

FEELINGS AS TRUTH.
SEX AS DESTINY.
THE NEW CULTURAL ORTHODOXY
AND HOW WE GOT HERE

THE TWISTED SELF

by Carl R. Trueman

ILLUSTRATION BY
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any of us are familiar with books and movies in which plots revolve around characters who find themselves trapped in worlds where nothing works in quite the way they expect. Whether it is Alice wandering through Wonderland or Keanu Reeves trapped in the Matrix, they feel disoriented, confused, and anxious. And that is the way many people feel today in our world, where everything that seemed certain only the day before yesterday—the definition of marriage or the meaning of the word *woman*, for example—seem now to be in a state of flux.

To understand this chaos, some historical reflection is necessary. Take, for example, the observation of Christian ethicist Oliver O'Donovan on the abortion debates of the 1970s. He noted that he and other pro-life advocates had made a fundamental mistake: They did not anticipate that the weakest argument of the abortion lobby would ultimately prove to be its strongest and most persuasive: that the baby in the womb is merely part of the woman's body. Everyone, whether pro-life or pro-abortion, knows that isn't the case. That's why wombs and their contents arouse so much passion on both sides of the debate. Why then did this obviously weak argument triumph? The answer, according to O'Donovan, was that it appealed to the deepest intuitions of modern men and women who think of themselves as free and autonomous—who conceive of life's purpose as attaining personal psychological happiness, a sense of inner well-being. In short, modern men and women got behind the argument that would give them what they wanted anyway—personal peace and contentment.

Decades on from O'Donovan's reflections, it is more clear than ever that this intuitive understanding of what it means to be human has empowered far more

than just the rhetorical arguments of the abortion lobby. Take the transgender issue, for example. Until recently, most people would have scoffed at a man who claimed he is really a woman trapped in the wrong body. And they would have dismissed as nonsense any suggestion that the term *gender* could have meaning apart from bodily sex. Now such statements and ideas are standard fare in our culture, from sitcoms to human resources departments to elementary schools.

And not only is transgenderism deemed merely plausible in our world, it's become a requirement of the new cultural orthodoxy. An article of faith. So much so that critics of trans ideology, such as author J.K. Rowling, are being digitally drawn and quartered.

All of this indicates that, if we wish to understand the real nature of the remarkable changes that are fracturing our society, we must set them within the broader context of how people think or imagine themselves to be. In the abortion debate, O'Donovan pointed not to the importance of arguments per se, but of the broader moral imagination that made certain arguments—even very weak ones—rhetorically powerful.

How have we become a society where we think of ourselves as autonomous? Where our emotions and

inner feelings determine who we think we are? Where personal, individual, psychological happiness has become a basic criterion for deciding what is and is not moral—and even what's real?

HOW WE GOT HERE

There is no single, simple answer to these questions as a variety of factors have all played a critical role. There is an intellectual narrative involving key thinkers whose ideas have shaped the view of reality. The plaything of educational elites, this narrative has trickled down through media and entertainment and into our streets. Meanwhile, technological developments have not simply changed how we behave, but have reshaped how we think about and relate to the world around us. Then there is the rise of a politics predicated on new and often volatile identities: gender, race, and sexuality. No longer just a clash of worldviews, this politics poses a fundamental challenge to the very coherence of our society. And all of these connect to basic transformations of the nature and purpose of the institutions that define our culture.

Many thinkers have helped shape the modern mindset. One particularly influential example: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the 18th-century Genevan philosopher. Few may read Rousseau today, but he still casts a long shadow as arguably one of the key sources for child-centered educational theories. Rousseau's statement that "Man is born free and everywhere is in chains" might well serve as the most concise summary of the modern myth of what it means to be a human being.

Rousseau believed that human beings are born in a fundamentally pristine state. Indeed, despite his protestations to the contrary, his own autobiography, *Confessions*, reads in part as a response to the great author of a book with the same title: Augustine. Augustine may have thought we human beings are born depraved, but Rousseau disagreed. For him, we emerge from the womb naturally empathetic and moral. It is only the demands of polite society that pervert us, encouraging us to be selfish in our dealings with others and to advance our status by conforming to the expectations society places on us. It is society that has morally ruined us.

Rousseau's approach to selfhood proved a powerful influence on the artistic movement we now call Romanticism. This movement flourished particularly in Germany and England in the late 18th and early

19th centuries. It was to an extent a response to the bloodshed of the French Revolution and to the Cult of Reason that had proved so inadequate as a basis for building a just society. Romanticism saw art as a means of improving humanity, by giving appropriate shape to the emotions. For the poet William Wordsworth, this meant helping the reader of his poems reconnect with nature. For the writer Percy Shelley, this meant helping readers respond with indignation to injustice and desire a more equitable society. Both men believed thoughts and emotions were key to the human condition.

