Whatever I Think, Therefore I Am: An Interview with Carl Trueman

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Timon Cline interviewed Professor Carl Trueman on his latest book, The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution (Crossway, 2020), *which includes a foreword by Rod Dreher.*

TC: Although there's a lot packed into *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self***—and it's not short—could you provide a brief thesis or synopsis?**

CT: It's a study of how conditions have emerged in our society that allow people to regard the statement "I am a woman trapped in a man's body" as coherent and to see its positive affirmation as a political imperative. Having said that, I only really address transgenderism toward the end, because my basic argument is that such changes are deep, wide, and longstanding, and that we need to see the sexual revolution of which it is a part as one aspect of a much broader revolution of what it means to be a self and how human flourishing is understood.

TC: Your previous book, *Histories and Fallacies***, endeavored to teach people how to do history well, and there is a similar lesson presented early on in** *Rise and Triumph***. You say in the introduction that "no individual historical phenomenon is its own cause." What do you mean to communicate to readers with that axiom? In many ways, it serves as the methodological guide for the book.**

CT: We can all tend to be mesmerized by the present, especially when that present involves radical and unprecedented shifts in society's thought, intuitions, or behavior. So, when we see something like gay marriage, or Trumpism, or transgenderism, or "wokeness" suddenly hit the headlines, we can tend to forget that each of these has a background. None emerged from a vacuum or caused itself. All are the result of a complex of historical factors and are thus, on one level, symptomatic of developments in our culture in more general terms.

It's important we study these backgrounds for at least two reasons. First, such study allows us to understand the immediate phenomena with greater accuracy and thus respond more thoughtfully. For example, Christians tend to think the sexual revolution is about behavior and then respond by reasserting Christian sexual mores. In fact, the sexual revolution is about identity. That certainly includes behavior, but it sees that behavior as having a greater significance for who people actually are. Christians need to grasp that in order to understand why phrases such as "We hate the sin but love the sinner" seem so implausible in the secular world, since they rest on the distinction between, say, homosexual

desire and personal identity—a distinction those outside of the church won't immediately recognize. In other words, knowing the background helps to inform our public engagement.

Second, knowing the background helps us understand the depth of the problems we face. If the problems are now deeply embedded within the way people imagine society to be, then we can't solve them simply by an act of Congress or a Supreme Court appointment. I am afraid it's much more difficult than that.

TC: In the subtitle of the book, two themes are previewed: "cultural amnesia" and "expressive individualism." Can you briefly define those for us, and perhaps "emotivism" as well?

CT: "Cultural amnesia" refers to the fact that our culture sees the past more and more as something to be repudiated and overcome. This takes many forms: the general neglect of the past as a source for knowledge in society at large; the domination of humanities in higher education by theoretical approaches, predicated on the notion that history and the past are really tools of legitimating injustice in the present and therefore in need of demolition; and the commitment of our cultural elites—educators, tech giants, politicians—to dismantling old patterns of thinking and acting.

"Expressive individualism" refers to the dominant way in which we all today intuit our selfhood. We believe that our humanity is realized by us being able to express outwardly that which we feel inwardly. The initial impulse for such thinking comes from Rousseau and the Romantics, but it is now the default of our culture at large. In such a world, sexual identity, for example, becomes important because some of our most powerful inner feelings are those connected to sexual desire, and being able openly to express that becomes important to our personal authenticity.

"Emotivism" is the term Alasdair MacIntyre used in *After Virtue* to describe the fact that, because there are no agreed metanarratives any more, our claims of right and wrong are really claims of emotional preference. To say, "Abortion is wrong," for example, is really to say, "I personally disapprove of abortion." In his later work, MacIntyre uses the language of expressive individualism to articulate the same idea, indicating how close the individualized notion of the self and our current incoherent ethical discussions are.

TC: What's the relationship between induced cultural amnesia and what's been referred to as the history wars?

