminates, not in developing alternative communities, building fair and just cities, or crushing whatever institutional injustice it sets itself against, but in demanding various recognitions from entities that really do hold power, especially, the state and its corporate constituents. In this way, identity politics serves the political and economic status quo, even as it defines itself in its radical opposition to it. Insofar as it remains a hidden, therapeutic act by which the member of a lost family attains a new identity, acts of political identification place a ceiling on their potential radicalism: they may only become so large and act with so much strength as to retain the unjust enemy who unites and binds their oppressed group into this or that identity. Thus constrained, they always remain in the mode of the petitioner, never the powerful.

Eberstadt limits the scope of her work, defining identity politics and arguing, quite plausibly, that its therapeutic aspect responds to family breakdown, even while its explicit goals sometimes respond to real injustice. But her work opens the door to a critique of capitalism which she seems reluctant to give. As much as one may describe the sexual revolution in moral terms, as a rejection of the wisdom of socially instilled chastity, these terms are limited. A fuller analysis would attend, for instance, to the economic dimension of the problem—as the technocratic management of human reproductive life for the sake of producing a more effective transfer of global wealth from its naturally common state into the hands of fewer and fewer men. That the destruction of the family is necessary for such a mighty work is obvious, insofar as families, after a certain size, tend to reduce the mobility and availability of their members for production, especially via motherhood; tend to create islands of communal sufficiency in which the consumption of mass-produced goods becomes less possible and less necessary; tend to desire ownership, rather than rent, of both home and productive property; and, most broadly speaking, tend towards the creation of worlds governed by personal authority, enjoying a unique culture, and dependent on friendships rather than purchases. The sexual revolution was a transformation of the family into a temporary reproductive unit, achieved by law, preaching, and technological devices, for the sake of the accumulation of the power and property that families would otherwise attain for themselves. Eberstadt’s description is a true description, and one that helps to locate the place of identity politics in our modern world, as the “political” side of familial destruction. But it is not simply in politics, but economics that the family is subjected to a crisis of identity resolved by deeper attachments to quasi-familial institutions, which, carried out on a broad enough scale, cements those institutions in power.

Whereas Eberstadt’s book is aimed at the root of identity politics, Francis Fukuyama’s book *Identity*

cautions against the stuff from a rote, liberal perspective, arguing that identities established at levels lower than that of the national identity risk undermining the stability of liberal democracies. He argues that identity politics is a threefold phenomenon combining the desire for recognition, an anthropology of expressive individualism, and the power of victimhood into an explosive method for making political demands. The first ingredient of this identitarian cocktail is found in the part of the human soul called *thymos*, “the spirit,” by which human beings “crave positive judgments about their worth or dignity.” Within a society which values *external* acts, *thymos* drives men to acquire honor through the societal recognition of noble actions or shame through ignoble actions. Not so in a culture imbued with an anthropology of expressive individualism, the “notion of an inner and an outer self, and the radical view that the inner self [is] more valuable than the outer one.” Here, *thymos* drives men to desire societal recognition, not of this or that action, but of the true self that persists (somehow) beneath all human action.

Though Christianity is largely opposed to the practice of identity politics, this much must be admitted: the Scriptures revealed the dignity of each individual and preached a doctrine of an “inner man” that changed the world, allowing *thymos* to find its satisfaction in the sheer fact of one’s being, rather than in the performance of noble actions or the accident of noble birth. The doctrine that each individual is uniquely created by God, ordered to his own particular vocation and perfection, and bound for eternal happiness, allows the slave to say to the master: “You redound with power and glory, but I too am a child of God. In Christ Jesus there is neither servant nor free, Greek nor Jew, male nor female, or, to say it by assertion rather than negation: You and I are brothers of equal dignity.”

But it would be wrong to stretch a red thread from the Christian celebration of the Father of All, to the Christian doctrine of the Church (that familial unity which relativizes all would-be distinctions between its members) and tack it to some adolescent demand that all of society recognize the inherent dignity of whatever newly minted, post-sexual identity has been rendered appropriable by something posted on Tumblr. Christianity did draw a distinction between the goodness and common destiny of each of God’s children, and the unequal honors, shames, and glories that accrued to them by virtue of action and accident, but it did not set this inherent dignity over and against “society.” The opposite is the case: the human creature is a social creature. There is no “true self” outside of or extrinsic to one’s constitutive relations. Society, far from being a force which suppresses the inner man, is the inescapable, communal mode of being in and through which one receives existence, consciousness, intellect, language, and, indeed, the very self which one would vainly attempt to set against the society that gives it life. Christianity is not reducible to the role that Fukuyama would give it, as a chapter in a narrative that ends with liberal modernity—a mere stepping-stone towards the “invention” of the individual. Christianity was never about such an awkward, atomizing task. Christianity is a social movement aimed at transforming all the world into a particular society, usually called the Kingdom, membership in which confers and reveals the inherent dignity of each of its members, not as atoms theoretically separable from that virtuous society, but as members of one body. Practically speaking, this means that, within the identity politics of Christianity, one’s identity is recognized precisely to the degree that it is always already embedded in the polity, for the sake of the whole.

While Fukuyama does not seem to intend any critique of the Protestant Reformation, he does identify it as the force which created the modern individual. Martin Luther “understood that the Church only acted on the outer person,” but that only the inner man was the object of Christ’s redemption, which “in one stroke undercut the *raison d’être* for the Catholic Church.” The inner was no longer in constitutive relation with the outer; the soul intertwined with the body; faith with works. Rather, the inner man, and not the Kingdom, became the distinct object of God’s intervention in human history, leading to “a whole series of social changes in which the individual believer was prioritized over prevailing social

structures.” Whether one boos, cheers, or nuances it, this narrative seems basically correct, and it is a rather short conceptual leap from Luther to Rousseau, who secularized the concept, arguing that the original experience of man, and one available to everyone today, is “a feeling of plenitude and happiness that emerges as an individual seeks to uncover the true self hiding beneath the layers of acquired social sensibilities.”

The trouble with attempting to express the worth and dignity of the individual, disembedded from society, is that expression itself is a social operation, as is the language with which an individual demands recognition. Every expression is an expression-to-someone. Every demand for recognition is a tacit acknowledgment that no individual identity exists outside of the gaze of others which do the recognizing. The concepts and language we use to articulate “who we are” are received from others and can never be utilized as private concepts, as if a word could express and define just *this* individual rather than always serving as universals, as categories to which particularity and singleness is subordinated. It makes sense, then, that identity politics, insofar as it is driven by the need to affirm the individual over and against society, is a tortured politics. Because we are social creatures, the demand to affirm the individual as over and against his society can never be met. At best, we can make smaller societies, set against other societies, larger societies, or society considered as a whole.

Identity politics cannot realize the promise of the individual which began in the Reformation; it cannot affirm the individual *as* individual any more than faith can be affirmed apart from works. It can only affirm such an unreal, asocial creature insofar as it creates and sustains it as a negative subtraction from society, cursing the whole to clearly establish the worth and dignity of the part. In this sense, it is not true to say that the Reformation evolves into expressive individualism, as if nature shifted in its course, and every child born after Luther was born as an atom for whom “family” is an odd, eighteen-year embarrassment. Rather, the Reformation is a scene that must be *repeated* in order to forge each individual anew. Ironically, the would-be individual receives the narrative of being set-against-society—from society. The individual is not freed from the social forces suppressing him, the individual *needs* the suppressing social force in order to appear as an individual, defined as a being set apart from society. To live as an individual, one must have a Catholic Church, the negation and accusation of which defines the individual. One is only an individual as a Protestant, that is, as one in protest against a society in which one is embedded. Were one to defeat and remove the object of protest, the individual would be removed along with it.

But Fukuyama’s recommendations are only superficially critical of identity politics. By making the Church into the stepping-stone along the way to liberal modernity, he loses the possibility of a universal framework, in which the individual’s particular identity is constituted by membership within a single, holy body, oriented toward the conversion of the entire world. Instead, Fukuyama advises that the energies of identity politics be diverted to identification with larger entities, particularly liberal nation states: “We need to promote creedal national identities built around the foundational ideas of modern liberal democracy and use those public policies to deliberately assimilate newcomers to those identities.”

These national identities are larger than the identities of our contemporary contentions, but they remain just as disembedded from any familial identity, on the one hand, and any universal identity, on the other. It is unclear why placing such a ceiling of belonging over the human person would not lead to the same need for an enemy, the same endless fragmenting and ideological purifying that seems to constitute the practitioners of identity politics; though while the latter plays out within more modest goals of justice, the coronation of national identity over all others would lead to the same fragmentation, even if on a larger, national, scale. Obviously, this is to predict a future that has already

taken place in our recent past. Nationalism, wherever tried, leads to the constitution of national identities in and through war and “rumors of war,” that is, through a castigated foreign nation utilized to shore up and unify an otherwise divided body politic. If Eberstadt is right, and our need for identity stems from the destruction of strong families, a return to nationalism without the restoration of the family would hardly generate a sane, tempered, “attachment to the principles and ideals of the Constitution,” but to a jingoism which sees in “nation” what it lacks in the family and clings to it with all the panic and irrationality of a child in search of a missing father.

Mark Barnes is editor of [New Polity](#).

The Transgender Movement: Identity Confusion

SUSAN WALDSTEIN

Abigail Shrier, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters* (Regnery Publishing, 2020).

Antonio Malo, *Transcending Gender Ideology: A Philosophy of Sexual Difference* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2020).