Rousseau and his Romantic heirs championed what modern sociologist Robert Bellah calls *expressive individualism*. This is the idea that each person has an inner core defined by feelings and intuitions that need to find outward expression in order for the individual to be authentic. Never mind that the human heart is deceitful and wicked above all things. The Romantics wanted it worn on our sleeves. But there is a key difference between the views of Rousseau and company and the normative kind of selfhood we have today. Rousseau and the Romantics assumed human nature had an intrinsic moral shape. This meant that, for them, the move inward to feelings and sentiments was not a move to pure subjectivity. Rather it was a *return* to the pristine self—to the built-in moral structure that society had obscured or corrupted. But once the notion that we all share a common, objective, moral human nature is denied, then everything changes. Then the individual will becomes sovereign, and human beings do descend into pure subjectivity, and ideas such as happiness, flourishing, good, and evil become matters of personal preference. That is where we are today.

Jer. 17:9

THE DESIGNER SELF

This rejection of human nature as having an intrinsic moral structure and unavoidable authority really emerged as a potent philosophical force in the 19th century. A key source is the German thinker G.W.F. Hegel. Hegel noted that human beings thought differently throughout history. An ancient Athenian, a medieval Tuscan, a Reformation Englishman, and a 19th-century Prussian would each think about themselves, the world, and their place within it in different ways.

Hegel was not pressing for a radical annihilation of the notion of human nature in its entirety, but he

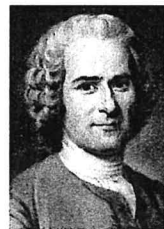
did press toward it being understood as a creature of history whose content came from its historical context. Still, this added another layer of subjectivity—and malleability. And in the hands of Hegel's most influential and revolutionary quasi-disciple, Karl Marx, this historicism became so much political clay. Marx took objective definitions of what it means to be human and to live within a common moral framework and molded them to assert bold, new "realities." Thus, for example, a claim that marriage should naturally be between one man and one woman for life was not really "natural" at all. Rather, it was asserting as non-negotiable a social arrangement that happened to serve the economic interests of the ruling class. If that sounds familiar, it's because it has so many parallels in the modern progressive movement. These days, arguments against the traditional family as patriarchal or racist or homophobic—whatever the diatribe of the month may be—abound.

Other 19th-century thinkers also helped undermine the notion of human nature as possessing an inherent morality. Charles Darwin relativized the difference between humans and other animals, denying that humanity had any special, transcendent purpose or meaning. While his motivation was not political, as with Marx, the implications were very similar: Moral categories of existence were merely mystifications of behaviors really only necessary for the survival of the species. And then the greatest philosophical iconoclast of them all, Friedrich Nietzsche, argued that all moral systems were merely power plays by one person or group designed to manipulate others. In the hands of Nietzsche, the very notion of "human nature" was only an invention, a sly construct used to inhibit the strong and make them weak.

Nietzsche's dark view of human psychology found a scientific counterpart in the work of Sigmund Freud, who saw the inner psychological space of human beings as dark and destructive, characterized above all by sexual desires. Indeed, for Freud, adulthood no longer meant becoming a sexual being but expressing the sexual desires that were always there. From the early 1900's, Freud's work took the world by storm and gave expression to an idea that now grips the popular imagination: Sex is not primarily something we do. It is something we are.

Take, for example, the terms *lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual*, and *straight*. Today, they are intuitively meaningful to us. Yet in conceding that point we concede that desire,

THINKERS WHO H



Jean-Jacques Rousseau

► June 28, 1712–
July 2, 1778

► Location:
Geneva

Rousseau's career as a public philosopher began in 1750, when he won first place in an essay-writing contest by arguing that the development of the arts and sciences led to moral degradation. He believed that man is naturally free, equal, and peaceful and that corruption comes from external institutions. Rousseau argued that man can never return to his free, pre-rational state. But he believed man could recover freedom by creating a government whose power came from the consent of the governed. Rousseau became one of three major social contract theorists. His ideas helped spark Romanticism, the French Revolution, and American democracy.



Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

► Aug. 27, 1770–
Nov. 14, 1831

► Location:
Germany

Hegel published his most famous work, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, in 1807. In it, he argued that every thesis—or premise—has a weakness. Such a weakness leaves room for an antithesis—an argument in opposition. Pitting a thesis against its antithesis will eventually create a

HELPED SHAPE THE MODERN MINDSET

“synthesis” that, by drawing ideas from both, moves closer to the truth. Hegel proposed that this process continues until eventually hitting the endpoint of knowledge. He believed history worked the same way, moving from thesis to synthesis as people learned and got closer to the truth. The work, which would later inspire Karl Marx, made Hegel famous, and he spent the rest of his life working as a newspaper editor and academic.



