

The Ethics of Authenticity

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Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
and London, England

I THREE MALAISES

I want to write here about some of the malaises of modernity. I mean by this features of our contemporary culture and society that people experience as a loss or a decline, even as our civilization "develops." Sometimes people feel that some important decline has occurred during the last years or decades — since the Second World War, or the 1950s, for instance. And sometimes the loss is felt over a much longer historical period: the whole modern era from the seventeenth century is frequently seen as the time frame of decline. Yet although the time scale can vary greatly, there is certain convergence on the themes of decline. They are often variations around a few central melodies. I want to pick out two such central themes here, and then throw in a third that largely derives from these two. These

three by no means exhaust the topic, but they do get at a great deal of what troubles and perplexes us about modern society.

The worries I will be talking about are very familiar. No one needs to be reminded of them; they are discussed, bemoaned, challenged, and argued against all the time in all sorts of media. That sounds like a reason not to talk about them further. But I believe that this great familiarity hides bewilderment, that we don't really understand these changes that worry us, that the usual run of debate about them in fact misrepresents them — and thus makes us misconceive what we can do about them. The changes defining modernity are both well-known and very perplexing, and that is why it's worth talking still more about them.

(1) The first source of worry is individualism. Of course, individualism also names what many people consider the finest achievement of modern civilization. We live in a world where people have a right to choose for themselves their own pattern of life, to decide in conscience what convictions to espouse, to determine the shape of their lives in a whole host of ways that their ancestors couldn't control. And these rights are generally defended by our legal systems. In principle, people are no longer sacrificed to the demands of supposedly sacred orders that transcend them.

Very few people want to go back on this achievement. Indeed, many think that it is still incomplete, that economic arrangements, or patterns of family life, or traditional notions of hierarchy still restrict too much our freedom to be ourselves. But many of

us are also ambivalent. Modern freedom was won by our breaking loose from older moral horizons. People used to see themselves as part of a larger order. In some cases, this was a cosmic order, a "great chain of Being," in which humans figured in their proper place along with angels, heavenly bodies, and our fellow earthly creatures. This hierarchical order in the universe was reflected in the hierarchies of human society. People were often locked into a given place, a role and station that was properly theirs and from which it was almost unthinkable to deviate. Modern freedom came about through the discrediting of such orders.

But at the same time as they restricted us, these orders gave meaning to the world and to the activities of social life. The things that surround us were not just potential raw materials or instruments for our projects, but they had the significance given them by their place in the chain of being. The eagle was not just another bird, but the king of a whole domain of animal life. By the same token, the rituals and norms of society had more than merely instrumental significance. The discrediting of these orders has been called the "disenchantment" of the world. With it, things lost some of their magic.

A vigorous debate has been going on for a couple of centuries as to whether this was an unambiguously good thing. But this is not what I want to focus on here. I want to look rather at what some have seen to be the consequences for human life and meaning.

The worry has been repeatedly expressed that the individual lost something important along with the larger social and cosmic horizons of action. Some

have written of this as the loss of a heroic dimension to life. People no longer have a sense of a higher purpose, of something worth dying for. Alexis de Tocqueville sometimes talked like this in the last century, referring to the "petits et vulgaires plaisirs" that people tend to seek in the democratic age.¹ In another articulation, we suffer from a lack of passion. Kierkegaard saw "the present age" in these terms. And Nietzsche's "last men" are at the final nadir of this decline; they have no aspiration left in life but to a "pitiable comfort."²

This loss of purpose was linked to a narrowing. People lost the broader vision because they focussed on their individual lives. Democratic equality, says Tocqueville, draws the individual towards himself, "et menace de le renfermer enfin tout entier dans la solitude de son propre coeur."³ In other words, the dark side of individualism is a centring on the self, which both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society.

This worry has recently surfaced again in concern at the fruits of a "permissive society," the doings of the "me generation," or the prevalence of "narcissism," to take just three of the best-known contemporary formulations. The sense that lives have been flattened and narrowed, and that this is connected to an abnormal and regrettable self-absorption, has returned in forms specific to contemporary culture. This defines the first theme I want to deal with.

(2) The disenchantment of the world is connected to another massively important phenomenon of the modern age, which also greatly troubles

many people. We might call this the primacy of instrumental reason. By "instrumental reason" I mean the kind of rationality we draw on when we calculate the most economical application of means to a given end. Maximum efficiency, the best cost-output ratio, is its measure of success.

No doubt sweeping away the old orders has immensely widened the scope of instrumental reason. Once society no longer has a sacred structure, once social arrangements and modes of action are no longer grounded in the order of things or the will of God, they are in a sense up for grabs. They can be redesigned with their consequences for the happiness and well-being of individuals as our goal. The yardstick that henceforth applies is that of instrumental reason. Similarly, once the creatures that surround us lose the significance that accrued to their place in the chain of being, they are open to being treated as raw materials or instruments for our projects.