The transgender movement can be hard to take seriously. It is so bizarre that one would like to believe it is confined to the cerebral sphere of politically correct professors and the garrulous spouting of media gurus. Unfortunately, it is an expanding movement that is misleading more and more people. Two recent books, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters* by journalist Abigail Shrier and *Transcending Gender Ideology* by philosophy professor Antonio Malo, are helpful in explaining how individuals can become so confused about their identities that they come to believe they are a man in a woman's body or vice versa.

Abigail Schrier's book is written for a popular audience, especially for the parents of teenage girls. It documents the many "authorities" in our culture that are encouraging young women to think they can become happier by changing their sexual identity. It is an excellent resource for discovering how identity confusion is being spread in the United States and how to defend one's children against it. Professor Malo's book is a much more difficult read. It is intended for the philosopher or philosophically inclined. It shows the deeper roots of the transgender movement in Marxism and radical feminism. More importantly, it investigates the reason for human vulnerability in the delicate task of developing a mature sexual identity and defends natural sexual difference and heterosexual marriage using the concepts of generativity and gift.

The more accessible of the two, Shrier's account of the transgender dysphoria epidemic afflicting teenage girls in the First World is chilling. As my youngest daughter is happily dating a young man and finishing college next year, I did not expect to be as deeply disturbed as I was by this excellent book. But I also have twelve grandchildren to worry about, and my compassion for all adolescents grew as I read the story of the battle for their psyche. Shrier presents a convincing case that the epidemic is spread through "peer contagion" and media propaganda. Transition gurus online, schools, therapists, doctors, and surgeons are all complicit in pushing girls into taking powerful hormonal drugs and undergoing disfiguring surgeries. These drugs often lead to sterility and increase the danger of cancer, and both kinds of treatments have led to an increase in depression and suicide.

The psychic alienation experienced by "transitioning" girls is also a flight from woman, born of the same fallacies that gave rise to the sexual revolution and radical

feminism alike.

Parents need to be warned of the assault their daughters will almost certainly encounter in our very broken culture. They also need to know that their authority is being systematically undermined by the very people who are supposed to help them take care of their children. Shrier conducted 200 interviews and collected an impressive array of statistics to prove her thesis that, in the last ten years, most of the adolescent girls claiming to be “transgender” are simply unhappy girls who are struggling with social anxiety and discover from social media and their schools that claiming to be “trans” is an immediate way to get lots of “friends” online and lots of affirmation at school. Historically, Shrier points out, adolescents with gender dysphoria have comprised only .01% of the population and their ranks consisted almost entirely of boys who displayed some dysphoria since before they were two. Now, with the advent of social media, which wields a particular influence over teen girls, we are witnessing an explosion in gender dysphoria among adolescent females.

Shrier not only exposes the aggressive effort to push the transgender agenda on young women; she also formulates seven rules for parents to help their daughters avoid this contagion and how to fight it if it has already infected one’s daughter. Here are three of them.

The first rule is also the hardest: “Don’t Get Your Kid a Smartphone.” Since the introduction of the iPhone in 2007, anxiety, depression, anorexia, cutting, and transgender dysphoria have increased enormously among teenagers. In Britain, for instance, adolescents claiming gender dysphoria has increased 4000% in the ten years from 2007–2017; the increase in the United States is 1000%. Teens are spending less time physically together than ever (especially after COVID restrictions); their principal social life is lived on their phone. A [recent nationwide survey](#) showed that the average American teenager spends nine hours a day on the phone! According to Shrier, then, it follows that being “friended” or “unfriended” on social media is becoming the most important thing in a teenager’s life.

But how in the world can you refuse your teens a smart phone, especially if they buy it for themselves? As I look at young couples I know, I see that many of them find it necessary to join or build a community of families that agree on raising their children according to certain standards. If all the parents agree that their children will not have smart phones, then flip phones can be a badge of belonging. Shrier also mentions that it is essential to organize physical get-togethers so that children and teens can have real friends with whom they do fun things in person. If girls were already pulled in by the transgender vortex, she found that decisive parental action was crucial in wresting their daughters from it. Sacrificing their own security, these parents often moved the family to a completely new environment and, importantly, disconnected the entire household from social media.

Two more of the rules Shrier suggests go together: “Stop Pathologizing Girlhood” and “Don’t Be Afraid to Admit: It’s Wonderful to Be a Girl.” Girls are not defective boys; they have their own gifts, including empathy and relationship-building. Women should stop envying men and stop thinking that the only way to be successful is to have a fast-track career and climb the corporate ladder to upper management and big money. Women can choose any career they wish now, but motherhood is also a beautiful vocation, even though it is so scorned by many in our culture. “We treat stay-at-home moms as the most contemptible of life’s losers. (I should know: I was one for years.)” Shrier recalls. When the distinctive value of womanhood, maternity, and homemaking are affirmed, the misogynist temptation of transgenderism will lose its appeal for girls.

Shrier is a fine journalist who has done an immense amount of research. Her extensive footnotes alone are valuable. She has written a very readable book that shows compassion for adults who have

“transitioned,” for the girls who are currently suffering, and for their parents.

Antonio Malo’s book is more theoretical than Shrier’s. It delves into the Marxist roots of the feminist movement from which the transgender movement sprang. It also looks at the meaning of sexuality and judges transgender ideology according to natural and Christian criteria.

Malo traces the path to our current sexual confusion from Engels, who viewed marriage as an institution that systematically oppresses women, to Freud, who viewed sexual restraints as social constructions that threaten mental health, to Wilhelm Reich, whose books intended to liberate youth from sexual repression and the authoritarianism of the family. All of these ideas led to the Sexual Revolution of 1968 and beyond.

But the radical overturning of sexual mores was not only the work of men. Simone de Beauvoir’s seminal work, *The Second Sex* (1949), both guided the revolution and began the radical feminist movement. She argued that all erotic relationships are an attempt of the man to absorb the woman into his own universe and reduce her to an object of ownership. Shulamith Firestone, writing twenty years later in *The Dialectic of Sex*, called for women to free themselves from reproduction and childcare with new technologies and institutions so that biological differences would have no more significance in society. According to Malo, the next step, following poststructuralist thinkers like Foucault,[1] is gender feminism, which maintains that sex is purely a social construct. Judith Butler, the voice of gender feminism, writes, “When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequences that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and women and feminine a male body as easily as a female one.”[2] Sex is now meaningless or reduced to a trite stereotype; “gender” is completely detached from nature and the body, open to all linguistic manipulation. If sex does not have to do with generative organs and procreation, then it is reduced to a stereotype. *Feeling* female means liking pink dresses and ballet rather than rifles and engineering. But the result seems to make gender meaningless. How could a hundred “genders” mean anything but flux and confusion?

Malo agrees with feminists that there was a false and destructive paradigm for understanding man and woman, which he calls “naturalistic monism.” This paradigm absolutized the difference between man and woman according to their biological role in reproduction. Men took the dominant role in marriage, family, and society, reducing women to passive submission in every arena. They were confined to the domestic sphere, bearing children and caring for them, their husband, and the home.[3] Malo sees the first feminists as “equality feminists” who were justly seeking equality of legal rights and job opportunity. It was radical feminism and gender feminism that moved from seeking equality between the sexes to unhinging sexuality from biology. Radical and gender feminists replaced “sex” with the concepts of “gender” (formerly only used in grammar) and sexual orientation, which—in their view—are both socially constructed.

Malo points out that the very idea of sexual orientation involves a paradox.

For, on the one hand, sexual orientation seems to be unnatural because it is unrelated to bodily sex, at times failing to correspond to it; and, on the other hand, it does not seem to be personal, because it precedes one’s own choice of membership of a specific gender, insofar as it is something we have, without having wanted to have it.... Moreover, the things that seem most personal, such as choice of gender, are really the things most subject to fashion, social pressure, and stereotypes; hence, the sort of gender we choose is never purely the creation of our own freedom; we choose a template from among those on offer.

In contrast to this confused and contradictory view, Malo insists that the most important path for understanding our sexed condition is *generativity*. We are always generated from two persons who are male and female; we recognize that we owe our life to another—it is a gift—and we are grateful for it. We show this gratitude above all by passing on this gift to the next generation by our generative relation with someone of the opposite sex. Malo insists that parents need to educate their children to reality, including the reality of their sex, with its foundation in their body, and their place in their genealogy.

He explains the Christian account of sexual difference as one “of reciprocity between two persons of equal dignity, who are called to communion through the mutual gift of self.” When two persons desire to produce children outside of this marital gift of self, the gift-character of the child is lost as well: “They are no longer the fruit of the spouses’ mutual gift, but a chance occurrence or a product—however precious they may be—to be acquired with the aid of the new biotechnologies.” Malo’s judgments on bio-tech interventions in conception flow from his Christian understanding of the beauty and positivity of sexuality and marriage.

Malo also helpfully exposes many of the fallacies of transgender ideology and traces their philosophical and historical roots; however, there are a number of difficulties with Malo’s book. The prose is sometimes obscure; the metaphysical discussion of person, essence, and existence is weak, as is his grasp of Aristotle’s and Aquinas’s understanding of natural inclinations. I find Malo’s concept of “the sexed condition” especially troubling. He concedes that the way we integrate sexuality into our personality depends on other factors besides our biological sex, most importantly relations with other persons and our culture’s expectations about roles for men and women. Malo argues that

human sexuality must be considered rational or even better, relational in itself, because it corresponds to a potentiality of the whole person. I am referring to its malleable nature in terms of our first encounters with the other, of our relationships with internal family models, and of language and culture. In short, sexed tendency is not mere vegetative dynamism, but a structure of body, mind, and soul that is relational in character: a sexed condition.

