

Current Trends and Individual Identity, pt. 2

Where in the World Are We, and How Did We Get Here?

Philip Rieff (1922-2006) and 1st, 2nd, and 3rd World Cultures:

1st world – PAGAN CULTURES – Moral authority is transcendent, emphasizes fate and mythology

2nd world – RELIGIOUS CULTURES – Moral authority is transcendent, emphasizes faith and revelation

- 1st and 2nd world cultures are stable because they ground their morality in something outside of themselves.

3rd world – POST RELIGIOUS CULTURES – Moral authority is internal, foundations for morality are not sacred. Moral foundations become individual and therapeutic.

- Rieff calls this “psychological man.” “The only moral criterion that can be applied to behavior is whether it conduces to the feeling of wellbeing in the individuals concerned. Ethics, therefore, becomes a function of feeling (Trueman, pg. 79).”

These 3 “worlds” are completely incompatible and yet they can exist in the same society at the same time. That is why our current culture feels like a battle zone! People are literally thinking about morality in ways that are “worlds” apart.

3rd World Cultures lead to:

Emotivism – all moral judgments are nothing more than expressions of personal preference.

- Therefore, moral judgments are seen as power plays at best, and violence at worst.
- Emotivism is also used as a strategy in moral arguments. If you present those who disagree with you as irrational and prejudiced you have basically won the argument.
- That is why everything is presented as a “phobia” i.e. homophobia, transphobia, etc.

Deconstruction – These 3rd world cultures tear down moral codes without replacing them.

And now... some history:

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)

- Rousseau’s *Confessions*:
 - Steals asparagus, but sees it as a good act because it was to help a friend.
 - Contrary to Augustine’s *Confessions* where he steals pears and blames his sin nature.
 - Rousseau believed that he was born innocent and that society corrupts him.
 - Augustine believes in total depravity.
- Rousseau’s Primary Philosophical Ideas:
 - Civilization is the source of social ills. Society and social institutions corrupt. Individuals in their “natural state” are basically pure. RESULT? – The French Revolution!
 - Ethics are a function of empathy, i.e. how would you like to be treated if you were in the same situation? There is some truth to this. But it also internalizes morality.
- The “innocence” and value of the “state of nature” has led to a cult of youth. If we are born innocent and society is responsible for corrupting us, then youth and youthfulness will be elevated. Best recent example of this is Greta Thunberg’s “How Dare You” speech to the UN Climate Action Summit in 2019 and becoming Time Magazine’s person of the year also in 2019.
- By the way, Rousseau sent all of his 5 children to orphanages at birth.

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) and the “Unacknowledged Legislators”

- Shelley was a leading Romantic poet. Some of his primary ideas:
- Poetry (literal poetry, but also the arts) appeal to the heart, therefore, they are the most effective means of both personal and political transformation.
- “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World.” – Shelley in *A Defense of Poetry*

- Shelley attacked institutional religion because it “polices” behavior instead of encouraging freedom of human behavior based on feeling and personal fulfillment apart from reason.
- Shelley promoted sexual liberation as a means of political liberation.
- “Love withers under constraint; its very essence is liberty.” – Shelley in *Queen Mab*
- Shelley promoted a revolution that was both sexual and irreligious because he believed that personal authenticity could only be found in free love and throwing off the restraints of religion.
- RESPONSE – It seems to me that these ideas are very anti-children, anti-family, and antisocial because children by definition constrain your lifestyle, families require commitment, and indeed any social relationship requires give and take.

What is the “Social Imaginary” – The Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor (1931-present), has pointed out that something more than just ideas (worldview) move individuals and cultures to “imagine” the world in a certain way. We aren’t all serious philosophers, but we do see the world through stories, relationships, emotions etc. Example: A lot of young people are growing up with a “be yourself,” “Let It Go!” philosophy in life that they didn’t get from reading Shelley’s poetry or Freud’s discourses.

Charles Darwin (1809-1882) – Origin of Species

- If you can explain the human race through natural selection and survival of the fittest...
 - You don’t need a divine creator...
 - But the human race also does not have any special status in nature...
 - And the human race and human history does not have any specific purpose.
 - Consequently, you can create your own purpose by seeking pleasure.

Karl Marx (1818 – 1883) – Human history is the history of oppression.

- He claimed that family, state, church were tools of the elite to keep the masses in line.
- This explains the “victim” mentality of today.
- This also explains why everything is so politicized in our current culture. You can’t make a movie, run a Boy Scout troop, or run a bakery without “making a statement.”

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) – the sexualization of the self

- If sexuality is one of the strongest urges that human feel...
And remember that feelings are primary in determining who we are...
- The sexuality is equal to identity.
- Freud also promoted the idea that sexual urges began in childhood, not puberty.
And if you combine that idea with the idea that children are innocent...
- Then any sexual urge or expression is by definition both innocent and a part of “who you are.”

MODERN EXPRESSIVE INDIVIDUALISM: “The real identity of an individual is to be found in the inner psychological autobiography. The authentic individual is one who behaves outwardly in accordance with this inner psychological nature (Trueman, 129).”

The modern ideal of “self-determination” has become the post-modern ideal of “self-definition.”

The “psychologizing of oppression” – If everything, especially personal identity, is sexual (Freud) and everything is a function of either oppressing or being oppressed (Marx) then you get the perfect storm of what we see today, i.e. saying that a particular sexual practice is wrong or saying that a man is a man, etc. is considered oppression. EXAMPLE - 100 years ago, if you told the doctor that you are a woman born in a man’s body, he would say, you have a problem in your mind; let’s get you some psychological help. Today he would say, you have a problem in your body, let’s adjust your body.

*Everything in this lesson is based on The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self, by Carl Trueman, chapters 1-7