In one way this change has been liberating. But there is also a widespread unease that instrumental reason not only has enlarged its scope but also threatens to take over our lives. The fear is that things that ought to be determined by other criteria will be decided in terms of efficiency or "cost-benefit" analysis, that the independent ends that ought to be guiding our lives will be eclipsed by the demand to maximize output. There are lots of things one can point to that give substance to this worry: for instance, the ways the demands of economic growth are used to justify very unequal distributions of wealth and income, or the way these same demands make us insensitive to the needs of the environment, even to the point of poten-

tial disaster. Or else, we can think of the way much of our social planning, in crucial areas like risk assessment, is dominated by forms of cost-benefit analysis that involve grotesque calculations, putting dollar assessments on human lives.⁴

The primacy of instrumental reason is also evident in the prestige and aura that surround technology, and makes us believe that we should seek technological solutions even when something very different is called for. We see this often enough in the realm of politics, as Bellah and his colleagues forcefully argue in their new book.⁵ But it also invades other domains, such as medicine. Patricia Benner has argued in a number of important works that the technological approach in medicine has often sidelined the kind of care that involves treating the patient as a whole person with a life story, and not as the locus of a technical problem. Society and the medical establishment frequently undervalue the contribution of nurses, who more often than not provide this humanly sensitive caring, as against that of specialists with high-tech knowledge.⁶

The dominant place of technology is also thought to have contributed to the narrowing and flattening of our lives that I have just been discussing in connection with the first theme. People have spoken of a loss of resonance, depth, or richness in our human surroundings. Almost 150 years ago, Marx, in the *Communist Manifesto*, remarked that one of the results of capitalist development was that "all that is solid melts in air." The claim is that the solid, lasting, often expressive objects that served us in the past are being set aside for the quick, shoddy, replaceable

commodities with which we now surround ourselves. Albert Borgman speaks of the "device paradigm," whereby we withdraw more and more from "manifold engagement" with our environment and instead request and get products designed to deliver some circumscribed benefit. He contrasts what is involved in heating our homes, with the contemporary central heating furnace, with what this same function entailed in pioneer times, when the whole family had to be involved in cutting and stacking the wood and feeding the stove or fireplace.⁷ Hannah Arendt focussed on the more and more ephemeral quality of modern objects of use and argued that "the reality and reliability of the human world rest primarily on the fact that we are surrounded by things more permanent than the activity by which they are produced."⁸ This permanence comes under threat in a world of modern commodities.

This sense of threat is increased by the knowledge that this primacy is not just a matter of a perhaps unconscious orientation, which we are prodded and tempted into by the modern age. As such it would be hard enough to combat, but at least it might yield to persuasion. But it is also clear that powerful mechanisms of social life press us in this direction. A manager in spite of her own orientation may be forced by the conditions of the market to adopt a maximizing strategy she feels is destructive. A bureaucrat, in spite of his personal insight, may be forced by the rules under which he operates to make a decision he knows to be against humanity and good sense.

Marx and Weber and other great theorists have

explored these impersonal mechanisms, which Weber has designated by the evocative term of "the iron cage." And some people have wanted to draw from these analyses the conclusion that we are utterly helpless in the face of such forces, or at least helpless unless we totally dismantle the institutional structures under which we have been operating for the last centuries — that is, the market and the state. This aspiration seems so unrealizable today that it amounts to declaring us helpless.

I want to return to this below, but I believe that these strong theories of fatality are abstract and wrong. Our degrees of freedom are not zero. There is a point to deliberating what ought to be our ends, and whether instrumental reason ought to have a lesser role in our lives than it does. But the truth in these analyses is that it is not just a matter of changing the outlook of individuals, it is not just a battle of "hearts and minds," important as this is. Change in this domain will have to be institutional as well, even though it cannot be as sweeping and total as the great theorists of revolution proposed.

(3) This brings us to the political level, and to the feared consequences for political life of individualism and instrumental reason. One I have already introduced. It is that the institutions and structures of industrial-technological society severely restrict our choices, that they force societies as well as individuals to give a weight to instrumental reason that in serious moral deliberation we would never do, and which may even be highly destructive. A case in point is our great difficulties in tackling even vital threats to our lives from environmental disasters,

like the thinning ozone layer. The society structured around instrumental reason can be seen as imposing a great loss of freedom, on both individuals and the group — because it is not just our social decisions that are shaped by these forces. An individual life-style is also hard to sustain against the grain. For instance, the whole design of some modern cities makes it hard to function without a car, particularly where public transport has been eroded in favour of the private automobile.

But there is another kind of loss of freedom, which has also been widely discussed, most memorably by Alexis de Tocqueville. A society in which people end up as the kind of individuals who are "enclosed in their own hearts" is one where few will want to participate actively in self-government. They will prefer to stay at home and enjoy the satisfactions of private life, as long as the government of the day produces the means to these satisfactions and distributes them widely.