CT: There is a close connection. Once one sees the past as not so much a source of wisdom but a tale of oppression, then the battle ensues to dethrone the old narratives (and their artifacts—statues, names on buildings and scholarships, etc.). The problem, of course, is that this is generally conceived as a zero-sum

game where one narrative is presented as mutually exclusive of all others. For example: either America was founded on freedom or it was built on slavery. In reality, there is some truth to both. Human agency is complex and not simply the zero-sum power game so many seem to think.

TC: One term not mentioned in the subtitle but nevertheless integral to the narrative is that of "plasticity," or rather, "plastic people." This is how you, in part, characterize the enduring result of the influence of Nietzsche, Marx, and Darwin. You write, "Perhaps the most striking characteristic of today's understanding of what it means to be human is not its sexual content but rather its fundamental plasticity." Human nature has become "dynamic." Can you flesh that out a bit more for us?

CT: By "plastic people," I am trying to capture the idea of self-invention that lies at the heart of our modern rejection of human nature as having a given "essence," which is the idea that lies at the heart of modern expressive individualism. Take Nietzsche, for example. He argues (correctly, in my view) that if you take God out of the picture of reality, then human nature, beyond its biological structure, is something we can invent for ourselves. Life becomes a matter of performance, of being whoever we want to be. Oscar Wilde might be the supreme and most sophisticated example: the sexual rebel, the aesthete, the man who made his own life a work of art. We are all wannabe Wildes today, impatient of having identities imposed on us by others.

TC: You draw on some seminal (notoriously nigh unreadable) sources in this work to inform your own analysis. To point out a few: from Philip Rieff, you borrow the ideas of "the triumph of the therapeutic" and "psychological man"; from Charles Taylor, you derive the modern notion of "expressive individualism" (mentioned above); and you find Alasdair MacIntyre useful for his argument that ethical discourse has descended into competing moral truth-claims propped up by nothing other than emotional preference. Would you briefly comment on each of these?

CT: Each of these figures approaches the modern human condition from a different angle. Rieff, a creative and critical appropriator of Freud, uses a psychological lens. Taylor, a philosopher, uses Hegel and the Romantics to analyze the modern notion of the self. And MacIntyre approaches the question of ethics in a world where society is marked by incommensurable narratives. The three thus generate different but complementary perspectives that I try to combine in my work. Human identity, agency, and culture are complex realities that can't be understood from a single perspective, and therefore a toolkit of compatible but different analytical approaches is necessary.

TC: You have assembled a motley crew of influencers, to borrow a contemporary term, in this book. Why did you select these figures? Some might be more obvious, like Marx, but what about someone like Wilhelm Reich? I doubt the average reader has ever heard of him.

CT: I chose the thinkers not so much on the basis of how many people will have read them or even how directly influential they have been, but rather as representing key intellectual moves or broader cultural pathologies that have shaped the present. So, a figure like Marx is obvious. Even those who are not Marxists tend to think in some ways he significantly shaped. For example, the contemporary cultural tendency to deny the existence of the pre-political, to see all human arrangements—from the Boy Scouts to the family to cake baking for weddings—as politically charged, is an important part of how we now imagine the world. Marx is one of the key figures in the story of how that came to be. But the genealogy of modern cultural pathologies involves other, less well-known figures. You mention Reich—well, he is one of the first to make a connection between Marx's theory of political oppression and Freud's notion of sexual repression. That paves the way for the all-important modern notion that political liberation and sexual liberation are inextricably connected.

TC: Maybe the most unexpected chapter in the book is "Unacknowledged Legislators," which covers Wordsworth, Blake, and Percy Bysshe Shelley—poets all. Can you whet the appetite of potential readers who might be curious about how nineteenth-century literary figures fit in with Rousseau, Nietzsche, and Marx? What are the influences and cultural functions (within your narrative) these writers enjoyed and performed?