Malo may use this concept partly to account for the fact that some persons, because of abuse or peer contagion, become convinced that their “gender” does not correspond to their sex. However, the reference to the “malleable nature” of human sexuality is potentially worrisome. It seems to contain the danger that a person could say that, despite their biological sex, other factors have made their “sexed condition” the opposite of their generative organs. I would prefer to say that the development of a person’s self-understanding of his or her sexuality is able to be distorted but I would not want to name this false understanding of a person’s sex their “sexed condition.”

Malo also gives away too much by talking about the errors of “naturalistic monism” and contrasting “nature to person” as though philosophers who equate “natural” with the bodily or animal side of man are correct. Man is a *rational* animal, so reason and voluntary activity is what is most natural to man. Sexual activity is in accord with human *nature* when it is embedded in the permanent relationship of mutual self-gift in marriage, open to the gift of children, rather than when it is engaged in out of an instinct for pleasure.

There are also certain natural qualities and roles belonging to women, flowing from their mode of being embodied persons. St. John Paul II, in his apostolic letter *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women*, talks about the spiritual and psychological effect of having a body built around a womb designed to welcome a new human person into the world. There is a natural reason behind the fact that, statistically, women overwhelmingly prefer people-oriented jobs to those in STEM fields like

mathematics, engineering, and computing. Of course, women should not be forced to stay at home and have babies, but even many of the “equality feminists” did not only seek justice, but also undermined an appreciation for the role of mother, educator, and creator of a home. What Malo says of gender feminists could very well be applied to most feminists, “For the model to be copied is always the same: it is the male one, characterized by freedom from generation and the duties relating to the care of children.”[4] It is, to borrow Karl Stern’s apt phrase, a “flight from woman.”

The psychic alienation experienced by “transitioning” girls is also a flight from woman, born of the same fallacies that gave rise to the sexual revolution and radical feminism alike. In the end, the basic response to each of these movements is the same: a return to woman. A return to the wholeness of a body and soul integrated so harmoniously that it can receive, give, and nurture human life.

Susan Waldstein teaches theology at Franciscan University of Steubenville. Her area of special interest is the interface of theology and biology in such topics as evolution and hierarchy in nature.

[1] Foucault makes the claim that sexuality is a construct of power and can be changed by changing language.

[2] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 6 as quoted in Malo, 48.

[3] An exception, Malo points out, is Medieval Christendom where certain women, like abbesses, were vested with tremendous responsibilities.

[4] Malo, 90.

The Rootless Tragedy of the "Real America"

MICHAEL MOSS

Kevin Williamson, *Big White Ghetto: Dead Broke, Stone-Cold Stupid, and High on Rage in the Dank Woolly Wilds of the "Real America"* (Regnery, 2020).

If you are looking for a delicate exposition of the rich cultural veins that underlie identity in America, this is not the book for you. Kevin Williamson argues those have withered away. Take his account of life in the mountains of Kentucky: "This is not the land of moonshine and hill lore, but of families of four clutching \$40 of lotto scratchers and crushing the springs on their beaten-down Camry while getting dinner from a Phillips 66 station." In *Big White Ghetto*, there is plenty more where that came from.

To read *Big White Ghetto* is to take a trip through the dingy and cringey parts of America with an acerbic commentator who grants no quarter. The book features twenty-two essays first published in the conservative editorial magazine *National Review* from 2008 to 2020. Topics are wide-ranging: economy and addiction in Kentucky's poorest counties; young, extremist politics of the right and left in Dallas and Oregon; heavy industry in the oilfields of Texas and the fracking hills of Pennsylvania; gambling in Atlantic City; and the obscene pornography conferences in Las Vegas.

Williamson provides a bitter antidote to simplistic but poisonous political narratives that classify those outside the cosmopolitan urban elite either as deplorables or misunderstood victims.

By Williamson's estimation, the "identity" that manifests throughout America's fringes is a sham attempt to create meaning out of nothing. True sources of identity such as love of home and family, historical awareness, or charitable self-sacrifice are now the exception. Much of Williamson's scorn is directed towards political activists on both the right and left, in addition to those who center their lives around manufactured identities. A meaningful life, writes Williamson, is hard-earned and achieved only through dedication, hard work, and intelligence. Political feuds, conspiracy theories, and cult hedonism can provide no basis for genuine identity, validation, or purpose because they promise recognition and exaltation without requiring any real effort. Williamson's argument is that most contemporary forms of "identity" are merely psychological consumer products, optimized for sale to a class of degenerates who want a painless, immediate source of gratification. Two discomfiting essays, "Among the Flat-Earthers" and "Topless Chick, Uncredited," illustrate how conspiracy peddlers and pornographers willingly indulge identity-seekers for a profit.

In "Der Apfelstrudelführers," Williamson characterizes "alt-right" politics as a haven for embittered, emasculated man-children. He presents a damning picture of men who hope that committing themselves to white identity politics will finally earn them respect and admiration from their peers,

especially from women. Williamson mocks their lonely refrains on internet message boards and goes so far as to compare them to jihadists in search of divinely guaranteed sexual gratification. While their purported goal is to find meaning in the politics of white identity, Williamson illustrates how men of the alt-right are just as much failures of the modern world, obsessed with a love they feel they are owed.

Williamson similarly lampoons radical leftist politics as its own kind of loneliness-induced revenge fantasy. In the essay “Adventures in National Socialism,” he interviews a Bernie Sanders groupie who cannot explain her politics without expressing her unresolved grievances against her parents. Williamson brands her “a classic American radical, which is to say, a wounded teenager in an adult’s body.” Writing on leftist protesters harassing random passersby in Portland, Williamson describes their city-sanctioned, police-protected activities as an opportunity for affluent, white liberals to play-act heroically driving out fascist demons, calling them “little runts who make pretty good thugs when confronted with people in wheelchairs or little old ladies.”

Sympathy plays no role in Williamson’s worldview, which appears to be formed by a whole-of-life libertarianism. Little discussion is given to the culture that produces so many pitiful individuals or the insipid philosophy of life that deprives them of the moral resources to understand their condition. Williamson goes for the throat, but it is often unclear whether this aggression offers anything more than brutal entertainment. Obviously, young people cursing furiously at bewildered bystanders are working through their own personal issues. No one thinks for a second that those attending pornography conventions are happy with their lives.

In Williamson’s eyes, group identity is only a minor part of a well-functioning community. An individual’s work ethic and willingness to respond unflinchingly to economic realities are far more important. To be useful, identity must be connected with responsibility and action. Williamson upholds the Scott family of Valley Spring, South Dakota—the fourth and fifth generation to farm their family land—as a prime example. The Scotts invest time and effort in their community, sustaining “a vibrant little city, one of those midwestern gems such as Kansas City and Grand Rapids that punch above their weight.” But farming, like many other activities, is subject to market forces beyond a single community’s control. Kevin Scott and his fellow farmers’ survival hinges on global market prices for corn and soybeans, which requires Scott to lobby Washington for international trade policies completely contrary to an “America First” approach. In a complicated, interconnected world, local culture and identity cannot survive without being first informed by market realities. Even though South Dakotan farmers are generally staunch, Trump-supporting conservatives, they are willing to move beyond puerile identity-based ideologies to protect their way of life.

Occasionally the market renders local industries defunct and people must move to other opportunities. In the essays “Big White Ghetto” and “White Trash Receptacle,” Williamson offers no sympathy to the poorer inhabitants of Kentucky who watch as economic opportunities disappear and choose to live on government benefits rather than take charge of their lives and move on. Williamson also has little patience for apologists of the white American underclass who argue that the rural poor are victims of the elite. He condemns such arguments as self-serving “sanctimony,” pointing out that the problems of poor America are both economic and moral. “The white American underclass is in thrall to a vicious, selfish culture whose main products are misery and used heroin needles . . . What they need isn’t analgesics, literal or political. They need real opportunity, which means that they need real change, which means that they need U-Haul.” Those who choose to stay and participate in broken local economies where people launder food stamps for drug money (an economy he describes in “Big White Ghetto”) get no sympathy at all.

Perhaps most frustrating is Williamson's disinterest with those working to improve life in towns left behind by industry. The essay "Big White Ghetto" devotes only one short paragraph to the people maintaining the quality of life in Booneville, Kentucky, preferring instead to focus on the derelict and drug-addicted population. He refuses to acknowledge that some people could rationally choose to live in less-than-ideal economic circumstances out of an appreciation for place or home, or a sense of moral responsibility.

Williamson's harsh tenor no doubt arises from his own childhood in a broken home and personal experiences with poor, white America. He writes bluntly in "White Trash Receptacle" about his adoption into a family that immediately fell apart and the subsequent parade of his mother's violent, drunken husbands. He describes growing up in poverty and facing homelessness because of his parent's financial incompetence, reckless materialism, and addictions. Throughout the collection, Williamson speaks of his leaving that world, but also how he often finds himself being pulled back into the dysfunctions of his family, even after their death. In "I Am Cancer," Williamson reflects on his own encounter with learned helplessness while "evicting my late mother's fourth husband's fifth wife." Stuck in a courtroom waiting for his case to be heard, Williamson is forced to listen to a stream of litigants deny responsibility for their debts and delinquencies. The experience only strengthens his conviction that such people have rendered themselves incapable of taking accountability for their poor choices. Williamson's unhappy encounters with the remnants of his childhood only reinforce his conviction that people deserve their misery.