This opens the danger of a new, specifically modern form of despotism, which Tocqueville calls "soft" despotism. It will not be a tyranny of terror and oppression as in the old days. The government will be mild and paternalistic. It may even keep democratic forms, with periodic elections. But in fact, everything will be run by an "immense tutelary power,"⁹ over which people will have little control. The only defence against this, Tocqueville thinks, is a vigorous political culture in which participation is valued, at several levels of government and in voluntary associations as well. But the atomism of the self-absorbed individual militates against this. Once

participation declines, once the lateral associations that were its vehicles wither away, the individual citizen is left alone in the face of the vast bureaucratic state and feels, correctly, powerless. This demotivates the citizen even further, and the vicious cycle of soft despotism is joined.

Perhaps something like this alienation from the public sphere and consequent loss of political control is happening in our highly centralized and bureaucratic political world. Many contemporary thinkers have seen Tocqueville's work as prophetic.¹⁰ If this is so, what we are in danger of losing is political control over our destiny, something we could exercise in common as citizens. This is what Tocqueville called "political liberty." What is threatened here is our dignity as citizens. The impersonal mechanisms mentioned above may reduce our degrees of freedom as a society, but the loss of political liberty would mean that even the choices left would no longer be made by ourselves as citizens, but by irresponsible tutelary power.

These, then, are the three malaises about modernity that I want to deal with in this book. The first fear is about what we might call a loss of meaning, the fading of moral horizons. The second concerns the eclipse of ends, in face of rampant instrumental reason. And the third is about a loss of freedom.

III THE SOURCES OF AUTHENTICITY

The ethic of authenticity is something relatively new and peculiar to modern culture. Born at the end of the eighteenth century, it builds on earlier forms of individualism, such as the individualism of disengaged rationality, pioneered by Descartes, where the demand is that each person think self-responsibly for him- or herself, or the political individualism of Locke, which sought to make the person and his or her will prior to social obligation. But authenticity also has been in some respects in conflict with these earlier forms. It is a child of the Romantic period, which was critical of disengaged rationality and of an atomism that didn't recognize the ties of community.

One way of describing its development is to see its starting point in the eighteenth-century notion

that human beings are endowed with a moral sense, an intuitive feeling for what is right and wrong. The original point of this doctrine was to combat a rival view, that knowing right and wrong was a matter of calculating consequences, in particular those concerned with divine reward and punishment. The notion was that understanding right and wrong was not a matter of dry calculation, but was anchored in our feelings. Morality has, in a sense, a voice within.²⁰

The notion of authenticity develops out of a displacement of the moral accent in this idea. On the original view, the inner voice is important because it tells us what is the right thing to do. Being in touch with our moral feelings would matter here, as a means to the end of acting rightly. What I'm calling the displacement of the moral accent comes about when being in touch takes on independent and crucial moral significance. It comes to be something we have to attain to be true and full human beings.

To see what is new in this, we have to see the analogy to earlier moral views, where being in touch with some source — God, say, or the Idea of the Good — was considered essential to full being. Only now the source we have to connect with is deep in us. This is part of the massive subjective turn of modern culture, a new form of inwardness, in which we come to think of ourselves as beings with inner depths. At first, this idea that the source is within doesn't exclude our being related to God or the Ideas; it can be considered our proper way to them. In a sense, it can be seen just as a continuation and intensification of the development inaugurated by Saint Augustine, who saw the road

to God as passing through our own reflexive awareness of ourselves.

The first variants of this new view were theistic, or at least pantheist. This is illustrated by the most important philosophical writer who helped to bring about this change, Jean Jacques Rousseau. I think Rousseau is important not because he inaugurated the change; rather I would argue that his great popularity comes in part from his articulating something that was already happening in the culture. Rousseau frequently presents the issue of morality as that of our following a voice of nature within us. This voice is most often drowned out by the passions induced by our dependence on others, of which the key one is "amour propre" or pride. Our moral salvation comes from recovering authentic moral contact with ourselves. Rousseau even gives a name to the intimate contact with oneself, more fundamental than any moral view, that is a source of joy and contentment: "le sentiment de l'existence."²¹

Rousseau also articulated a closely related idea in a most influential way. This is the notion of what I want to call self-determining freedom. It is the idea that I am free when I decide for myself what concerns me, rather than being shaped by external influences. It is a standard of freedom that obviously goes beyond what has been called negative liberty, where I am free to do what I want without interference by others because that is compatible with my being shaped and influenced by society and its laws of conformity. Self-determining freedom demands that I break the hold of all such external impositions, and decide for myself alone.

I mention this here not because it is essential to authenticity. Obviously the two ideals are distinct. But they have developed together, sometimes in the works of the same authors, and their relations have been complex, sometimes at odds, sometimes closely bound together. As a result, they have often been confused, and this has been one of the sources of the deviant forms of authenticity, as I shall argue. I will return to this later.

