

The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution

Carl Trueman, Crossway, 2020.
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Carl Trueman, a church historian by training and, in recent years, a cultural analyst, has given the evangelical world—and others willing to listen—a sophisticated historical and philosophical genealogy of the current cultural crisis in the West. It is a “how we arrived at our present situation” book, filled with evidence and intellectual connections over about 300 years. Trueman searches for the roots, not only of our sexual mores and practices, but of the broader ideas that form what many would label the reigning worldview.

Trueman’s book contains four major sections: (1) the framework of his analysis, drawn from the works of Charles Taylor, Philip Rieff, and Alasdair MacIntyre; (2) the early historical development of Expressive Individualism, the worldview Trueman identifies as the foundational problem; (3) the later development of Expressive Individualism, starting in the twentieth century; and (4) the modern culmination of the historical process, focusing primarily on the Sexual Revolution.

At the heart of Trueman’s entire discussion is Expressive Individualism, the idea that not only are individuals autonomous (as exemplified by Kant and the Enlightenment) but that they should express that autonomy in their choice of “life project” or identity (after Rousseau and the Romantics). In Part One, Trueman draws on Taylor, Rieff, and MacIntyre to provide a workable framework or analytic lens for assessing this worldview.

Taylor contributes his mimesis/poiesis relationship and the “immanent frame” (opposed to transcendent) as ways of tracing the emergence of the “modern self.”¹ Trueman then states that “Philip Rieff . . . is significant for this study because of his application of psychology to the patterns and pathologies of cultural change in the last one hundred years” (p. 42). In particular, he considers the influence of Sigmund Freud and Wilhelm Reich in this regard. Rieff also contributes the category of “third world” as a cultural *Zeitgeist*.² Finally, MacIntyre is helpful to Trueman for his discussion of virtue ethics in connection with social assumptions.³

Building on these foundations, Part Two traces the historical core of Expressive Individualism and its specific manifestation in the realm of sexuality from Rousseau to the New Left of the 1960s. With individual autonomy an assumed foundation from the Enlightenment, individuals must be free to pursue their goals, as much as possible, unhindered by church or state and guided by reason. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Rousseau and the Romantics did not attempt to undermine the Enlightenment but to complete it. Wordsworth, Shelley, and Blake highlight the “rise of the modern self” as both an introspective phenomenon and an external expression. As Trueman puts it, “the psychological inner life” is Rousseau’s

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preoccupation (pp. 107–8). More crucially, Trueman points to Rousseau’s argument “that it is society and the relations and conditions that society embodies that decisively shape and . . . decisively corrupt individuals” who might otherwise live happily in dignity (another central shibboleth for the modern age) in a “state of nature” (p. 115). To sum up, regarding dignity and the psychologizing of the self, “individuals [have] integrity and a value that derives from their inward self-consciousness and individuals have a value in themselves and not derived from their extrinsic position in the social hierarchy” (pp. 126–27). It is this inner dignity that must be encouraged and expressed. The other Romantics follow Rousseau’s course but add the dimension of “freedom from religion” and “freedom for love,” namely, sexual love (pp. 148–58).

Trueman then turns to Nietzsche, Marx, and Darwin to exemplify the historical shift in moral philosophy from its traditional transcendental forms to those variants rooted in naturalism. Nietzsche emphasizes “self-creation” and the so-called “transvaluation of values,” while Marx “stresses conditions and the constitution of the world” (p. 176). According to Trueman, human nature is plastic for Marx, subject to change as economic systems change. Moreover, besides the therapeutic, everything becomes political (p. 179), an idea that profoundly influences our current culture. Finally, Darwin’s influence was to allow “no room for inferring that [human nature] had any special destiny or significance” (p. 185). Darwin thereby leaves no room for objective morality, making it incumbent on the individual to create his own identity.

In Part 3, Trueman completes his historical analysis in the twentieth century by examining Freud, his Marxian follower Wilhelm Reich, and the Neo-Marxist/Critical theorist Herbert Marcuse. Together, these individuals and their followers sexualize politics and politicize sexuality, or at least lay the foundations for such trends. Freud advocated freedom from sexual repression, Reich promoted liberation for sexual expression at the societal level, and Marcuse functioned as a sort of “guru” of the New Left among its younger members concerning sexuality. Not coincidentally, the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s coincided with Marcuse’s heyday of influence.⁴

In Part 4, the final section, Trueman argues that we now see the culmination of all these influences in Expressive Individualism. The “Triumph of the Erotic” (ch. 8) represents the logical outcome of these movements in history. “Sex now pervades every aspect of life,” Trueman writes, including the LGBTQ+ movement, expressions of sexuality in commercial life, education, court cases, media and entertainment, religion, even Christian Evangelicalism, as well as the culture at large (pp. 272–73).⁵ In addition, Trueman perceives the “triumph of the therapeutic,” invoking the work of Rieff, as permeating culture, not just in the area of psychology proper, but in all parts of life. He discusses the Supreme Court (its invocation of “dignity” in *Obergefell* and other cases), ethics (Peter Singer), and student protests (“microaggressions” and “safe spaces”). In a limited sense, the Neo-Marxists of the Frankfurt School succeeded in their “march through the institutions.” Trueman finishes with a succinct discussion of where we should go from here, for which he apologizes as not fulfilling.

Trueman’s work is unique, not so much in its genre of addressing worldviews of various types, but in the particular content of Expressive Individualism. Charles Taylor and other

recent Christian writers have contributed elements to this analysis. But no one else has “put the pieces together” as well as Trueman. He masterfully traces the historical antecedents that led to Expressive Individualism, though he might have done even better by beginning with the Enlightenment. Overall, the book is well-written and readable by both general readers and scholars alike.

REFERENCES

1. Cf. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007).
2. Cf. Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).
3. Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981).
4. Marcuse, besides promoting sexual “liberation,” was ardently anti-tolerationist regarding those with whom the New Left disagreed. The cultural revolution must not be obstructed by the ignorant.
5. Trueman’s characterization looks much like imperial Roman culture as portrayed in Steven D. Smith, *Pagans and Christians in the City: Culture Wars from the Tiber to the Potomac* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018).
6. Robert M. Veatch, Amy Haddad, and E. J. Last, *Case Studies in Pharmacy Ethics*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
7. Robert A. Buerki and Louis D. Vottero, *Pharmacy Ethics: A Foundation for Professional Practice* (Washington, D.C.: American Pharmacists Association, 2013).
8. Steven Pinker, “The Stupidity of Dignity,” *The New Republic*, May 27, 2008, <https://newrepublic.com/article/64674/the-stupidity-dignity>.
9. Bioethicists of the Pellegrino Center for Clinical Bioethics, “Proposal for Revising the Uniform Determination of Death Act,” *Hastings Bioethics Forum*, February 18, 2022, <https://www.thehastingscenter.org/defining-brain-death/>.
10. Rich Phillips, “Autopsy: No Sign Schiavo Was Abused,” CNN, June 17, 2005, <http://www.cnn.com/2005/HEALTH/06/15/schiavo.autopsy/>.
11. Richard J. Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986).
12. For more detailed discussion of Rae’s approach see Scott Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018); and Scott Rae and Paul Cox, *Bioethics: A Christian Approach in a Pluralistic Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).
13. See, e.g., Mollie Frost, “Doctors with Disabilities Reflect on Challenges,” *ACP Internist* (February 2020), <https://acpinternist.org/archives/2020/02/doctors-with-disability-reflect-on-challenges.htm>.

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