People inclined to pontificating about "real America" should read this book. Williamson provides a bitter antidote to simplistic but poisonous political narratives that classify those outside the cosmopolitan urban elite either as deplorables or misunderstood victims. We need more charity in our political discourse, but charity cannot love what it does not know. Williamson displays little interest in improving the political discourse that he frequently mocks throughout the collection, but he does provide a searingly honest presentation of the way that a significant number of Americans live their lives. He makes a compelling argument that many Americans are overwhelmed by their lives and therefore live in misery. Their attempts to escape their unhappiness through "identity" only open them up to charlatans who sell them fantasies. Acknowledging this human suffering is necessary if we are to do anything about it. While his stubborn libertarianism blocks him from providing political solutions to personal problems, Williamson opens the door for others to address the causes of this human misery, causes that appear to require solutions more nuanced than blaming the other side of the aisle—especially when the antisocial tendencies found on ugly reaches of the left mirror problems on the right.

Michael Moss graduated from the University of Notre Dame in 2017 and completed his Masters of Arts in Human Rights under Catholic University's Institute for Human Ecology in 2020. He works as a management consultant in the DC area.

The Apocalypse of the Modern Self

CARL R. TRUEMAN

A Hegelian Insight for the Modern Day

At the heart of the chaos and fragmentation which seems to characterize modern society lies a notion of the self which rests upon deep, often unnoticed, philosophical assumptions that shape not only how we think of ourselves as individuals in relationship to others but how society as a whole thinks of itself, how it frames its moral discourse, and how it decides who does and who does not truly count. To justify these claims, it is helpful to revisit a point made by the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel.

Hegel begins his famous section in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* on lordship and bondage with the following statement:

Self-consciousness is *in and for itself*, when, and by the fact that, it is in and for itself for another self-consciousness; that is, it is only as something recognized.[1]

The point Hegel is making is important: selfhood is a dialogue, even a dialectic, between self-consciousnesses. I may intuitively think of myself as defining who I am but in fact my identity, or sense of selfhood, is the result of my interaction with my environment, specifically with other self-consciousnesses. This process Hegel characterizes as “recognition.” This is not recognition in the simple, commonsense manner in which a friend might call to me across the street as she recognizes my face. Rather, it is a more significant sense whereby I am ascribed legitimacy and value by another and, therefore, in relation to that other. A good illustration of this is provided by the creation of Eve in Genesis 2. Upon seeing her, Adam declares that she is “bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.” He has clearly recognized her as different from all other creatures, possessing an affinity with himself that he shares with no other. We might say that Adam truly comes to know himself at that point precisely because he knows (recognizes) Eve.

Hegel’s notion of recognition is important not simply because it exposes the falsity of our intuitive sense that each of us is sovereign over our own selfhood. It is also important because it highlights the fact that our sense of selfhood stands at the nexus of freedom and belonging. The desire to be free—indeed, the intuitive feeling that I am, or at least should be, free—is a fundamental part of what it means to be human. Unlike other animals, we are intentional beings. The beaver builds a dam instinctively; humans build dams intentionally. There is indeed some truth to the idea that for us existence precedes essence. I could have chosen numerous careers, but I chose to be a teacher. I could have remained single, but I chose to marry. And yet freedom is not all there is to being human. We also want to belong, to be recognized. Everything from the language I speak to the way I dress is a means by which I am located in, and belong to, a wider society. We might say that the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of recognition are not set by me but by the world into which I am born and by which I need to be recognized. And this arguably involves a sacrifice, or modification, of my freedom with reference to social rules and conventions in order that I might belong to (be recognized by) that society.

Given Hegel’s insight, we might cast the question of selfhood as one which inevitably places the issues of freedom and belonging at the center of the human drama. The question of selfhood is: How can I be free and also belong? And this, in turn, points us to the question of the terms of belonging and

recognition: Are these purely social constructions, subject to the specific tastes or convictions of society at any given time or place? And is our freedom something determined solely by our wills? The two questions clearly connect to each other because the answer to each ultimately rests on whether nature has any intrinsic moral or metaphysical structure or whether it is merely so much raw material, to be shaped and made meaningful by acts of human will, whether individual or corporate. In short, the question of human selfhood is an apocalyptic one in the true sense of the word: a revelation of how we think about reality as a whole.

At this point it is perhaps useful to anticipate my later argument. To call the connection of freedom and belonging *the* central dilemma of modernity might be an exaggeration, but not by much. It arguably underlies not just Hegel's view of personhood but also his view of history and, via its materialist inversion, that of Marx and Marxism, too. One might speculate as to whether the relation of freedom and belonging, construed in these terms, is the source of so much of the spiritual or psychological anxiety that marks our modern world, despite the fact that we live in times that are more materially comfortable and secure than many previous generations. Hegel poses the problem of selfhood nicely; but the modernity to which he contributes assumes a basic antithesis between the concept of freedom and the concept of belonging that can only be resolved by one or both being modified (sacrificed to?) by the other. The Christian idea—that freedom is found in belonging, and that belonging is found in freedom, is thus tragically denied by the modern world at the outset. Yet for Christianity freedom is not found simply in freedom from coercion but rather in cleaving to the Good.

Characteristics of the Modern Self

Perhaps the best way to see what is involved in the modern notion of selfhood is to look at the most extreme recent example of such: transgenderism. While those identifying as transgender remain a very small segment of the population, it is noteworthy that the plausibility of transgenderism enjoys increasing cultural cachet, to the point where the Supreme Court itself has determined that it is protected under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, and where it is increasingly controversial to express any skepticism on the issue. These clearly indicate that the basic concepts underlying transgenderism are part of the common currency of how modern society thinks of selfhood.

Transgenderism rests upon a set of assumptions and social conditions that together serve to make it a plausible concept. The most obvious of these is the repudiation of the idea that the physical body exercises any ultimate authority over an individual's identity beyond the obvious limits of time and space. The traditional notion of being a man or a woman by physical determination is rejected. Indeed, any attempt to include physical characteristics in the definition of man or woman is rejected out of hand. As the author [J. K. Rowling discovered](#), menstruation is irrelevant to the modern definition of woman, to which we might add such things as chromosomes, pregnancy, and breast feeding. Gender—maleness and femaleness—is separate from bodily sex.

The specific intellectual genealogy of the separation of gender and sex finds its most influential expression in the work of Judith Butler and her notion that gender is a performance, not something determined by biology.[2] The roots of this idea lie in the work of earlier second wave feminists, such as Simone de Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone, but also find some precedent in the observation by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* that industrial technology, by reducing the importance of physical strength, would slowly relativize the distinction between men and women. The story of our culture over the last two centuries could be told in terms of the increasing irrelevance of the physical differences between men and women for the way we think of ourselves. The authority of the body no longer grips the moral imagination as it once did.

The loss of the authority of the body is connected to a parallel rise in the authority of psychological feelings. A world where transgenderism is plausible must be one where inner feelings have come to carry significant weight in matters of identity. It is easy to imagine someone struggling early last century with what we now term “gender dysphoria.” That person would have been told that the problem was with his mind, his psyche, and any treatment would be aimed at bringing those inner feelings into conformity with the physical body. Today, any doctor giving that advice might find himself subject to a charge of medical malpractice, not because the phenomena present in a different way but because the grid through which society interprets them has been radically inverted. Now the patient’s feelings possess normative authority for identity, and the body is merely an instrument for the realization of this, to be treated appropriately with surgery or hormones when there is any conflict between the two.

The roots of this shift are again deep-seated. The anti-essentialism of late medieval voluntarism and nominalism certainly paved the way for the epistemological, and thus inward, turn of thinkers such as Descartes. But of broader cultural significance is the thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and of the various figures of the Romantic movement for whom he was an important inspiration and influence. Rousseau’s focus on the inner life, as exemplified in his *Confessions*, prioritized the individual’s thoughts and feelings in constructing his identity. Further, his emphasis on the importance of the pristine state of nature, as opposed to the corrupting forces of culture, served to invest the inner voice of nature with moral authority. This quest for natural integrity found artistic expression in the poetry of a Wordsworth or the meditative prose of a Thoreau, designed as they were to reconnect the reader with their true selves. The true self thus became the one whose outward behavior conformed to that inner voice of nature; the inauthentic self the one who suppressed that inner voice in order to conform to the outward demands of society.

Such a self could still be regarded as stable, given the commitment of Rousseau and company to the idea of a hypothetically pre-cultural human nature that possessed an intrinsic moral structure. The voice of nature would guide the individual to the truth, making him empathetic to others and thus properly moral.[3] Once that moral structure was denied, however, the self took on a much darker form. We see this anticipated in the work of the Marquis de Sade, in many ways the anti-Rousseau, who saw human nature as dark and destructive, not kind and empathetic, a point later expressed in scientific idiom in the work of Sigmund Freud. Yet the most devastating assault on this benign view of natural man came from Friedrich Nietzsche in the nineteenth century who argued convincingly that, once God was dead, once the philosophers had killed him, all claims to moral truth lacked objective foundations and were in reality little more than assertions of power by one individual or group over another.

In a very important sense, Nietzsche set the trajectory for the modern moral imagination. This is explicit in the work of Judith Butler, whose theory of gender draws on both Nietzsche’s work and that of another modern thinker he deeply influenced, Michel Foucault. We might characterize this modern moral imagination as involving a prioritizing of feelings or desire, a rejection of any compelling authority over the individual will, and a deep suspicion that any claims to moral truth are masks for cynical and manipulative power plays.