Self-determining freedom has been an idea of immense power in our political life. In Rousseau's work it takes political form, in the notion of a social contract state founded on a general will, which precisely because it is the form of our common freedom can brook no opposition in the name of freedom. This idea has been one of the intellectual sources of modern totalitarianism, starting, one might argue, with the Jacobins. And although Kant reinterpreted this notion of freedom in purely moral terms, as autonomy, it returns to the political sphere with a vengeance with Hegel and Marx.

But to return to the ideal of authenticity: it becomes crucially important because of a development that occurs after Rousseau and that I associate with Herder — once again its major early articulator rather than its originator. Herder put forward the idea that each of us has an original way of being human. Each person has his or her own "measure" is his way of putting it.²² This idea has entered very deep into modern consciousness. It is also new. Before the late eighteenth century no one thought that the differences between human beings had this kind of moral significance. There is a certain way of being

human that is *my* way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else's. But this gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for *me*.

This is the powerful moral ideal that has come down to us. It accords crucial moral importance to a kind of contact with myself, with my own inner nature, which it sees as in danger of being lost, partly through the pressures towards outward conformity, but also because in taking an instrumental stance to myself, I may have lost the capacity to listen to this inner voice. And then it greatly increases the importance of this self-contact by introducing the principle of originality: each of our voices has something of its own to say. Not only should I not fit my life to the demands of external conformity; I can't even find the model to live by outside myself. I can find it only within.

Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own. This is the background understanding to the modern ideal of authenticity, and to the goals of self-fulfilment or self-realization in which it is usually couched. This is the background that gives moral force to the culture of authenticity, including its most degraded, absurd, or trivialized forms. It is what gives sense to the idea of "doing your own thing" or "finding your own fulfilment."

But we are imagining discussing with people who are in the contemporary culture of authenticity. And that means that they are trying to shape their lives in the light of this ideal. We are not left with just the bare facts of their preferences. But if we start from the ideal, then we can ask: What are the conditions in human life of realizing an ideal of this kind? And what does the ideal properly understood call for? The two orders of questions interweave, or perhaps shade into each other. In the second, we are trying to define better what the ideal consists in. With the first, we want to bring out certain general features of human life that condition the fulfilment of this or any other ideal.

In what follows, I want to work out two lines of argument that can illustrate what is involved in this kind of questioning. The argument will be very sketchy, more in the nature of a suggestion of what a convincing demonstration might look like. The aim will be to give some plausibility to my second claim, that you can argue in reason about these matters, and hence to show that there is indeed a practical point in trying to understand better what authenticity consists in.

The general feature of human life that I want to

evoke is its fundamentally *dialogical* character. We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining an identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression. For purposes of this discussion, I want to take "language" in a broad sense, covering not only the words we speak but also other modes of expression whereby we define ourselves, including the "languages" of art, of gesture, of love, and the like. But we are inducted into these in exchange with others. No one acquires the languages needed for self-definition on their own. We are introduced to them through exchanges with others who matter to us — what George Herbert Mead called "significant others."²⁴ The genesis of the human mind is in this sense not "monological," not something each accomplishes on his or her own, but dialogical.

Moreover, this is not just a fact about *genesis*, which can be ignored later on. It's not just that we learn the languages in dialogue and then can go on to use them for our own purposes on our own. This describes our situation to some extent in our culture. We are expected to develop our own opinions, outlook, stances to things, to a considerable degree through solitary reflection. But this is not how things work with important issues, such as the definition of our identity. We define this always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the identities our significant others want to recognize in us. And even when we outgrow some of the latter — our parents, for instance — and they disappear from our lives, the conversation with them continues within us as long as we live.²⁵

So the contribution of significant others, even when it occurs at the beginning of our lives, continues throughout. Some people might be following me up to here, but still want to hold on to some form of the monological ideal. True, we can never liberate ourselves completely from those whose love and care shaped us early in life, but we should strive to define ourselves on our own to the fullest degree possible, coming as best we can to understand and thus gain some control over the influence of our parents, and avoiding falling into any further such dependencies. We will need relationships to fulfil but not to define ourselves.

This is a common ideal, but I think it seriously underestimates the place of the dialogical in human life. It still wants to confine it as much as possible to the genesis. It forgets how our understanding of the good things in life can be transformed by our enjoying them in common with people we love, how some goods become accessible to us only through such common enjoyment. Because of this, it would take a great deal of effort, and probably many wrenching break-ups, to *prevent* our identity being formed by the people we love. Consider what we mean by "identity." It is "who" we are, "where we're coming from." As such it is the background against which our tastes and desires and opinions and aspirations make sense. If some of the things I value most are accessible to me only in relation to the person I love, then she becomes internal to my identity.

To some people this might seem a limitation, from which one might aspire to free oneself. This is one way of understanding the impulse behind the life of

the hermit, or to take a case more familiar to our culture, the solitary artist. But from another perspective, we might see even this as aspiring to a certain kind of dialogicality. In the case of the hermit, the interlocutor is God. In the case of the solitary artist, the work itself is addressed to a future audience, perhaps still to be created by the work itself. The very form of a work of art shows its character as *addressed*.²⁶ But however one feels about it, the making and sustaining of our identity, in the absence of a heroic effort to break out of ordinary existence, remains dialogical throughout our lives.