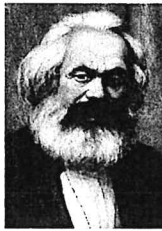
Charles Darwin

► **Feb. 12, 1809–April 19, 1882**

► **Location: England**

Darwin studied to be a clergyman

after his distaste for corpses drove him from medicine. After deciding he felt no call to ministry, he took geology and zoology classes on the side and set sail on the HMS *Beagle*. During a five-year voyage, he discovered the famous Galapagos tortoises and finches, ate the tortoises, and began to doubt the Bible’s accuracy. His resulting book, *The Descent of Man*, argued that man evolved from lower life forms. His rejection of the Bible’s account of creation undermined Christianity and redefined how man viewed himself, individually and socially.



Karl Marx

► **May 5, 1818–March 14, 1883**

► **Location: Germany**

Marx studied law and philosophy,

particularly Hegel’s theory of history. In the 1840s, he moved to Paris, where he grew increasingly unhappy with capitalism and began adopting socialist views. He viewed history in economic and political terms, with common ownership, private property and slavery, feudalism, and capitalism as four major stages. Each ended through violence, Marx believed, and the discontented lower class would inevitably overthrow the greedy upper class and replace capitalism with communism. Marx supported several uprisings across Europe and helped launch the Communist League, a political society that appealed to the working classes. He co-wrote its plan of action, *The Communist Manifesto*, with Friedrich Engels. Driven out of mainland Europe due to his political activities, Marx settled in London, where he wrote his major life work, *Das Kapital*.



Friedrich Nietzsche

► **Oct. 15, 1844–Aug. 25, 1900**

► **Location: Germany**

Nietzsche

believed striving for the “good” moral character outlined by traditional religion is an affront to life,

because it means rejecting certain sources of happiness as morally wrong. But, concerned that removing religion would leave a hole, he developed the idea of the *Übermensch*, a superman who lives only by his own standards, who values and is driven by the “will to power”—to perfect and transcend the self. Nietzsche suffered a mental collapse in 1889 after trying to save a horse from a whipping in the street. He died 11 years later.



Sigmund Freud

► **May 6, 1856–Sept. 23, 1939**

► **Location: Austria**

Freud argued that instincts are the

main motivating forces in the mental realm, and that sexual energy is the most important motivator. He believed babies are born with impulses that lead them to be sexually attracted to the opposite-sex parent. He attributed his poor relationship with his father to this phenomenon. But Freud redefined sexuality to include any pleasure that can be obtained from the body. Most famously, he founded psychoanalysis, a technique for verbalizing and confronting trauma that sought to cure mental disorders. —*Abi Churchill*

not action, defines sex, which defines *us*. To say “I am straight” is to make an identity claim, but it is not to assert that I have ever had a sexual encounter with someone else. It is a statement of felt desire, not action.

Few today have read Rousseau, Marx, Nietzsche, or Darwin, let alone reflected deeply upon Hegel and his heirs. So how did their ideas, expressed through sophisticated arguments in lengthy books, become the instincts and intuitions of society at large? A large part of the answer is technology. Technology panders to the myths that fallen human beings want to believe about themselves. First, that we are free, answerable to no one, and masters of our own destinies. Second, that human nature involves no accountability to some set of objective moral standards.

THE DIGITAL SELF

So how do technological developments do this? The short answer is: Technology is decisive for the way we interact with the world and, therefore, how we come to imagine who we really are.

First, technology weakens the bonds of community. Take music, for example. Two hundred years ago music was a matter of communal production. To enjoy music, one needed to be either part of a group making it or present at a gathering that witnessed its production. Today most of us experience music most of the time as a matter of individual consumption. We listen in private. We choose what we listen to. We listen when we want to.

You might consider that a trivial matter of entertainment, but it captures in miniature how technology shapes the way we imagine ourselves in the world. We are sovereign. We can bend the world to suit our individual desires. This leads to the second important impact of technology. It gives us a sense that we are all-powerful and the world is so much raw material we can simply bend to our wills. Further, institutional authority is eroded. Using the internet as the bridge to all places, we are no longer tethered to bricks-and-mortar ... or to the institutions therein. The worker can seek work where he wants, the churchgoer can worship where he wants, and the shopper can shop where he wants.

Technology has also fostered a third cultural intuition: Phenomena once regarded as moral problems are now really no more than technical problems. STDs used to be seen as the result of immoral behavior.



