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The Apocalypse of the Modern Self

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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.

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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?

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[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.