I want to indicate below that this central fact has been recognized in the growing culture of authenticity. But what I want to do now is take this dialogical feature of our condition, on one hand, and certain demands inherent in the ideal of authenticity on the other, and show that the more self-centred and "narcissistic" modes of contemporary culture are manifestly inadequate. More particularly, I want to show that modes that opt for self-fulfilment without regard (a) to the demands of our ties with others or (b) to demands of any kind emanating from something more or other than human desires or aspirations are self-defeating, that they destroy the conditions for realizing authenticity itself. I'll take these in reverse order, and start with (b), arguing from the demands of authenticity itself as an ideal.

(1) When we come to understand what it is to define ourselves, to determine in what our originality consists, we see that we have to take as background some sense of what is significant. Defining myself means finding what is significant in my dif-

ference from others. I may be the only person with exactly 3,732 hairs on my head, or be exactly the same height as some tree on the Siberian plain, but so what? If I begin to say that I define myself by my ability to articulate important truths, or play the Hammerklavier like no one else, or revive the tradition of my ancestors, then we are in the domain of recognizable self-definitions.

The difference is plain. We understand right away that the latter properties have human significance, or can easily be seen by people to have this, whereas the former do not — not, that is, without some special story. Perhaps the number 3,732 is a sacred one in some society; then having this number of hairs can be significant. But we get to this by linking it to the sacred.

We saw above in the second section how the contemporary culture of authenticity slides towards soft relativism. This gives further force to a general presumption of subjectivism about value: things have significance not of themselves but because people deem them to have it — as though people could determine what is significant, either by decision, or perhaps unwittingly and unwillingly by just feeling that way. This is crazy. I couldn't just *decide* that the most significant action is wiggling my toes in warm mud. Without a special explanation, this is not an intelligible claim (like the 3,732 hairs above). So I wouldn't know what sense to attribute to someone allegedly *feeling* that this was so. What could someone *mean* who said this?

But if it makes sense only with an explanation (perhaps mud is the element of the world spirit, which you contact with your toes), it is open to

criticism. What if the explanation is wrong, doesn't pan out, or can be replaced with a better account? Your feeling a certain way can never be sufficient grounds for respecting your position, because your feeling can't *determine* what is significant. Soft relativism self-destructs.

Things take on importance against a background of intelligibility. Let us call this a horizon. It follows that one of the things we can't do, if we are to define ourselves significantly, is suppress or deny the horizons against which things take on significance for us. This is the kind of self-defeating move frequently being carried out in our subjectivist civilization. In stressing the legitimacy of choice between certain options, we very often find ourselves depriving the options of their significance. For instance, there is a certain discourse of justification of non-standard sexual orientations. People want to argue that heterosexual monogamy is not the only way to achieve sexual fulfilment, that those who are inclined to homosexual relations, for instance, shouldn't feel themselves embarked on a lesser, less worthy path. This fits well into the modern understanding of authenticity, with its notion of difference, originality, of the acceptance of diversity. I will try to say more about these connections below. But however we explain it, it is clear that a rhetoric of "difference," of "diversity" (even "multiculturalism"), is central to the contemporary culture of authenticity.

But in some forms this discourse slides towards an affirmation of choice itself. All options are equally worthy, because they are freely chosen, and it is choice that confers worth. The subjectivist principle

underlying soft relativism is at work here. But this implicitly denies the existence of a pre-existing horizon of significance, whereby some things are worthwhile and others less so, and still others not at all, quite anterior to choice. But then the choice of sexual orientation loses any special significance. It is on a level with any other preferences, like that for taller or shorter sexual partners, or blonds or brunettes. No one would dream of making discriminating judgements about these preferences, but that's because they are all without importance. They really do just depend on how you feel. Once sexual orientation comes to be assimilated to these, which is what happens when one makes *choice* the crucial justifying reason, the original goal, which was to assert the *equal value* of this orientation, is subtly frustrated. Difference so asserted becomes *insignificant*.

Asserting the value of a homosexual orientation has to be done differently, more empirically, one might say, taking into account the actual nature of homo- and heterosexual experience and life. It can't just be assumed a priori, on the grounds that anything we choose is all right.

In this case, the assertion of value is contaminated by its connection with another leading idea, which I have mentioned above as closely interwoven with authenticity, that of self-determining freedom. This is partly responsible for the accent on choice as a crucial consideration, and also for the slide towards soft relativism. I will return to this below, in talking about how the goal of authenticity comes to deviate.

But for the moment, the general lesson is that authenticity can't be defended in ways that collapse

horizons of significance. Even the sense that the significance of my life comes from its being chosen — the case where authenticity is actually grounded on self-determining freedom — depends on the understanding that *independent of my will* there is something noble, courageous, and hence significant in giving shape to my own life. There is a picture here of what human beings are like, placed between this option for self-creation, and easier modes of copping out, going with the flow, conforming with the masses, and so on, which picture is seen as true, discovered, not decided. Horizons are given.

