The Ethics of Authenticity

Charles Taylor

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II
THE INARTICULATE DEBATE

We can pick it up through a very influential recent book in the United States, Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind.* The book itself was a rather remarkable phenomenon: a work by an academic political theorist about the climate of opinion among today's students, it held a place on the *New York Times* best-seller list for several months, greatly to the surprise of the author. It touched a chord.

The stance it took was severely critical of today's educated youth. The main feature it noted in their outlook on life was their acceptance of a rather facile relativism. Everybody has his or her own "values," and about these it is impossible to argue. But as Bloom noted, this was not just an epistemological position, a view about the limits of what reason can establish; it was also held as a moral position: one

ought not to challenge another's values. That is their concern, their life choice, and it ought to be respected. The relativism was partly grounded in a principle of mutual respect.

In other words, the relativism was itself an offshoot of a form of individualism, whose principle is something like this: everyone has a right to develop their own form of life, grounded on their own sense of what is really important or of value. People are called upon to be true to themselves and to seek their own self-fulfilment. What this consists of, each must, in the last instance, determine for him- or herself. No one else can or should try to dictate its content.

This is a familiar enough position today. It reflects what we could call the individualism of self-fulfilment, which is widespread in our times and has grown particularly strong in Western societies since the 1960s. It has been picked up on and discussed in other influential books: Daniel Bell's *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* and *The Minimal Self*, and Gilles Lipovetsky's *L'ère du vide*.

The tone of concern is audible in all these, although perhaps less marked in Lipovetsky. It runs roughly along the lines I outlined above under theme 1. This individualism involves a centring on the self and a concomitant shutting out, or even unawareness, of the greater issues or concerns that transcend the self, be they religious, political, historical. As a consequence, life is narrowed or flattened.[11] And the worry characteristically spills over into the third area I described: these authors are

concerned about the possibly dire political consequences of this shift in the culture.

Now there is much that I agree with in the strictures these writers make of contemporary culture. As I shall explain in a minute, I think the relativism widely espoused today is a profound mistake, even in some respects self-stultifying. It seems true that the culture of self-fulfilment has led many people to lose sight of concerns that transcend them. And it seems obvious that it has taken trivialized and self-indulgent forms. This can even result in a sort of absurdity, as new modes of conformity arise among people who are striving to be themselves, and beyond this, new forms of dependence, as people insecure in their identities turn to all sorts of self-appointed experts and guides, shrouded with the prestige of science or some exotic spirituality.

But there is something I nevertheless want to resist in the thrust of the arguments that these authors present. It emerges clearest in Bloom, perhaps most strongly in his tone of contempt for the culture he is describing. He doesn't seem to recognize that there is a powerful moral ideal at work here, however debased and travestied its expression might be. The moral ideal behind self-fulfilment is that of being true to oneself, in a specifically modern understanding of that term. A couple of decades ago, this was brilliantly defined by Lionel Trilling in an influential book, in which he encapsulated that modern form and distinguished it from earlier ones. The distinction is expressed in the title of the book, *Sincerity and*

Authenticity, and following him I am going to use the term "authenticity" for the contemporary ideal.

What do I mean by a moral ideal? I mean a picture of what a better or higher mode of life would be, where "better" and "higher" are defined not in terms of what we happen to desire or need, but offer a standard of what we ought to desire.

The force of terms like "narcissism" (Lasch's word), or "hedonism" (Bell's description), is to imply that there is no moral ideal at work here; or if there is, on the surface, that it should rather be seen as a screen for self-indulgence. As Bloom puts it, "The great majority of students, although they as much as anyone want to think well of themselves, are aware that they are busy with their own careers and their relationships. There is a certain rhetoric of self-fulfilment that gives a patina of glamor to this life, but they can see that there is nothing particularly noble about it. Survivalism has taken the place of heroism as the admired quality."[12] I have no doubt that this describes some, perhaps lots, of people, but it is a big mistake to think that it allows us insight into the change in our culture, into the power of this moral ideal — which we need to understand if we are to explain even why it is used as a hypocritical "patina" by the self-indulgent.

What we need to understand here is the moral force behind notions like self-fulfilment. Once we try to explain this simply as a kind of egoism, or a species of moral laxism, a self-indulgence with regard to a tougher, more exigent earlier age, we are already off the track. Talk of "permissiveness" misses this point. Moral laxity there is, and our age

is not alone in this. What we need to explain is what is peculiar to our time. It's not just that people sacrifice their love relationships, and the care of their children, to pursue their careers. Something like this has perhaps always existed. The point is that today many people feel *called* to do this, feel they ought to do this, feel their lives would be somehow wasted or unfulfilled if they didn't do it.

