

# The Discovered Self

by [Albert Norton, Jr.](#) (September 2023)



*Christ in Silence*, Odilon Redon, 1897

In 2020, Carl Trueman published *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, subtitled *Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*. It's an important book but, as with all writings in the postmodern age, one has to pay close attention to precise word definitions. "Expressive individualism" can be misunderstood. The opposite of individualism is collectivism, so it's not obvious that one should attach any kind of pejorative to forms of the word "individualism." Trueman's intent becomes clearer upon reading one of his shorter essays, in two parts dated November 9 and 10, 2020, at Public Discourse, titled *The Rise of the "Psychological Man."* "Psychological man" perhaps resonates better. It's important we understand the cultural shift it portends.

How did people form their sense of self before we all became "psychological man?" Once upon a time, the sense of self was formed from relations outside oneself. People grew up forming their sense of identity on the basis of love relationships: son, brother, friend, citizen, child of God. A person's sense of his own "self" would be formed from beliefs concerning the nature of reality that he acquires from his environment and from reason. That sense rested on an understanding that there is a common human nature, containing the conscience and basic principles like the givenness of categories in reality.

With that common-sense understanding of how identity is formed, we can consider the shift away from it to "psychological man." Instead of forming one's identity on the basis of external influences, we turn to examination of the interior being. I suggest the seeds of this shift lay in existentialist thinking that survives as a significant strand of postmodernism. It meant a turn inward to discover one's true essence. My true "self" is in here somewhere, to be discovered. It is Whitman's "barbaric yawp."

This coincides with the shift to emphasis on psychology which, especially after Freud, is taken in large part to be the study of what makes the inner person. A significant book from the 1960s highlights this shift of emphasis: Philip Reiff's *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*. People increasingly centered the self's needs and wants, and the culture came to reflect that centering. This was a shift from faith to therapy, which is why Reiff's book was subtitled *Uses of Faith after Freud*. Freud, you recall, developed his theories around tensions in the inner being, especially regarding sex. Id, ego, superego, and all that. The "triumph" was that of inner self-examination over the outward seeking of God in faith.

A new form of self-identity arises out of this subjective, inner-seeking, therapeutic environment. If you understand the world to revolve around its Creator, and the self to be defined in terms of relationship to that Creator, then you naturally form your sense of "self," or "identity" on that and on other relationships in life, especially parents, but also including other family, and authority figures like teachers, and on community, friendships, and so on. I might say for example that my identity is in Christ, with Him as the Northstar in the development of self reflected back to me in close relationships with parents, siblings, spouse, and friends. Or, I can discover my identity in the wellspring of my inner "true" being, which will manifest in categories of personhood supplied by ideologies formed in the culture upon the advent of "psychological man."

Sex is central to identity formation. Religions teach that very thing. But traditional religion taught there are two ontological categories of human being, male and female, and that there are proper and improper uses of sexual function. One's identity must be formed within the given category. We identify our maleness or femaleness not by consulting our inner psychology, but by the body and through social reinforcement of male and female category.

If the inner, "true" self is the source of identity, however, then even one's sex can be discerned by looking within, and this can trump the obvious external, bodily indicator of sex category. This helps explain the intractability of trans identity activism. From the trans activist perspective, how dare you not accept whatever I say I am? From the objective truth perspective, how is it compassionate to affirm delusion? The tension is acute when we're talking about children. Is "gender affirmation" genuine kindness? Or is it indifference tricked out as tolerance?

The sexual attraction one feels can also be a source of identity. A male attracted to males, for example, may not think of himself as a person who is tempted to the sin of same-sex sexual experiences. He may conceive himself as a distinct category of human: a gay man. That's his "identity," a sub-category of human being to which he consigns himself in eternal conflict with other sub-categories.

With the turn from faith to psychological self-formation, the concept of sin is discarded. The truth is that an inclination to sin is present in every heart; we're to actively resist it to be the best person we can be. We live our lives swimming around at the mouth of a whirlpool. We can fight it by swimming away from it, to the weaker outer edges of the vortex. Or we can relax, deny the existence of the vortex, and be sucked into it. Children don't know any better, if we don't teach them, so that's what they will do.