CT: The Romantics are the key figures in the narrative. They both prioritize the importance of inner feelings—that inner voice of nature—in the establishment of what it means to be an authentic human person and, at least in the figures of Shelley and Blake, identify sexual codes—specifically lifelong monogamous marriage—as oppressive and as connected to the power of the church. So, several aspects of our present age emerge at their hands: the priority of feelings, the notion of freedom as having a significant sexual component, and the oppressive nature of institutional religion. And they also understood that it is artists who play a decisive role in shaping people's attitudes to the world. They are the "unacknowledged legislators," to use Shelley's memorable phrase.

TC: Returning to Marx and Nietzsche, I think it's striking that today most cultural observers would probably blame Michel Foucault for making power the central category for how we evaluate societal and cultural dynamics. That makes it a development of more recent vintage. You, however, locate the germ of this way of thinking over a hundred years prior. (Of course, Foucault relied a good bit on Marx and Nietzsche.) The

same thing might be said about Judith Butler and the performativity of gender roles, etc., being predated by Wilhelm Reich's belief that sexual codes are tools of the dominant class designed for suppression. Is it fair, then, to say that we have been conditioned to think (and speak) in the terms that dominate our public discourse today long before we noticed it? That now we, conceiving of ourselves as we do, would find it difficult to do otherwise?

CT: Yes. At the heart of expressive individualism is the (ridiculous) notion articulated by Rousseau: that man is born free and everywhere is in chains. When we think of ourselves that way—as we intuitively do today—then all relationships tend to be conceived along contractual lines, involving power. Nietzsche and company made dramatically explicit something toward which expressive individualism will tilt: a concern with power as the fundamental element in relationships.

TC: Often talked about today is the cult of authenticity, how it guides our political discourse (but also, it seems to me, our theological discourse). Hyper-individualism is a related sentiment. Is there an appropriate place for authenticity?

CT: There's a need for nuance here. Authenticity—the notion that people should be outwardly what they are inwardly—is not in itself a bad thing. We have pejorative words such as *hypocrite* and *fake* to describe the opposite. Yet, it's not in itself good either: serial killers might be the most authentic people there are, acting out their inner desires, but clearly society does not regard them as virtuous. Such things as self-control, reserve, and suppression of our desires in the service of the greater good are also valuable and important. The problem today is that we no longer agree on that greater good—or tend to identify it with our own psychological happiness. As a result, we tend to prize the authentic (or even fake performances of "authenticity," which tend to be crude or extreme) over all else.

TC: How does the idea of the psychological man and expressive individualism connect to this new conception of authenticity?

CT: Both ideas root real identity in the inner, psychological realm. When this is assumed as basic, then any outward performance not consistent with this inward identity is deemed fake or dishonest. Hence the language used by the Jenner interview with Diane Sawyer about transitioning: the idea that Bruce was a living a lie and Caitlyn lives the truth.

TC: In *Ethics of Authenticity***, Charles Taylor suggests that the emergence of authenticity as the sole governing virtue is owing to (in addition to individualism) a deep-seated ahistorical attitude (or chronological**

snobbery, to invoke C. S. Lewis), and the disenchantment of the world. He says that when society loses its sacred structure based on a cosmic, hierarchical order, everything is up for grabs and decided on the basis of individual pleasure—the raw pursuit of *happiness*. And because the world is now unsacred, so too is man who is part of the world. Do you think Taylor is right, and if so, how did the thinkers you cover contribute to this erosion of the sacred?

CT: Taylor is (as usual!) correct and echoes the similar approach of Philip Rieff here. Of course, the erosion of the sacred is a long story, starting well before the nineteenth century. But Darwin, Marx, and Nietzsche are key. Darwin's theory of natural selection means that human exceptionalism is no longer a necessary hypothesis: we're just the latest form of ape, the result not of some grand design of which we are the culmination but simply the latest stage of an ongoing, aimless process. Marx and Nietzsche both wrestled with the notion of why religion persisted after the Enlightenment had rendered it implausible. Both offered psychological accounts: Marx, that religion was both the cry of pain of the poor and dispossessed and a means by which the bourgeoisie could reconcile them to their oppressed status; Nietzsche, that it was a means by which the weak could manipulate the strong by granting weakness the (fake) status of moral superiority. For both men, the "sacred" was thus not a reality but rather a means of mystifying life and disempowering people.