Thus what gets lost in this critique is the moral force of the ideal of authenticity. It is somehow being implicitly discredited, along with its contemporary forms. That would not be so bad if we could turn to the opposition for a defence. But here we will be disappointed. That the espousal of authenticity takes the form of a kind of soft relativism means that the vigorous defence of any moral ideal is somehow off limits. For the implications, as I have just described them above, are that some forms of life are indeed *higher* than others, and the culture of tolerance for individual self-fulfilment shies away from these claims. This means, as has often been pointed out, that there is something contradictory and self-defeating in their position, since the relativism itself is powered (at least partly) by a moral ideal. But consistently or not, this is the position usually adopted. The ideal sinks to the level of an axiom, something one doesn't challenge but also never expounds.

In adopting the ideal, people in the culture of authenticity, as I want to call it, give support to a certain kind of liberalism, which has been espoused by many others as well. This is the liberalism of neutrality. One of its basic tenets is that a liberal society must be neutral on questions of what consti-

tutes a good life. The good life is what each individual seeks, in his or her own way, and government would be lacking in impartiality, and thus in equal respect for all citizens, if it took sides on this question.[13] Although many of the writers in this school are passionate opponents of soft relativism (Dworkin and Kymlicka among them), the result of their theory is to banish discussions about the good life to the margins of political debate.

The result is an extraordinary inarticulacy about one of the constitutive ideals of modern culture.[14] Its opponents slight it, and its friends can't speak of it. The whole debate conspires to put it in the shade, to render it invisible. This has detrimental consequences. But before going on to these, I want to mention two other factors that conspire to intensify this silence.

One of them is the hold of moral subjectivism in our culture. By this I mean the view that moral positions are not in any way grounded in reason or the nature of things but are ultimately just adopted by each of us because we find ourselves drawn to them. On this view, reason can't adjudicate moral disputes. Of course, you can point out to someone certain consequences of his position he may not have thought about. So the critics of authenticity can point to the possible social and political results of each person seeking self-fulfilment. But if your interlocutor still feels like holding to his original position, nothing further can be said to gainsay him.

The grounds for this view are complex and go far beyond the moral reasons for soft relativism, although subjectivism clearly provides an important backing

for this relativism. Obviously, lots of people into the contemporary culture of authenticity are happy to espouse this understanding of the role (or non-role) of reason. What is perhaps more surprising, so are a great many of their opponents, who therefore are led to despair all the more of reforming contemporary culture. If the youth really don't care for causes that transcend the self, then what can you say to them?

Of course, there are critics who hold that there are standards in reason.[15] They think that there is such a thing as human nature, and that an understanding of this will show certain ways of life to be right and others wrong, certain ways to be higher and better than others. The philosophical roots of this position are in Aristotle. By contrast, modern subjectivists tend to be very critical of Aristotle, and complain that his "metaphysical biology" is out of date and thoroughly unbelievable today.

But philosophers who think like this have generally been opponents of the ideal of authenticity; they have seen it as part of a mistaken departure from the standards rooted in human nature. They had no reason to articulate what it is about; while those who upheld it have been frequently discouraged from doing so by their subjectivist views.

A third factor that has obscured the importance of authenticity as a moral ideal has been the normal fashion of social science explanation. This has generally shied away from invoking moral ideals and has tended to have recourse to supposedly harder and more down to earth factors in its explanation. And so the features of modernity I have been focussing on here, individualism and the expansion of

instrumental reason, have often been accounted for as by-products of social change: for instance, as spin-offs from industrialization, or greater mobility, or urbanization. There are certainly important causal relations to be traced here, but the accounts that invoke them frequently skirt altogether the issue whether these changes in culture and outlook owe anything to their own inherent power as moral ideals. The implicit answer is often negative.[16]

Of course, the social changes that are supposed to spawn the new outlook must themselves be explained, and this will involve some recourse to human motivations, unless we suppose that industrialization or the growth of cities occurred entirely in a fit of absence of mind. We need some notion of what moved people to push steadily in one direction, for example towards the greater application of technology to production, or towards greater concentrations of population. But what are often invoked are motivations that are non-moral. By that I mean motivations that can actuate people quite without connection to any moral ideal, as I defined this earlier. So we very often find these social changes explained in terms of the desire for greater wealth, or power, or the means of survival or control over others. Though all these things can be woven into moral ideals, they need not be, and so explanation in terms of them is considered sufficiently "hard" and "scientific."