Of course, comparatively few people have read Nietzsche, Foucault, or Butler. But these basic ideas have nonetheless come to shape the intuitions of the modern moral imagination. Part of this story is technological. Technology has served to fuel humanity’s belief in, if not its own omnipotence, then at least in its ability to achieve anything it wishes by the deployment of instrumental reason and technical know-how. In this context, it is interesting to notice the panic, perhaps even mass hysteria, induced by

the Covid-19 pandemic. We have been faced with an enemy which cannot be immediately defeated and which brings the reality of mortality closer to us than has been typical of our age, marked as it is by the practical denial of death. Our panicked response has entailed eliminating the consideration of any social good except the immediate preservation of life, whatever the cost to others, and a corresponding desperate hunt for a vaccine. The inability of our moral imaginations to rank goods, let alone view the pandemic from any transcendent point of reference, has been dramatically exposed.

In our current technological age, we find it easier and easier to think of nature as raw matter for manipulation rather than a substantial reality possessing an inherently meaningful structure. Further, technology has made things possible and therefore plausible, — transgenderism being the most obvious example: prior to hormone treatment and gender reassignment surgery, it was not surprising that the body was accorded more authority. Nothing else was remotely plausible. The linguistic shift from *gender reassignment* to *gender confirmation* surgery is, of course, emblematic of the authority now invested in feelings or psychological states. The body is raw matter, while feelings are absolute. Any conflict between feelings and biology, therefore, requires a gerrymandering of the body by surgery and hormones. And this point has been established as part of the modern social imaginary more by mass consumption of pop culture—sitcoms, soap operas, song lyrics, reality TV—than by any widespread reading of cultural theorists.

Hegel's Insight Revisited

Given this brief genealogy and analysis of aspects of the modern self, we can now reflect on the matter in the terms of the nexus implied in Hegel's notions of self-consciousness and recognition, that of freedom and belonging. Indeed, to pick up language used earlier, Hegel's insight allows us to see the modern self as apocalyptic—and now not only as revealing our culture's underlying view of the universe, as I noted earlier, but also in the more common sense of ultimately destructive of society as a whole.

Indeed, it is clear that the modern self faces a terrible and irresolvable dilemma. It conceives of freedom as the almost limitless capacity of the human will to shape the self into anything it wishes to be. "Existence precedes essence" neatly summarizes how we are trained instinctively from birth to think of ourselves. Yet this limitless freedom is not simply part of the self-consciousness of the individual; it is now part of the moral imagination of society which therefore conceives of any attempt to restrict this as oppressive. In short, we want limitless freedom. But we also want to belong, to be recognized by others. And that is an impossible situation for several reasons.

First, with no larger metaphysical framework and no moral imperative beyond "freedom for all," the terms of belonging become inherently volatile and, hence, in need of top-down authority. Because society cannot practically organize itself on the basis of unlimited freedom for everyone (serial killers? drunk drivers?), there must be limits, and these limits—absent a recognition of some objective standard—will simply be functions of the tastes of those who possess social and cultural power. Ironically, this radical freedom will therefore tend towards authoritarianism, as the only means for justifying the necessary limitations on freedom will be by the diktats of those with power. We see this already in the move to police pronouns.

*We want limitless freedom. But we also want to belong, to be recognized by others.
And that is an impossible situation for several reasons.*

Second, our society will also always be vulnerable to dramatic, chaotic, anarchic change because it has

nothing beyond those diktats to which it can appeal for authority. A society which recognizes an authority beyond itself is able to maintain a degree of stability by appealing to that authority. Yet the normative notion of the self in contemporary western society is predicated precisely on a repudiation of such an authority. Therefore, it cannot justify itself on anything other than the basis of itself. In short, it cannot really justify itself in any truly compelling way at all and will always be shaped by the whims of those who hold cultural power.

Third, it will be a society marked by high degrees of anxiety. The very fact that the terms of recognition are so volatile will render individuals insecure. If there is no objective standard to which one must conform, then freedom (as Nietzsche himself saw in the famous Madman passage of *The Gay Science*) can just as easily be a terrifying prospect as one of exhilaration. To tell a child of three that you as a parent do not know if he is a boy or a girl but that that is something he has to decide for himself—that is freedom as nightmare, not freedom as liberation. The modern self is truly apocalyptic: it reveals society's philosophical commitments, and it is utterly destructive of society in any long-term, stable form.

Christians, of course, cannot accept the modern notion of selfhood because they cannot accept the metaphysical, or rather anti-metaphysical, assumptions that lie behind it. Human freedom, and thus identity, is not constituted by the untrammelled exercise of the will. The man who self-identifies as a falcon and then leaps to his death from a skyscraper to prove his point can scarcely be characterized as free. Freedom for human beings involves understanding human nature as made in the image of God and acting accordingly; and the beauty of this is that true freedom is the true means of belonging because freedom is not, in the end, reducible to choice; it is, rather, human flourishing in love. Marriage offers a wonderful example of this: the husband who loves his wife sacrifices his bachelorhood and his freedom; he gives himself unconditionally to her; and in so doing, he finds his true self, he is truly free.

And this is where the genius of Christianity is to be found, for, as in marriage, the terms of freedom and the terms of belonging are one and the same. If the Son sets you free, you are free indeed. In Christ, in the church, you find your freedom precisely in the fact that you have surrendered your autonomy to belong to another.

The tragedy of the modern self is that it is the wrong answer to the right question: How can I be free and yet belong? And the radical nature of Christianity's answer might itself be posed as a question: How can one be free and not belong?

*Carl R. Trueman is professor of biblical and religious studies at Grove City College in Pennsylvania, and was previously the William E. Simon Visiting Fellow in Religion and Public Life at Princeton University. A graduate of the Universities of Cambridge and Aberdeen, he is the author most recently of *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*.*

[1] *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated with an introduction and a commentary by Michael Inwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), par. 178 (p. 76).

[2] A skeptic might respond that such things as menstruation, conception, giving birth, and breastfeeding are performances absolutely determined by biology. Of course, the underlying logic of Butler's argument is based upon the exclusion from the outset of such biological factors as constitutive of what it means to be male or female. In short, there is a metaphysical a priori in play which simply assumes the irrelevance of the body and then uses this in order to prove the irrelevance of the body.

[3] It is perhaps worth noting that Rousseau's empathy did not extend to his five children, all of whom were sent to an orphanage (and thus to almost certain death) shortly after they were born.

Identity: A History of an Idea

ANGELA FRANKS

The closing episode of the Disney show “WandaVision” no doubt triggered a storm of internet-searching when a main character, in the middle of a classic comic-book battle, suddenly pivoted to discussing “identity metaphysics.” The character, a sentient android facing off with an apparent identical copy of himself, references the ancient Ship of Theseus. The ship was preserved, but each plank was eventually replaced by new planks. Was it the same ship or a different one?

This example works perfectly for an android, given that androids are artifacts, like the ship, and have parts (as machines). Human beings, by contrast, are not artifacts. Nevertheless, we have an oddly mixed status as spiritual-material beings, the matter of which is constantly regenerating (except for the neurons of the cerebral cortex, interestingly). The question can then fairly be asked: where is our “identity”? What answers the question “Who am I”?

As psychologist Erik Homburger Erikson notes, identity was *the* problem of the twentieth century: “If the relation of father and son dominated the last century, then this one is concerned with the self-made man asking himself what he is making of himself.” And, indeed, Erikson was perfectly situated to observe this: a Freudian by training, the son of an unknown Danish man and a Jewish woman, adopted by a German stepfather who was presented to him as his natural father until he was a teen, Erik changed his surname to Erikson as a young man. He was so self-made, he was his own father.[1]

A related question was taken up in the closing decades of the twentieth century, in which much ink was spilled on the question of the “*death of the subject*.” Closely connected to this dying subject, and of even more recent coinage, is the term “identity.” In his book *Puzzling Identities*, French philosopher Vincent Descombes points out that the use of the word “identity” in the possessive or “identitarian” sense—“my identity,” “France’s identity”—was born in the twentieth century. Late-seventeenth-century editions of French dictionaries take “*identité*” to refer (and then only rarely) to logical problems of sameness, while this is still the primary meaning in the *Oxford English Dictionary* under “identity.” This meaning has faded in importance. Helping the process along, Wittgenstein ridiculed this logical sense of “identity”: “‘A thing is identical with itself.’—There is no finer example of a meaningless sentence ...”

Almost simultaneously, beginning in the 1960s, a revolt against identity began to be fought by post-modern French philosophers. “Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same,” implored Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, “leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order.” He was, he was certain, not “the only one who writes in order to have no face.” Accordingly, he and fellow philosopher Gilles Deleuze pushed for “the liquidation of the principle of identity.”[2]

So how is it that identity went from being marginal to essential to ambivalent? I will trace that history here.

Sources of the Modern Self

“Identity as such is a modern invention,” sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues, “It was a ‘problem’ from

its birth—was born as a problem (that is, as something one needs do something about—as a task), could exist only as a problem”[3] This task-nature of identity—as something to be achieved—is quintessentially modern.

Philosophers in the Platonic school tended to find human identity in a transcendent One. Early modern empiricists, by contrast, were not interested in finding the unity of the self in transcendence but instead sought it in immanent matter and experiences.[4] The move from the logical sense of identity to a personal, “identitarian” one begins in English, according to the *OED*, in the seventeenth century. John Locke insisted, “The Identity of the same Man consists ... in nothing but a participation of the same continued Life, by constantly fleeting Particles of Matter, in succession vitally united to the same organized Body.”

Lockean personal identity is rooted in consciousness: “*Consciousness makes personal identity.*” As Descombes says, this radical proposal contends that “*it is not necessary to be the same man as Jacques to be the same person as Jacques. One need only be the same self, i.e., be constituted as a person by the same self-consciousness—in other words, to have the same memories.*”

With Jean-Jacques Rousseau comes a specification of the necessary content of one’s consciousness, namely, *authenticity* as the means to locating one’s identity. For Rousseau, the exterior and the communal is seen to be an impediment to the authentic interior. This was part of a larger “disembedding,” as Charles Taylor calls it, of the authentic self out of the inauthentic social environment.