But more: this minimum degree of givenness, which underpins the importance of choice, is not sufficient as a horizon, as we saw with the example of sexual orientation. It may be important that my life be chosen, as John Stuart Mill asserts in *On Liberty*,²⁷ but unless some options are more significant than others, the very idea of self-choice falls into triviality and hence incoherence. Self-choice as an ideal makes sense only because some *issues* are more significant than others. I couldn't claim to be a self-chooser, and deploy a whole Nietzschean vocabulary of self-making, just because I choose steak and fries over poutine for lunch. Which issues are significant, I do not determine. If I did, no issue would be significant. But then the very ideal of self-choosing as a *moral ideal* would be impossible.

So the ideal of self-choice supposes that there are *other* issues of significance beyond self-choice. The ideal couldn't stand alone, because it requires a horizon of issues of importance, which help define

the *respects* in which self-making is significant. Following Nietzsche, I am indeed a truly great philosopher if I remake the table of values. But this means redefining values concerning important questions, not redesigning the menu at McDonald's, or next year's casual fashion.

The agent seeking significance in life, trying to define him- or herself meaningfully, has to exist in a horizon of important questions. That is what is self-defeating in modes of contemporary culture that concentrate on self-fulfilment *in opposition* to the demands of society, or nature, which *shut out* history and the bonds of solidarity. These self-centred "narcissistic" forms are indeed shallow and trivialized; they are "flattened and narrowed," as Bloom says. But this is not because they belong to the culture of authenticity. Rather it is because they fly in the face of its requirements. To shut out demands emanating beyond the self is precisely to suppress the conditions of significance, and hence to court trivialization. To the extent that people are seeking a moral ideal here, this self-immuring is self-stultifying; it destroys the condition in which the ideal can be realized.

Otherwise put, I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of solidarity, everything but what I find in myself, would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters. Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order *matters* crucially, can

I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands.

But if this is so, there is something you can say to those who are enraptured in the more trivialized modes of the culture of authenticity. Reason is not powerless. Of course, we haven't got very far here; just to showing that *some* self-transcending issues are indispensable [issue (b) above]. We have not shown that any particular *one* has to be taken seriously. The argument so far is just a sketch, and I hope to take it (just a little) further in subsequent sections. But for the moment I want to turn to the other issue, (a), whether there is something self-defeating in a mode of fulfilment that denies our ties to others.

V
THE NEED FOR RECOGNITION

(2) Another one of the common axes of criticism of the contemporary culture of authenticity is that it encourages a purely personal understanding of self-fulfilment, thus making the various associations and communities in which the person enters purely instrumental in their significance. At the broader social level, this is antithetical to any strong commitment to a community. In particular, it makes political citizenship, with its sense of duty and allegiance to political society, more and more marginal.²⁸ On the more intimate level, it fosters a view of relationships in which these ought to subserve personal fulfilment. The relationship is secondary to the self-realization of the partners. On this view, unconditional ties, meant to last for life, make little sense. A relationship may last till death, if it goes on

serving its purpose, but there is no point declaring a priori that it ought to.

This philosophy was articulated in a popular book of the mid-1970s: "You can't take everything with you when you leave on the midlife journey. You are moving away. Away from institutional claims and other people's agenda. Away from external valuations and accreditations. You are moving out of roles and into the self. If I could give everyone a gift for the send-off on this journey, it would be a tent. A tent for tentativeness. The gift of portable roots. . . . For each of us there is the opportunity to emerge reborn, *authentically* unique, with an enlarged capacity to love ourselves and embrace others. . . . The delights of self-discovery are always available. Though loved ones move in and out of our lives, the capacity to love remains."²⁹

Authenticity seems once more to be defined here in a way that centres on the self, which distances us from our relations to others. And this has been seized on by the critics I quoted earlier. Can one say anything about this in reason?

Before sketching the direction of argument, it is important to see that the ideal of authenticity incorporates some notions of society, or at least of how people ought to live together. Authenticity is a facet of modern individualism, and it is a feature of all forms of individualism that they don't just emphasize the freedom of the individual but also propose models of society. We fail to see this when we confuse the two very different senses of individualism I distinguished earlier. The individualism of anomie and breakdown of course has no social ethic at-

tached to it; but individualism as a moral principle or ideal must offer some view on how the individual should live with others.