With the thinking of Jean Jacques Rousseau and many another after him, a shift began away from the Christian understanding of mankind's inclination to sin, toward an understanding that we are essentially good except as corrupted by society. Evil does not exist in my own heart, in other words. It invades me from the outside. We come to think of our moral task as repulsing the corrupting evil outside ourselves, rather than suppressing the evil in our own heart. The line between good and evil no longer runs through each individual heart, on this

understanding.

In the last two or three generations or so, the evil in the heart is increasingly denied and is thereby given rein because that's what we do, we fall into destructive patterns of thought haphazardly if we are not conscious of sin and our own frailty in dealing with it. Part of the problem is that we've collectively become allergic even to the word "sin." The demons laugh their heads off when we recoil at mention of sin. But fine, let's call it something else, so long as we're willing to accept that it's here in the heart, not just vaguely out there somewhere. It's a little monster inside each of us that becomes as big as we allow.

If evil is external, it follows that the uncorrupted discovered self is an expression of moral purity. The necessary corollary to the self as basically good is that any attempt to abridge the discovered inner identity must be evil. That attempt is bigotry, the new original sin, words and attitudes that would deny the pure discovered identity.

Denial of the discovered identity is not just to be fought as evil corruption, it is to be fought as an existential threat, quite literally. A person's identity is their very self, and denying that identity means denying the self. Thus, if my body is sexually male, but my discovered identity is female, and you deny that I am "really" a female, you are attempting to cancel my very existence. Identity is essence, in this way of thinking.

This precept is not unique to trans ideology. A person immersed in the therapeutic conception of self sees evil only in what they call bigotry. They may not conceive of a dark side to their own being, so focused are they on how good they are. How open-minded. How accepting of other people. How unwilling to call evil "evil." You do you. Indifference is transmuted alchemically to moral uprightness.

The paradigm of discovered identity has profound implications for relationship to authority. Absent belief in God and the reality such belief discloses, we have a tendency to consider internal predilections, feelings, emotions, and desires as being solely authoritative. External sources of authority are suspect. Even, or perhaps especially, the authority of fathers, but certainly all human sources of authority for which the father is archetype.

Some time ago in child psychology circles, there arose a new concept called "oppositional defiant disorder." It's a phrase to describe children who oppose authority and are defiant toward it. But that's true of every child, to some degree or another, why is it elevated to a mental health "disorder?" It's a therapy-language response to the observation that so many children and teenagers in this day reflexively oppose authority in the abstract, and, being children, oppose it particularly as it is embodied in parents, and especially the father. External authority is a threat to the internal authority of one's discovered identity, which must be allowed to emerge from the inner being.

It's quite difficult, in this environment, to turn to religion to understand reality. We can easily ignore its factual narrative supporting hard principles, and substitute vague spirituality. This is why moral therapeutic deism has replaced Christianity in too many ostensibly Christian churches. It is a capitulation of the church itself to the paradigm of psychological man.

A consequence is that we are incapacitated from grasping that our default state is to turn to evil. Evil is not the difficult thing to explain about humanity; good is. The cultured, educated, disciplined state we try to bring about in our children must include an understanding of how to renounce evil so we don't "lean on our own understanding" (Prov 3:5). Instilling that self-discipline and that truth about selfhood is what it means to rear a child, rather than just keeping him

and feeding him like a pet. Left to his own devices he will feed the monster within, the self in a state of nature, the self-authored self.

If you have trouble thinking religion is so important, think instead of "transcendence," the understanding that there is something higher and greater to which we appeal: objectivity of truth and morality. You can think of it as Platonic idealism, or as correspondence theory of truth, or as the logos. The danger is in disconnecting from understanding this objective feature of reality. The disconnect means moral decisions are no longer externally guided. The compass is broken. We drift on stormy seas with a broken rudder, vulnerable to shipwreck in every gasping moment.

This psychological turn has coincided with the loss of a sense that there is a common and stable human nature, with the result that, in Trueman's words, "all that remains of human purpose is the attaining of personal psychological happiness in whatever form happens to work for the individual concerned." This is utter relativism and utter narcissism. Our identity emerges from the raw material of inner being, like mushrooms from nightsoil, without reference to its impact on others. It appears from the outside like self-absorption producing false contrived identity, but from the inside as timorous innocence, fearful of identity-denying "violence."