Even where individual freedom and the enlargement of instrumental reason are seen as ideas whose intrinsic attractions can help explain their rise, this attraction is frequently understood in non-moral terms. That is, the power of these ideas is often

understood not in terms of their moral force but just because of the advantages they seem to bestow on people regardless of their moral outlook, or even whether they have a moral outlook. Freedom allows you to do what you want, and the greater application of instrumental reason gets you more of what you want, whatever that is.[17]

The result of all this has been to thicken the darkness around the moral ideal of authenticity. Critics of contemporary culture tend to disparage it as an ideal, even to confound it with a non-moral desire to do what one wants without interference. The defenders of this culture are pushed into inarticulacy about it by their own outlook. The general force of subjectivism in our philosophical world and the power of neutral liberalism intensify the sense that these issues can't and shouldn't be talked about. And then on top of it all, social science seems to be telling us that to understand such phenomena as the contemporary culture of authenticity, we shouldn't have recourse in our explanations to such things as moral ideals but should see it all in terms of, say, recent changes in the mode of production,[18] or new patterns of youth consumption, or the security of affluence.

Does this matter? I think so, very much. Many of the things critics of contemporary culture attack are debased and deviant forms of this ideal. That is, they flow from it, and their practitioners invoke it, but in fact they don't represent an authentic (!) fulfilment of it. Soft relativism is a case in point. Bloom sees that it has a moral basis: "The relativity of truth is not a theoretical insight but a moral postulate, the condition of a free society, or so [the students] see

it."[19] But in fact, I would like to claim, it travesties and eventually betrays this moral insight. So far from being a reason to reject the moral ideal of authenticity, it should itself be rejected in its name. Or so I would like to argue.

A similar point can be made for those appeals to authenticity that justify ignoring whatever transcends the self: for rejecting our past as irrelevant, or denying the demands of citizenship, or the duties of solidarity, or the needs of the natural environment. Similarly, justifying in the name of authenticity a concept of relationships as instrumental to individual self-fulfilment should also be seen as a self-stultifying travesty. The affirmation of the power of choice as itself a good to be maximized is a deviant product of the ideal.

Now if something like this is true, then it matters to be able to say it. For then one *has* something to say, in all reason, to the people who invest their lives in these deviant forms. And this may make a difference to their lives. Some of these things may be heard. Articulacy here has a moral point, not just in correcting what may be wrong views but also in making the force of an ideal that people are already living by more palpable, more vivid for them; and by making it more vivid, empowering them to live up to it in a fuller and more integral fashion.

What I am suggesting is a position distinct from both boosters and knockers of contemporary culture. Unlike the boosters, I do not believe that everything is as it should be in this culture. Here I tend to agree with the knockers. But unlike them, I think that authenticity should be taken seriously as a moral

ideal. I differ also from the various middle positions, which hold that there are some good things in this culture (like greater freedom for the individual), but that these come at the expense of certain dangers (like a weakening of the sense of citizenship), so that one's best policy is to find the ideal point of trade-off between advantages and costs.

The picture I am offering is rather that of an ideal that has degraded but that is very worthwhile in itself, and indeed, I would like to say, unrepudiable by moderns. So what we need is neither root-and-branch condemnation nor uncritical praise; and not a carefully balanced trade-off. What we need is a work of retrieval, through which this ideal can help us restore our practice.

To go along with this, you have to believe three things, all controversial: (1) that authenticity is a valid ideal; (2) that you can argue in reason about ideals and about the conformity of practices to these ideals; and (3) that these arguments can make a difference. The first belief flies in the face of the major thrust of criticism of the culture of authenticity, the second involves rejecting subjectivism, and the third is incompatible with those accounts of modernity that see us as imprisoned in modern culture by the "system," whether this is defined as capitalism, industrial society, or bureaucracy. I hope to be able to make some of this plausible in what follows. Let me start with the ideal.

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."

IV
INESCAPABLE HORIZONS

This is a very rapid sketch of the origins of authenticity. I shall have to fill in more detail later. But for the moment it is enough to see what is involved in reasoning here. And so I want to take up the second controversial claim that I made at the end of the last section. Can one say anything in reason to people who are immersed in the contemporary culture of authenticity? Can you talk in reason to people who are deeply into soft relativism, or who seem to accept no allegiance higher than their own development — say, those who seem ready to throw away love, children, democratic solidarity, for the sake of some career advancement?

Well, how do we reason? Reasoning in moral matters is always reasoning with somebody. You have an interlocutor, and you start from where that

person is, or with the actual difference between you; you don't reason from the ground up, as though you were talking to someone who recognized no moral demands whatever. A person who accepted no moral demands would be as impossible to argue with about right and wrong as would a person who refused to accept the world of perception around us be impossible to argue with about empirical matters.[23]

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 enmired 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.