The Man Who Was His Own Father

This abbreviated genealogy of the modern self shows how the way was paved for the recent ascendancy of “identity.” A sea-change happened in the twentieth century, when Freudian-trained psychologist Erik H. Erikson proposed a new understanding of “identity” in his 1950 book *Childhood and Society*. The timing was propitious. As Erikson stated, “We begin to conceptualize matters of identity at the very time in history when they become a problem.”

Erikson’s chapter “Reflections on the American Identity” is, historian Philip Gleason argues, the first time the term national “identity” substituted for national “character” in Anglophone psychology and sociology. Erikson later explained the link between America and identity crises.

If something like an identity crisis gradually appeared to be a normative problem in adolescence and youth, there also seemed to be enough of an adolescent in every American ... [because of] a strangely adolescent style of adulthood—that is, one remaining expansively open for new roles and stances ... But this also means that problems of identity become urgent wherever Americanization spreads ...

Along these lines, Erikson commented on the rise of what is now called the RV, permitting elderly Americans “to settle down to perpetual traveling and to die on wheels.” Indeed, the American nature of the book’s thesis was expressed iconically in a sketch by Norman Rockwell of Tom Sawyer absorbed in reading *Childhood and Society*.

The idea of an identity crisis was based on both clinical observation and autobiography. “I am not implying that ‘identity crisis’ is a symptom of mine that I simply assumed everybody else had also—although there is, of course, something to that too. ...” Erikson had lived his first three years alone with his mother before she married Theodor Homburger and told Erikson that Homburger was in fact his father. But this never sat well with Erikson, who remembered some of his early days alone with her.

As he would later poignantly reflect, “[I] felt all along ... doubt in my identity ... all through my childhood years.”

His proposal depends on two meanings of “identity”: first, the subjective, Rousseauian sense of authenticity, as expressed by William James: “*This is the real me!*” The second feature is one’s personal connection with the wider culture and society. Identity is the mostly unconscious process of making authentic judgments about oneself in “a kind of *psychosocial relativity*.”

While notoriously vague about his central term, Erikson still hit a nerve. Gleason argues that “identity” was such a successful reboot of the older problem of the unity of the self because of the peculiar situation in the 1950s. “Identity” aptly expressed the concern for the existence of the alienated individual against the backdrop of “mass society.” Spurring this along was the arrival of the Frankfurt School thinkers in the United States, who brought a Marxist-Freudian treatment of alienation and authoritarianism to a wider American audience.

The term took off in the 1960s, when “identity” was modulated into more personal terms. Everyone had to have an identity crisis; Gleason notes that “American Catholics fairly luxuriated in them.” Religiously, the post-conciliar situation seemed, to revisionists at least, to require the interrogation of ecclesial roles. True to type, this revisionist theological stance contracted a shotgun wedding with the larger *Zeitgeist* of identity-questioning. The situation demanded parody, and Harvard Catholic students took up the challenge, posting invitations to a scheduled “Identity Crisis,” Thursday evening at 8 p.m. sharp.

To his credit, Erikson recognized the “faddish” and mimetic aspects of identity confusion: “[W]ould some of our youth act so openly confused and confusing if they did not *know* they were *supposed* to have an identity crisis?” What was already clear in 1968 has become even more clear since then in cases such as *imitative eating disorders*, as well as the recent spate of rapid-onset gender dysphoria. In the latter case, groups of “*super cheerful, giggly*” girls are showing up at Planned Parenthood clinics to request (and invariably receive) cross-sex hormones.[5] The difference between developmentally appropriate and performative crises, Erikson insisted, is that true identity crises were “silent, inner, and unconscious” rather than “flamboyantly” performed.

“Would some of our youth act so openly confused and confusing if they did not know they were supposed to have an identity crisis?” ~E. Erikson

Around the same time, and supplementing but also diverging from Erikson’s psychoanalytic sense of identity, there arose a sociological approach that focused only on exterior identification. As I have noted, Erikson was deeply concerned with the interrelation between social conditions and interior drives and structures. Sociology, in contrast, neglected the latter to focus on the former. These sociological approaches went in one of two directions: identity found in roles or identity found in group membership.

I Am What I Do

Most researchers staking out the midcentury sociological position explicitly refused to grant an internal personal reality enduring through change, a reality that we might call “the self.” In 1963, at the cusp of the philosophical embrace of the “death of the subject” in France, Peter Berger argued, “Looked at sociologically, the self is no longer a solid, given entity.... It is rather a process, continuously created and

re-created in each social situation that one enters, held together by the slender thread of memory.” Later Berger, with Thomas Luckmann, would argue in the influential book *The Social Construction of Reality* that personal identity’s social construction is distinguished from other social construction solely by being connected to a body.

In all of these approaches, *esse sequitur operare*; the traditional primacy of being over action is reversed. As one sociologist put it, “Identity refers to the individual’s sequence of acts ...” Here identity can only come about retroactively, through the sum-total of actions, and a sense of self is merely the consciousness of this reality.

One variant of the sociological approach was proposed by Erving Goffman, whose 1959 book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* continues to be influential. Goffman finessed role theory by proposing an analogy from theater: the “self” is an actor who is always playing different dramatic roles “onstage” while curating the scenery, costumes, and plot. This “dramaturgical analysis” led its readers, according to one reviewer, to be “traumatized by the realization ... of how phony we all are.” For obvious reasons, Goffman’s book has been utilized extensively by those researching online life, especially the social-media experience.

Hans Urs von Balthasar notes that Goffman played with the enduring “dualism ... between what I represent and what I am in reality ...”[6] But the role-approach, which throws roles “over a colorless ‘I’ like some coat that happened to be at hand and could at any time be exchanged for another,” cannot arrive at “an ‘I’ that [is] irreplaceable as such.”[7]

I Am What I Belong To

A second sociological attempt to find the “I” in the “exterior” also gained steam in the 1950s. Increasingly, questions such as religion and immigration began to be viewed through the lens of identity, as the importance of belonging to a group in order to answer the “Who am I?” question was reasserted.

In many ways, the sociological approach is a return of the old, “solid” way of self-identification via social status and family. But there is also something new, in that group-membership began to be defined in more “liquid” ways. With race now the one remaining hold-out, all the other important categories—religion, nationality, even sex—have today become a matter of shifting preference rather than pre-existing realities that define the person prior to choice.

In her recent book, *Primal Screams*, Mary Eberstadt calls attention to the beginning of “identity politics” in the 1970s. Eberstadt argues that identity politics, tied to the sexual revolution (and, I argue, the centuries-long development of secularization), is the expression of emotionally fragile people who do not know where they belong.

Identity politics make the personal political in a wholly new way. As one feminist critic writes of gender theorist Judith Butler’s queer theory, “[W]hat was once ‘the personal is political’ has become ‘the political need only be personal.’” Or even more: the political is merely the most public forum to force recognition of the personal. Francis Fukuyama contends that “demand for *recognition of one’s identity* is a master concept that unifies much of what is going on in world politics today.” This emotional and human aspect of identity helps to explain why, according to Eberstadt, “it’s all panic, all the time.” This irrational aspect of identity politics, as well as its tribalism, have been criticized on the left as well as the right. But such criticisms have not done much to put out the fire, because they have no better method of identity-formation to offer.

Let us take stock of this history up to now. Both the interior, identity-formation approach (Erikson) and the exterior, role- or group-based proposals (Goffman, identity politics) fail to account sufficiently for the ephemeral nature of the identity achieved by either or both approaches. They are often correct, as far as they go. But they do not go far enough. Rather than anchoring identity solely in the beyond (the neo-Platonic approach), they root it solely in the ephemeral here-and-now: either my achievement of a sense of self, or in the groups and roles with which I identify myself. We are not yet at Balthasar's "I that is irreplaceable as such."

Identity for the Non-Identical

What all these solutions are circling around but never quite name is the irreducible non-identity at the heart of the human person. Our identity-instability points to this metaphysical aporia, namely, that we are, as [Erich Przywara](#) puts it, marked by "the illimitable openness of the movement of becoming." It is, in other words, "a *creaturely principle*" that we are non-identical. We are, and yet we change. Further, we are, and we appear, and these two aspects of ourselves are not simply identical. Non-identity fractures the person. These aporias are one reason why post-moderns chose simply to embrace this non-identity in a literal way, à la Foucault: we do not have a face.

For all that, however, we are also marked by identity. This is the value in the primary, logical meaning of identity. The metaphysical bases for this identity are multiple. First, human beings are substances, that is, individually existing persons that exist on their own. Substances "stand under" (as the term literally states) the features that mark our lives, namely, the qualities, relations, and locations that can come and go (these are also called metaphysical "accidents"). I may undergo dementia and not remember my family and friends, but I would be still the same human being who once remembered and then does not.

Second, as persons, human beings are a particular kind of substance: we have a rational and embodied nature. This nature does not change as I change; I am still the *kind* of thing that I was as a girl. Through all my non-identity, that is, through all my changes, I am still as human as ever and the same person as ever.

Third, individual human persons have souls, which are intimately related to our changing bodies. A human soul, as the form of a living body, organizes its material flux (Locke's "constantly fleeting Particles of Matter") around a unifying and governing center. My body, despite all its change, is still *my* body, because my soul ensures its continuity.

For all that, human beings do not find this metaphysical identity, which gives us a perduring structure underlying change, to be enough. As both Balthasar and John Paul II point out, this continuity is necessary but still not sufficient to answer the question "Who am I?" How can we account for each person's irreducible uniqueness, which sets me apart from all other human persons?