People who have not gone 'round the bend on psychological self-formation are often puzzled at regularly being called bigots, or homophobes, or transphobes, or something similar. It's puzzling because they see a clear distinction between the evil ideology, on the one hand, and the person who adopts it, on the other. Communism is evil, but that doesn't mean a billion Chinese people are. Likewise, a transperson is the confused victim of transgender activism, not a personification of evil. But if identity is essence, then rejection of the ideology counts as rejection of the person affected by it. For psychological man, identity is in the ideology, so an attack

on the ideology is an attack on identity; an attack on the very self. The idea that one can love the sinner but hate the sin is entirely lost on those who discover identity in the inner id, because for them there is no distinction. Ideology and self are ineluctable.

Words are the instrumentality by which we affirm or deny the discovered, internally-derived identity. Denial is thought to be injury, conceptualized in psychological terms. "Misgendering" a transperson by using the "wrong" pronoun, for example, or "deadnaming" them, is deemed equivalent to a physical assault. Speech conformity is imposed to alleviate this "violence." An objection to homosexuality may be taken as denial of the selfhood of another, an act of political violence. You can say you believe marriage to be between a man and a woman, and that sex belongs only inside that marriage, but a person who identifies himself as "gay" is not going to hear this as disagreement about application of universal moral principles. He's going to hear it as a denial of his very existence.

It's not just that we use words to disagree about things, but that we disagree about the purpose of words. It's the age-old problem of the serpent in the garden, the misuse of language that distorts objective meaning, and is the source of man's universal morally compromised state. The serpent employs deceptive language rendering us, if we are not vigilant, unable to assign objective and transcendent meaning to *anything*. We're our own first casualty, in alienation from God.

As I say in my book *The Mountain and the River/Genesis, Postmodernism, and the Machine* (New English Review Press 2023), the alienation is an endemic feature of our existence, it's not just theory. We spend our whole lives in desperate yearning, sometimes unable even to figure out what it is we yearn for. In my earlier book, *Intuition of Significance*, I talked about yearning a lot, citing the contemporary Christian



philosopher Alvin Plantinga who argued that yearning for reconciliation with God is properly understood as “basic” in epistemology. It’s why the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

When we unhitch ourselves from belief in God, we don’t eliminate the feeling of alienation. We just attribute it to something else, usually a particularized dissatisfaction with the imperfect world, and we concoct man-made ways to cure it, usually through some sort of utopian political vision. Marx is a model for this, and is the most pertinent for postmodern philosophy, but you can see all through history people trying to cure the felt sense of alienation in ways that obfuscates rather than clarifies.

The shift in how we formulate self-identity means everyone should be maximally free to self-actualize, and the impetus for that actualization is to be in no way constrained by social norms or even nature. There can be no natural claims based in love imposed against that ultimate freedom. I am the sole author of me. I reject any restraint on my desires. I will not tolerate any external channeling of my energies on the pretense that it teaches self-discipline, or is necessary to learning, or causes me to acquire respect or love. Hear my primal scream. I am a toddler exhausting myself in wailing frustration. An animal reacting in rage to any suggestion that I am a child of God.

This leads me to state even more emphatically the central premise of my book reflected in the Solzhenitsyn quote: “Men have forgotten God, that’s why all this has happened.” It’s all one way or the other. Either nothing is wasted or everything is. Either there is a God who cares, or nothing whatsoever matters even a little bit. Either love is the air we breathe, or power is. Death or life. Choose this day.

Reminds me of the old joke: There are only two kinds of people in the world. The kind who say there are two kinds, and the

kind who don't. Everything about our existence presents dichotomously. Many of the dualities that present to us in reality are ineradicable; fixed; ontological. Like the duality of male and female.

A final thought, harkening again to Trueman's work. Maybe you'll sympathize. One needn't be a theologian to be greatly concerned with how secular philosophies degrade our conception of reality as informed by religion. I'm worn out by church leaders' lack of preparedness to help Christians understand what we're up against. We can't engage the world without understanding its garbled notions of what a person even is.

*The needs of this hour are not so much that of explaining the church to the world. First, we need to explain the world to the church. –Trueman*

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