So the great individualist philosophies also proposed models of society. Lockean individualism gave us the theory of society as contract. Later forms connected to notions of popular sovereignty. Two modes of social existence are quite evidently linked with the contemporary culture of self-fulfilment. The first is based on the notion of universal right: everyone should have the right and capacity to be themselves. This is what underlies soft relativism as a moral principle: no one has a right to criticize another's values. This inclines those imbued with this culture towards conceptions of procedural justice: the limit on anyone's self-fulfilment must be the safeguarding of an equal chance at this fulfilment for others.³⁰

Secondly, this culture puts a great emphasis on relationships in the intimate sphere, especially love relationships. These are seen to be the prime loci of self-exploration and self-discovery and among the most important forms of self-fulfilment. This view reflects the continuation in modern culture of a trend that is now centuries old and that places the centre of gravity of the good life not in some higher sphere but in what I want to call "ordinary life," that is, the life of production and the family, of work and love.³¹ Yet it also reflects something else that is important here: the acknowledgement that our identity requires recognition by others.

I wrote earlier of the way our identities are formed in dialogue with others, in agreement or struggle

with their recognition of us. In a sense we can say that the discovery and articulation of this fact in its modern form came about in close connection with the developing ideal of authenticity.

We can distinguish two changes that have together made the modern preoccupation with identity and recognition inevitable. The first is the collapse of social hierarchies, which used to be the basis for honour. I am using "honour" in the *ancien régime* sense in which it is intrinsically linked to inequalities. For some to have honour in this sense it is essential that not everyone have it. This is the sense in which Montesquieu uses it in his description of monarchy. Honour is intrinsically a matter of "préférences."³² It is also the sense we use when we speak of honouring someone, by giving her some public reward, say the Order of Canada. Plainly this would be without worth if tomorrow we decided to give it to every adult Canadian.

As against this notion of honour, we have the modern notion of dignity, now used in a universalist and egalitarian sense, where we talk of the inherent "dignity of human beings," or of citizen dignity. The underlying premiss here is that everyone shares in this.³³ This concept of dignity is the only one compatible with a democratic society, and it was inevitable that the old concept of honour be marginalized. But this has also meant that the forms of equal recognition have been essential to democratic culture. For instance, that everyone should be called Mister, Mrs, or Miss, rather than some people being called Lord or Lady, and others simply by their surnames, or, even more demeaning, by their

first names, has been thought crucial in some democratic societies, such as the U.S.A. And more recently, for similar reasons, Mrs and Miss have been collapsed into Ms. Democracy has ushered in a politics of equal recognition, which has taken various forms over the years, and which now has returned in the form of demands for the equal status of cultures and of genders.

But the importance of recognition has been modified and intensified by the understanding of identity emerging with the ideal of authenticity. This was also in part an offshoot of the decline of hierarchical society. In those earlier societies, what we would now call a person's identity was largely fixed by his or her social position. That is, the background that made sense of what the person recognized as important was to a great extent determined by his or her place in society and whatever role or activities attached to this. The coming of a democratic society doesn't by itself do away with this, because people can still define themselves by their social roles. But what does decisively undermine this socially derived identification is the ideal of authenticity itself. As this emerges, for instance with Herder, it calls on me to discover my own original way of being. By definition, this cannot be socially derived but must be inwardly generated.

In the nature of the case, there is no such thing as inward generation, monologically understood, as I tried to argue above. My discovering my identity doesn't mean that I work it out in isolation but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internalized, with others. That is why the development of an ideal of inwardly generated identity

gives a new and crucial importance to recognition. My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others.

The point is not that this dependence on others arose with the age of authenticity. A form of dependence was always there. The socially derived identity was by its very nature dependent on society. But in the earlier age recognition never arose as a problem. Social recognition was built in to the socially derived identity from the very fact that it was based on social categories everyone took for granted. The thing about inwardly derived, personal, original identity is that it doesn't enjoy this recognition a priori. It has to win it through exchange, and it can fail. What has come about with the modern age is not the need for recognition but the conditions in which this can fail. And that is why the need is now *acknowledged* for the first time. In premodern times, people didn't speak of "identity" and "recognition," not because people didn't have (what we call) identities or because these didn't depend on recognition, but rather because these were then too unproblematic to be thematized as such.

It's not surprising that we can find some of the seminal ideas about citizen dignity and universal recognition, even if not in these terms, in Rousseau, one of the points of origin of the modern discourse of authenticity. Rousseau is a sharp critic of hierarchical honour, of "préférences." In a significant passage of the *Discourse on Inequality*, he pinpoints a fateful moment when society takes a turn towards corruption and injustice, when people begin to desire preferential esteem.³⁴ By contrast, in republican

society, where all can share equally in the light of public attention, he sees the source of health.³⁵ But the topic of recognition is given its most influential early treatment in Hegel.³⁶

The importance of recognition is now universally acknowledged in one form or another; on an intimate plane, we are all aware how identity can be formed or malformed in our contact with significant others. On the social plane, we have a continuing politics of equal recognition. Both have been shaped by the growing ideal of authenticity, and recognition plays an essential role in the culture that has arisen around it.

On the intimate level, we can see how much an original identity needs and is vulnerable to the recognition given or withheld by significant others. It is not surprising that in the culture of authenticity, relationships are seen as the key loci of self-discovery and self-confirmation. Love relationships are not important just because of the general emphasis in modern culture on the fulfilments of ordinary life. They are also crucial because they are the crucibles of inwardly generated identity.