I Am As I Am Sent

This stalemate highlights the importance of a transcendent solution to our identity problems, because any purely creaturely solution is riven by non-identity. But the neo-Platonic absorption of the self by the divine cannot be the way to go.

In the first volume of his *Theo-Drama*, Balthasar concurs that worldly attempts to answer the "Who am I?" question end in this impasse. He finds a way forward in the one case of a perfect union of person and mission, in Jesus Christ, who serves as a template and cause of our true identity. In Christ, man's

non-identity, his “duality of ‘being’ and ‘seeming’ ... is absolutely overcome in the identity of person and mission in Christ.”[8]

In *TD 1* and in many other places, Balthasar credits this insight to the Thomistic doctrine of the divine missions of the Son and Spirit as the extensions, into time, of their eternal processions from the Father (*ST*, Ia, q. 43). “This mission ... is nothing but the ‘timeward’ side of his eternal procession from the Father.” The Son, who is eternally his being generated by the Father, is this procession from the Father into the world. “Jesus Christ dedicates his whole self to his mission; he is entirely one with it. He is the ‘one sent.’” Jesus’s identity is his mission, which is the procession that he is but now extended into the world.

We are not capable of such metaphysical simplicity, but Balthasar emphasizes that, “while the personal mission of Jesus is unique, it is also capable of ‘imitation’ by those who are called, in him, to participate in his drama.” This Christian existence is “existence as mission.”^[9] Our identity is ultimately a question of the particular saint *God* intends each person to be, in the *exitus* and *reditus* that marks our existence.[10] Roles, family, race, citizenship, and the other crucial aspects of a life are a mere pile of qualities, like iron filings, that require the magnet of our mission to be given order—to achieve identity.[11]

A mission does not obliterate the iron filings, nor does it remove our fundamental non-identity. Instead, it stabilizes the “I” in the midst of its life-history and even *in its non-identity*. Our metaphysical incompleteness is also a gift, in that it orders us beyond ourselves. Mission-identity takes up this ordering, without destroying our non-identity to the God who is both identical (*homoousios*) and non-identical (really distinct Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

And so, in the end, the concern of the twenty-first century is oddly resonant with the preoccupation with fathers in the nineteenth. The debunking of a divine Father left only flawed human fathers to fill the void. But not family nor one’s own actions nor group membership can create a self. What an irony of biography that Erik Erikson’s biological father was probably in fact a man named ... Erik. Thus do our best efforts at self-construction fail to outstrip the givens of family and biology. Even more fundamentally, what grounds all of these is the person whom God made us to be. “Thus, in the very discipleship in which the Christian ‘loses his soul,’ he can attain his true identity.”

Angela Franks, Ph.D., is a theologian, speaker, writer, and mother of six. She serves as Professor of Theology at the Theological Institute for the New Evangelization at St. John’s Seminary in Boston.

[1] After citing Wordsworth’s line “The Child is the Father of the Man,” Erikson wrote about Gandhi that “[i]t makes particular sense for special men: they, indeed, strive to become their own fathers” (quoted in Lawrence J. Friedman, *Identity’s Architect: A Biography of Erik H. Erikson* [New York: Scribner, 1999], 147). Friedman gives the larger background to the name-change at 143–47.

[2] According to Pierre Klossowski, “Digression à partir d’un portrait apocryphe,” *L’Arc* 49 (1990): 11–22 at 11, cited in David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault: A Biography*, xv. Of course, the contemporary search for identity occurs against the backdrop of “liquid modernity,” which validates flux over stability. Identity serves both as a resting-place from the flux and as something isomorphic to the flux. In other words, often the chosen identity is the experience of flux itself. The most sophisticated

expression of this contemporary Dionysianism is found in Gilles Deleuze; see Angela Franks, “The Blood of Dionysius or the Vineyard of the Lord?”

[3] Zygmunt Bauman, “From Pilgrim to Tourist—or a Short History of Identity,” eds. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: SAGE, 1996), 18–36 at 18–19.

[4] See the related approaches by analytic “identity theorists,” summarized by J. J. C. Smart, “The Mind/Brain Identity Theory” .

[5] I have argued that the sexual revolution is primarily a matter of solving the identity-problem via sexuality in “The Body as Totem in the Asexual Revolution.” See Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*, for a more detailed genealogy of the sexual revolution as it applies to the self.

[6] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 1: Prolegomena , first U.S. edition (Ignatius, 2004), 481. Making identity deeply dependent on socially defined roles and interactions creates the problem that “the individual who has submerged himself in a role must lose his identity” when the social expectations change (535, attributing the insight to Jürgen Habermas).

[7] *Ibid*, 645.

[8] *Ibid.*, 646. I develop Balthasar’s proposal in “The Mission and Person of Christ and the Christian in Hans Urs von Balthasar,” in *The Center is Jesus Christ Himself: Essays on Revelation, Salvation, and Evangelization in Honor of Robert P. Imbelli*, ed. Andrew Meszaros (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 272–299.

[9] Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Existenz als Sendung: Christus und seine Nachfolge,” *Christliche Innerlichkeit* 18 (1984): 274–78. In *Who is a Christian?* Balthasar dedicates a section to “Existenz aus der Sendung” (in the German: *Wer ist ein Christ?*, Herder-Bücherei, vol. 335 [Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1965], 90–95; rendered “The Mission Gives Life” in the English translation by John Cumming [New York: Newman Press, 1965], 86–91).

[10] See Angela Franks, “Liquidity: Man, the Triune God, and the Eucharistic Christ,” *Communio*, vol. 46, no. 3–4 (Fall–Winter 2019): 585–619.

[11] See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, trans. Sr. Mary Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1977), 74. Is this now just a Christian redux of the *esse sequitur operari* sociological conviction? Joshua R. Brotherton is concerned that Balthasar is so moved by Barthian actualism that he desires to overturn the Scholastic axiom *operari sequitur esse*, such that now *esse sequitur operari* (*One of the Trinity Has Suffered: Balthasar’s Theology of Divine Suffering in Dialogue* [Steubenville, OH.: Emmaus Academic Press, 2019], 247, nt. 137). I cannot treat this question at length, but I would argue, *first*, that Brotherton’s concern comes back to how he reads mission and identity: “Hence, similarly, identifying mission with identity can only be taken so far—such cannot involve denial of the logical priority of the latter” (120). Here Brotherton seems to equate mission with *operari* and identity with *esse*. Yet, as he elsewhere realizes, mission is a trinitarian and personal category, which is rooted in the being (*processio*) of the Son primarily and only secondarily his economic action (*operari*). Brotherton’s mistake could be avoided by recognizing that mission pertains first and foremost to the divine idea God has of each individual, thereby anchoring mission in God’s being and not in worldly doing. *Second*, it should be noted that there is a sense in which one can propose that *esse sequitur operari*, but only if one works within the horizons of a metaphysically informed virtue-ethics.

Karol Wojtyła named this a “bilateral system” of being and action, each forming the other, *yet* with a priority given to being; see Angela Franks, “A Body of Work: Labor and Culture in Karol Wojtyła,” in *Leisure and Labor*, ed. Anthony Coleman (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), 127–140. I draw on Karol Wojtyła, “Teoria e Prassi nella Filosofia della Persona Humana,” *Sapienza* 29 (1977): 377–84; Karol Wojtyła, “Teoria—Prassi: Un Tema Umano e Cristiano,” in vol. 1 of *Teoria e Prassi: Atti del VI Congresso Internazionale*, eds. Benedetto D’Amore and Agostino Giordano (Napoli: Edizione Dominicane Italiane, 1976): 31–41 at 33–35; and Karol Wojtyła, “The Problem of the Constitution of Culture through Human Praxis,” in *Person and Community*, trans. Theresa Sandok, OSM, in vol. 4 of *Catholic Thought from Lublin* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 265–67.

Immigration and Identity: It's Not That Simple

AGATA ROTTKAMP

I flipped through the pages of a newly-arrived Ikea catalogue: chairs, tables, cupboards with clean lines, and Swedish names—familiar offerings. And yet, there was something new. Tucked in between pictures of dishes and rugs were human interest stories of “global nomads.” Glossy pictures showed carefree men and women who, in search of meaning and adventure, had settled in new cities and countries. The catalogue highlighted their sparse and stylish apartments, outfitted with particleboard coffee tables and mass-produced décor of Ikea’s making. After all, these were just temporary digs—until *wanderlust* strikes again or something better comes up.

What struck me was that this trend of the global nomad was presented as something overwhelmingly uncomplicated. These folks were *free* to pick up and take off. How exciting! Granted, the stories in question were being pitched by the supplier of most global nomads’ furnishings, wherever they end up. But it does seem that the idea that we are *of* a place, and that place has some claim on us is apparently passé. After the most recent presidential election in the United States, when the fears of a more liberal cultural climate dawned on the horizon, several of my American friends asked me whether I thought they should leave. Would Poland (my native land) be a better place to raise their children? Should they consider emigrating—leaving the only home they and their children have ever known for something better? It’s not that simple, I kept thinking. I knew leaving everyone and everything you know is *not that simple*. Even if life were to improve in many ways, there always remains a pain of loss.

The choice to become a global nomad, a citizen of the whole world but of no place in particular, is only made possible by financial and political privilege. There is another, uglier, version of beginning a new life elsewhere, which is forced emigration, when you *must* leave your homeland out of fear, because of war, or starvation, or because your family and children lack a basic dignity of life.