TC: Given recent conflicts in the Southern Baptist Convention (and to a lesser extent, the Presbyterian Church of America), readers might perk up when they come to chapter 7, which charts out twentieth-century revisions to Marx by people like Antonio Gramsci, and the melding of Marx and Freud by members of the Frankfurt School (first, Erich Fromm and Max Horkheimer, and then Herbert Marcuse and Wilhelm Reich). This, as many know, marked the (proper) founding of critical social theories. Can you tell us a bit about how this way of thinking—this "shotgun marriage" between two of the biggest names of the nineteenth century—eventually spawned the (first) sexual revolution?

CT: It is a somewhat complicated story, but in essence the Frankfurt School used Freud's ideas to understand why the proletariat in Europe in the 1920s and '30s was not moving toward the revolutionary politics of the Left but the authoritarian parties of the Right—such as the Fascists in Italy, the Nazis in Germany, and the Iron Guard in Romania. They concluded that the bourgeois family was the microcosm of the authoritarian state and that its tools were the sexual codes in which it trained children. In this, they borrowed from Freud, who had famously argued that sexual codes were the means of maintaining civilization, but they gave this a distinctly political twist. Thus the means to liberate the consciousness

of the working class was to shatter the authority of the family and its sexual morality. In the imagination of the Left, political liberation became inseparable from sexual liberation.

TC: You write that in Gramsci and the Frankfurt Schoolers we find "the roots of the modern approach to political revolution via the transformation of cultural institutions such as schools and the media." Obviously, the sexual revolution is the focus of your book and the most evident manifestation of Marcuse et al.'s influence; but in what other ways is the legacy of Frankfurt influencing our political situation?

CT: Queer theory and critical race theory are both highly influential at elite institutions and, in crude forms, increasingly among the population in general where ideas such as the radical separation of biological sex and gender, "systemic racism," and "white privilege" now inform the intuitions of many people who have no idea of their origins or real significance. And both of these represent both the success of this revolution-by-cultural-transformation approach and, of course, reinforce it and advance it.

TC: Douglas Murray, who himself is gay, has often said that sexuality, specifically being gay, moved from being something you did—one of many life activities and preferences—to something you *are*. The same is obviously true of transgenderism. How does this shift within the sexual revolution, from libertinism to fundamentalism, connect to the psychologization of human nature and human plasticity? Does this also speak to why people who identify as trans, nonbinary, queer, asexual, or what have you, are so hostile when challenged on the validity of their identity?

CT: It is the key move that comes out of Freud's thinking, that locates our identity in our sexual desires. Of course, once identity is grounded in desire, it becomes highly malleable. And once this grips the imagination, the curtailing of those desires or the delegitimizing of any of them becomes an attack on the selfhood of those who define themselves in terms of such.

TC: In *The Demon in Democracy*, Ryszard Legutko talks about how modern liberal democracies privatize everything, so religion is now totally relegated to private life. Legutko adds, however, that while everything is privatized, so too are traditionally private matters publicized (i.e., sex). What are your thoughts on this in relation to the modifications of the self that come from Freud and then Reich and Marcuse, whereby the self is increasingly defined by its sexual activity and sex is politicized?

CT: Once sex became central to identity, it was inevitably going to become central to politics, which is, after all, concerned with the way individuals connect

as a society. And as the family is the place where sexual mores are transmitted to children, the family was inevitably going to become a major focus of political interest. This was at the heart of Reich's program, and to an extent that of Marcuse too. But it is now a general truth: once one side makes the family political, the other side has no choice but to do so as well. So, the base unit that mediated between the individual and society as a whole—the family and the private space it occupies—becomes an area of public interest and political contestation.