On the social plane, the understanding that identities are formed in open dialogue, unshaped by a predefined social script, has made the politics of equal recognition more central and stressful. It has, in fact, considerably raised its stakes. Equal recognition is not just the appropriate mode for a healthy democratic society. Its refusal can inflict damage on those who are denied it, according to a widespread modern view. The projecting of an inferior or de-meaning image on another can actually distort and

oppress, to the extent that it is interiorized. Not only contemporary feminism but also race relations and discussions of multiculturalism are undergirded by the premiss that denied recognition can be a form of oppression. Whether this factor has been exaggerated may be questioned, but it is clear that the understanding of identity and authenticity has introduced a new dimension into the politics of equal recognition, which now operates with something like its own notion of authenticity, at least in so far as the denunciation of other-induced distortions are concerned.

In the light of this developing understanding of recognition over the last two centuries, we can see why the culture of authenticity has come to give precedence to the two modes of living together I mentioned earlier: (1) on the social level, the crucial principle is that of fairness, which demands equal chances for everyone to develop their own identity, which include — as we can now understand more clearly — the universal recognition of difference, in whatever modes this is relevant to identity, be it gender, racial, cultural, or to do with sexual orientation; and (2) in the intimate sphere, the identity-forming love relationship has a crucial importance.

The question with which I started this section can perhaps be put in this way: Can a mode of life that is centred on the self, in the sense that involves treating our associations as merely instrumental, be justified in the light of the ideal of authenticity? We can now perhaps rephrase it by asking whether these favoured modes of living together will allow of this kind of disaffiliated way of being.

(1) On the social level, it might seem that the answer is a clear yes. All the recognition of difference seems to require is that we accept some principle of procedural justice. It doesn't require that we acknowledge a strong allegiance to a citizen republic or any other form of political society. We can "hang loose," so long as we treat everyone equally. Indeed, it might even be argued that any political society based on some strong notion of the common good will of itself by this very fact endorse the lives of some people (those who support its notion of the common good) over others (those who seek other forms of good), and thereby deny equal recognition. Something like this, we saw, is the fundamental premiss of a liberalism of neutrality, which has many supporters today.

But this is too simple. Keeping in mind the argument of the previous section, we have to ask what is involved in truly recognizing difference. This means recognizing the equal value of different ways of being. It is this acknowledgement of equal value that a politics of identity-recognition requires. But what grounds the equality of value? We saw earlier that just the fact that people *choose* different ways of being doesn't make them equal; nor does the fact that they happen to *find themselves* in these different sexes, races, cultures. Mere difference can't itself be the ground of equal value.

If men and women are equal, it is not because they are different, but because overriding the difference are some properties, common or complementary, which are of value. They are beings capable of reason, or love, or memory, or dialogical recognition.

To come together on a mutual recognition of difference — that is, of the equal value of different identities — requires that we share more than a belief in this principle; we have to share also some standards of value on which the identities concerned check out as equal. There must be some substantive agreement on value, or else the formal principle of equality will be empty and a sham. We can pay lip-service to equal recognition, but we won't really share an understanding of equality unless we share something more. Recognizing difference, like self-choosing, requires a horizon of significance, in this case a shared one.

This doesn't show that we have to belong to a common political society; otherwise we couldn't recognize foreigners. And it doesn't by itself show that we have to take seriously the political society we are in. More needs to be filled in. But we can already see how the argument might go: how developing and nursing the commonalities of value between us become important, and one of the crucial ways we do this is sharing a participatory political life. The demands of recognizing difference themselves take us beyond mere procedural justice.

(2) How about our relationships? Can we see them as instrumental to our fulfilment, and thus as fundamentally tentative? Here the answer is easier. Surely not, if they are also going to form our identity. If the intense relations of self-exploration are going to be identity-forming, then they can't be in principle tentative — though they can, alas, in fact break up — and they can't be merely instrumental. Identities do in fact change, but we form them as the

identity of a person who has partly lived and will complete the living of a whole life. I don't define an identity for "me in 1991," but rather try to give meaning to my life as it has been and as I project it further on the basis of what it has been. My identity-defining relations can't be seen, in principle and in advance, as dispensable and destined for supersession. If my self-exploration takes the form of such serial and in principle temporary relationships, then it is not my identity that I am exploring, but some modality of enjoyment.

In the light of the ideal of authenticity, it would seem that having merely instrumental relationships is to act in a self-stultifying way. The notion that one can pursue one's fulfilment in this way seems illusory, in somewhat the same way as the idea that one can choose oneself without recognizing a horizon of significance beyond choice.

In any case, that's what this rather sketchy argument would suggest. I cannot claim to have established solid conclusions here, but I hope I have done something to suggest that the scope of rational argument is much greater than is often supposed, and therefore that this exploration of the sources of identity has some point.