My family—my parents, brother and I—fled our homeland for various reasons when I was eight. We left Poland shortly before communism crumbled. My parents packed our Fiat 125p full of camping gear, and we sought asylum in Western Europe where we had traveled under the guise of a vacation. We were not alone. A steady stream of asylum seekers from Eastern Europe infiltrated the West throughout the 1980s, seeking opportunity and dignity away from the watchful eye of fellow comrade and state. Many ended up in the United States, while others awaited their fate in immigration camp limbo, wondering whether any of the great Western democracies would grant them and their families asylum.

After a few failed attempts, West Germany granted us permission to wait on their soil for the paperwork to settle in the United States or Canada. We lived in an immigration camp with many others, sharing tight quarters and the hope for a better life. The wait for answers often took years. Some would-be émigrés were turned away and sent back home, crushed. Others headed to new lands and lives. My family was given permission to resettle in Canada, where we arrived in late March, 1991.

Were you to chart the feelings of a newly arrived émigré, you would see peaks of euphoria and excitement at the new, woven together with vales of despair and sadness over what was lost. Over time, the peaks grow smaller and the valleys shallower, giving way to the mundane ups and downs of common experience, whether émigré or not. You find a place to live and work, find your footing in the intricacies of a new language, find your way around and eventually find a community, often made up of people who are newcomers to the land, just like you. The startling strangeness of a new place and clime eventually gives way to an easy familiarity: this becomes home.

With the help of many generous Canadians, my family settled in a small town in Ontario. It took some time, but my parents both found work. We moved out of our flimsy rental and bought a house and two cars, privileges denied to many Poles back home. I learned English, got an education, and later married a wonderful American, which prompted another move, this time to the United States. All five of our children were born here.

Melting pot that it is, the United States is home to many people like me. I blend in. I speak English with no accent. I have learned how to adeptly shift between my old culture and the new. I have settled comfortably in American suburbia and am grateful for the life I have received.

And yet, and yet. *It is not so simple to leave one's homeland.* For one, you never truly leave it behind. Poland continues to exercise a claim over me and this is a burden I don't always shoulder gracefully. What am I? Polish? American? Canadian? Some hyphenated combination of the above? On infrequent visits back to Poland, I am little more than a tourist, albeit one who slips quietly into my old skin, peppering my rusty Polish with phrases gleaned from my cousins and eating rye bread breakfasts like the locals. But I no longer understand how daily life works in Poland. My relationship is with the country I left behind, not with Poland as it is now. I no longer belong there.

The burden of leaving one's homeland comes with not knowing who you really are, not fully belonging to any place or people.

The stuff of daily American life is much more familiar. I have lived in the United States for many years now, after all. But even still, when it comes to the great symbols of American nationality—the flag, anthem, monuments, etc.—my heart comes up short despite the fact that, rationally, I know they have profound meaning. When teaching my children the Pledge of Allegiance, I say the words along with them, but feel like a fraud, my hand lying limply across my heart. I work to convince myself that I really *am* pledging allegiance, but the words always ring hollow. Despite learning many of the great episodes of American history, these stories are not my own. But at the same time, having grown up in a home where pride of all things Polish was merely implicit but rarely explicitly taught, I shamefully know little about Polish history. I'm not sure whether that is my story either. *Poland, my homeland, do I belong to you at all? But can I really call myself a true American?* The burden of leaving one's homeland comes with not knowing who you really are, not fully belonging to any place or people.

This tension between where I now make my home and where I come from is most apparent when navigating between generations, older and younger. I may be a cultural chameleon, but my children were born here and feel comfortably American. “You're Polish, mama,” they say. Yes and no, I think to myself. In many ways, I have become “Americanized”—so much so that I'm not sure how much Polish culture I will successfully pass on to my kids. I have tried to teach them my native tongue, but only with partial success. They balk at putting in effort to learn Polish when their mama speaks English so well. And yet, even though my own Polish identity remains tenuous and fraught, my children not feeling

Polish at all is still painful. Even more painful is the cultural disconnect I often observe between my children and my parents. Though they have now lived in Canada almost as long as they had in Poland, my parents' formative years were back in the Old World. My children's typical American childhood, with its baseball, ballet, and Mother Goose rhymes, is in many ways an enigma to them. I find myself explaining to my parents what it is that my children mean when they share details about their life and, simultaneously, explaining to my children what it is that my parents mean when they respond. This is not a question of a lack of love between grandparents and grandchildren, rather, one of a painful cultural divide we are always trying to overcome.

Emigrating does not merely mean leaving a place, but leaving behind people, often family. For me, it meant moving away from my beloved grandmother who had lived with us since I was born. Aunts, uncles, and cousins, and my other grandparents also stayed put when we left. There were, of course, letters and occasional phone calls in those pre-FaceTime days, but over years spent so far apart, ties have loosened and I no longer feel connected to their daily lives and they equally struggle to relate to mine. Actual visits are rare and brief. I am only an occasional guest who drops by for dinner every few years. Perhaps we would all feel closer if I were better at video chats? I'm not so sure. As it stands, my children rarely recall even having family in Poland and could hardly communicate with them if they were to call. When my paternal grandmother died three years ago, I felt that my last great anchor to my native land was lost. She was the last person who had clung to my still belonging to Poland, the last one who still counted on my visits.

I shared some of these thoughts and experiences with the same friend who had asked me about emigrating after the last election. "But aren't you glad you live here now?" she countered with some alarm. *Yes, I am.* I am profoundly grateful, especially for the good life my family is able to enjoy. I am grateful for my American husband, my sweet American children—even though they might never understand their mother's complicated national identity. It's just that emigrating is so very complicated and touches so many aspects of one's identity.

So, when that Ikea catalogue with its features on carefree global nomads arrived in the mail, I was quick to recycle it. I stand by the fact that you *cannot be a citizen of the world without coming from a specific place*. That place has a claim on you and it is no small thing to leave it behind. This is why **John Paul II** boldly proclaimed that people have the *right not to emigrate*, because it is indeed such a great rupture to one's life and sense of self. No one should be forced to leave their homeland because they feel unsafe or unable to live with dignity. Equally, this option should be available for those who wish to seek a new life elsewhere, which John Paul II affirms as well. Setting out in search of meaning or adventure, or to find a better life for one's children and their children, is not inherently wrong. One just has to remember—we are all rooted somewhere and uprooting and replanting is always more complicated and painful than picking out a new couch and coffee table.

Agata Rottkamp is the Managing Editor of Humanum.

What is Patriotism?

POPE SAINT JOHN PAUL II

The following is an excerpt from Memory and Identity: Conversations at the Dawn of a Millennium (Rizzoli, 2005), 65–67 by Pope John Paul II. It was the last book published by the Polish Pontiff before his death.

If we ask where patriotism appears in the Decalogue, the reply comes without hesitation: it is covered by the fourth commandment, which obliges us to honor our father and mother. It is included under the umbrella of the Latin word *pietas*, which underlines the religious dimension of the respect and veneration due parents. We must venerate our parents, because for us they represent God the Creator. In giving us life, they share in the mystery of creation and therefore deserve a veneration related to that which we give to God the Creator. Patriotism includes this sentiment inasmuch as the patria truly resembles a mother. The spiritual matrimony which we acquire from our native land comes to us through our mother and father, and provides the basis for our corresponding duty of *pietas*.

Patriotism is a love for everything to do with our native land: its history, its traditions, its language, its natural features. It is a love which extends also to the works of our compatriots and the fruits of their genius. Every danger that threatens the overall good of our native land becomes an occasion to demonstrate this love. Our history teaches us that Poles have always been willing to make great sacrifices to preserve this good, or to regain it. The many tombs of soldiers who fought for Poland on different fronts around the world testify to this: they are widely dispersed, both at home and abroad. Yet I believe that the same could be said of every country and every nation in Europe and throughout the world.

The native land is the common good of all citizens and as such it imposes a serious duty. History amply documents the often heroic courage with which Poles have carried out this duty, when it was a question of defending the greater good of their native land. This is not to deny that some periods have witnessed a decline in this readiness to accept sacrifice in order to promote values and ideals connected with the notion of native land. At such times private interest and traditional Polish individualism have intervened as disruptive factors.

Every society's formation takes place in and through the family: of this there can be no doubt. Yet something similar could also be said about the nation.

The native land, then, is a complex reality, in the service of which social structures have evolved and continue to evolve, starting from primitive tribal traditions. The question arises whether this evolution of human society has reached its final goal. Did not the twentieth century witness a widespread tendency to move toward supranational structures, even internationalism? And does this tendency not prove that small nations, in order to survive, have to allow themselves to be absorbed into larger political structures? These are legitimate questions. Yet it still seems that nation and native land, like the family, are permanent realities. In this regard, Catholic social doctrine speaks of “natural” societies, indicating that both the family and the nation have a particular bond with human nature, which has a

social dimension. Every society's formation takes place in and through the family: of this there can be no doubt. Yet something similar could also be said about the nation. The cultural and historical identity of any society is preserved and nourished by all that is contained within this concept of nation. Clearly, one thing must be avoided at all costs: the risk of allowing this essential function of the nation to lead to an unhealthy nationalism. Of this, the twentieth century has supplied some all-too-eloquent examples, with disastrous consequences. How can we be delivered from such a danger? I think the right way is through patriotism. Whereas nationalism involves recognizing and pursuing the good of one's own nation alone, without regard for the rights of others, patriotism, on the other hand, is a love for one's native land that accords rights to all other nations equal to those claimed for one's own. Patriotism, in other words, leads to a properly ordered social love.

Pope Saint John Paul II served as Pope from 1978 to 2005. He was canonized in 2014.