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That was an easy position to maintain in a time when there was no way of addressing prevention other than encouraging celibacy outside of marriage and monogamous fidelity within it. With the advent of antibiotics, STDs became simply problems to be solved with the right medicine.

In fact, the technological revolution lies at the heart of the transformation of sex in society. In time past, the idea of sex as recreation was impractical. Before easy access to reliable contraception and abortion, it was hard to imagine sex as mere recreation. The risk of disease or pregnancy meant that sex came with responsibilities. Technology has broken that connection. Further, pornography objectifies the sexual act, repurposes it as entertainment, and severs sexual pleasure from any broader interpersonal relationship. This further fuels the notion that what counts in sex is my desire and my satisfaction—and reinforces the idea of individual happiness and expression as the goal both of living and of modern identity politics.

These three strands of our culture's technological imagination have come together in a potent form in transgenderism. Transgenderism grants huge authority to the desires of the autonomous individual. It

assumes that nature is really just raw material. And it sees technology as a key component in determining not only what is right and what is wrong, but indeed what is possible. What is real and what is merely an oppressive ideological imposition. Thus, even our bodies cease to have authority in the face of our minds, our feelings, our inner desires ... and our access to certain medical procedures. It is only because of technological developments that we can even imagine the *possibility* of changing from a man to a woman.

There is one more notable way in which technology helps to cultivate expressive individualism. That is the central role it allows for public performance. If authenticity is found by giving outward expression to inward feelings, then social media makes all the world a stage. Now we all can present any part of our lives as a public performance to a vast audience. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok all provide platforms for exhibitionism.

In very real terms, such platforms have taken expressive individualism shaped by intellectuals and mainlined it into the larger culture. You do not need to have read Nietzsche to think that nature has no intrinsic authority, that human nature has therefore no intrinsic moral shape, that reality is whatever you might care to make it, and that happiness is to be found by satisfying your inner desires. You do not need to have heard of Freud to believe that sex defines who we are. You need only a steady diet of social media—or even to follow the basic plotlines of myriad mainstream movies or TV shows. Sex is destiny and sexual fulfillment is meaning. That is the not-so-subliminal message.

FUTURE SHOCK

So far, so depressing. But what broader cultural and political transformations is this view of the self bringing in its wake? How is expressive individualism, infused with sex and supercharged by the advent of social media, reshaping the practical realities of the world in which we live? What new strangeness looks set to further twist our strange new world?

First, the old values of social engagement are being overthrown. In an expressive world, where authenticity is found in performance, those things once considered virtues—modesty, reserve, respect for authority, etc.—start to look more like signs of repression. Second, given the central role of sex to modern identity, sexual

exhibitionism and the destruction of traditional sexual mores becomes a central part of the modern program of cultural transformation. For the progressive, this must reach ever earlier into childhood. Children will be taught to express themselves sexually because that, according to modern cultural assumptions, is actually *who they are*. Anyone puzzled by the number of families with young children happily cheering on the ostentatious and explicit sexual flamboyance on display at pride rallies need only reflect on the narrative of the modern self to understand what they are seeing. The modern world does not think it is sexualizing children. It thinks kids are *born* sexualized. To be truly themselves, they merely need to be helped to realize that.

Third, cultural principles that used to enjoy support across the mainstream political spectrum, such as freedom of speech and freedom of religion, will become increasingly implausible—and vulnerable. Once the self becomes psychologized and happiness is identified with an inner sense of contentment, words become weapons. Their use must be regulated as tightly as physical violence. Hence the advent of restrictive speech codes and increasing pressure on the free exercise of religion in the public space. To refuse to use a trans person's preferred pronouns is to refuse to acknowledge them for who they think they are. Such refusals will be regarded as an assault on their person because it denies the sovereignty of their inner feelings and the legitimacy of their chosen identity.

Of course, this will itself lead to further difficulties because not all identities are compatible—the vocal Christian, for example, and the outspoken drag queen. So somebody will have to decide whom to recognize and whom to silence. Hence that other strangeness we see emerging even now: Radical individual freedom is fostering remarkably intolerant and sometimes totalitarian policies in the workplace and even society at large.

We do indeed live in a strange new world. The good news? It is built on a myth. We are not born free but radically dependent on others and subject to nature and her God. The bad news? We can do a lot of damage trying to deny those basic and obvious truths. Yet, as O'Donovan saw in retrospect with regard to the abortion debate, this strangeness has a logic to it. And while its roots are deep and its foundations well established, grasping that logic is surely the first step to mounting a thoughtful response. ■

—Carl R. Trueman is a professor of Biblical and religious studies at Grove City College and author of *Strange New World*