TC: To most people, the victories of the sexual revolution seem to have progressed at warp speed. For example, by the time *Obergefell* went through, most state legislatures across the country were poised to legalize gay marriage anyway. The time gap between *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003) and *Obergefell* was pretty small. But the *Obergefell* ruling was only a few years ago, and the debates surrounding it seem almost boring now. Gay marriage has been completely normalized, and transgenderism is increasingly leaning that way. Pete Buttigieg garnered almost no social capital for being gay in the last Democratic primary. Your book examines how the modern mind was conditioned to accept the sexual revolution, from the 1960s to the present, with relative ease. Should we have been surprised, then, with the speed of all these fairly recent developments? Is there any going back? And what can we do to ensure we aren't perpetually caught unawares?

CT: I would actually say that the conditions for the sexual revolution—basically, the psychologizing of selfhood and the sexualizing of psychology—were in place long before the sixties. Our lack of awareness of that left us vulnerable to the shock and awe of the last decade's collapse of the institution of marriage and the separation of sex and gender. In hindsight (20/20 as usual), we should not have been surprised.

TC: Similar question: Is there any way that the modern conception of the self, which infects all of us, can be reverse engineered? Should we even try, or just resign ourselves to our own time?

CT: That's the big question. I'm inclined to think that the prospects on this front are currently rather bleak, precisely because the underlying cultural pathology—expressive individualism—is something in which we simply cannot help but be complicit. Yet I do think we can mount some form of rebellion: the church as a vital, disciplined body should be a witness that a community that is more than another form of social contract can exist. The problem, of course, is that we still have to contract into joining such a community. As long as Christians treat church as a consumer choice and a weekend hobby, we will see no progress.

TC: Although your book is decidedly nonpolemical, do you have any advice for Christians regarding how they might combat—in themselves, families, and churches—these elements of the modern self that have captured the Western imagination? Is a Benedict Option in order?

CT: Catechesis. Teach your kids well. Attend church where your family will sit under the word preached and receive the sacraments. Be a loving community as a church and focus your primary efforts locally. For me that means, for example, not wasting time on trivia like Twitter but focusing my time and effort on teaching students in my class. Too many people spend too much time using social media belligerently, trying to influence people they can never really influence. That's time that could be spent graciously influencing the people God has actually put in their lives—their family members, their neighbors, their workplaces. I suspect Rod [Dreher] would say that this is a big part of what he thinks the Benedict Option should look like.

TC: Since writing that last chapter, have you seen anything that would sway you against your own conclusion at all? (I'm asking you to, if possible, discard your inborn pessimism for a moment.)

CT: Ha! For me to do that would be . . . to make myself inauthentic! But I do see hope. Conflict is unpleasant and often evil, but it can also occasion good that might otherwise never exist. For example, the man who dies on the battlefield to save his companions has done something great and heroic that would be difficult to achieve in peacetime. And so, in the times in which we find ourselves, I think there is good emerging that might never have come to the fore: a friendship forged across old party divisions is one; and deep reflection on the difference between the church and the world, between Christian hope and earthly success, might be another. A growing appreciation for the community of the church, which will develop as a result of marginalization, is definitely something to look for and welcome.

TC: What are some book recommendations that might help us think more critically and Christianly about human nature and our understanding of the self?

CT: I would say that Philip Rieff's *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, Charles Taylor's *The Ethics of Authenticity* (or, for the more ambitious, his *Sources of the Self*), and O. Carter Snead's *What It Means to Be Human* are all essential reading. I would also suggest regularly checking the *Public Discourse* and *First Things* websites; they publish useful articles and helpful commentary on cultural issues.

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i-think-therefore-i-am-an-interview-with-dr-carl-trueman-on-his-the-rise-and-triumph-of-the-modern-self/.

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