

## WEEK 9 | EXPRESSIVE INDIVIDUALISM<sup>1</sup>

*Glory to man in the highest! For Man is the master of all things.*

ALGERNON SWINEBURNE, "HYMN OF MAN"

For most of human history, individuals found their meaning and identity from their relation to God and their position in society. Culture directed the individual outward, so that individuals found their true self in communal activities and their relationships with others. Identity, then, was something given and learned, not created.

Over time, a shift in Western thought occurred. Rather than look outward for the true self—identity and meaning—the modern man now looks inward. Now, the individual finds meaning by giving expression to their own feelings and desires. The social philosopher Charles Taylor describes this ‘culture of authenticity’ as:

... the understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late eighteenth century, that each of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.

Prior to the modern age the individual’s commitment was outwardly directed to those communal beliefs, commitments, and institutions that were bigger than the individual; the individual found their identity in their conformity to and cooperation in their community. Now, the individual’s commitment is, first and foremost, to the self and inwardly directed. We might call this the psychologization of self.

We see this in many ways. Higher institutions of learning have now become safe spaces for fragile identities. Rather than challenge a student’s deep held beliefs and perceptions about the world, universities are places where those beliefs are affirmed and safeguarded from contradicting ideas and perspectives. To disagree with how someone feels about something is a personal attack on who they are, because their identity is now tied to their inward feelings.

If the inner psychological life of a person—one’s ‘feelings’—is sovereign over their identity, then ‘identity’ becomes as unlimited as the human imagination. That is exactly what we are seeing today. Our society affirms the authority of the individual to identify however they want, to

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<sup>1</sup> This section is a condensed, simplified adaptation of the argument made by Carl Trueman in *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020). This book is well worth reading to develop a more complete understanding of the cultural pathologies that plague our society.

be whatever they ‘feel’ they are. This is expressed most clearly in the realm of sexuality and gender: how one ‘feels’ is determinative, even if it conflicts with their biology.

It is also important to recognize that, in this kind of cultural climate, any value system that prohibits a person’s unbridled expression of their inner self, their self-determined identity, is repressive. What has taken place in the West in the last century is what Friedrich Nietzsche called a “transvaluation of values.” That which was once deemed good is now bad; that which was once regarded as healthy is now deemed a sickness. Judeo-Christian values regarding sexuality and sexual identity are now considered a part of a repressive system inhibiting people from being who they truly are (or, how they feel to be. . . which is what society has come to believe determines who someone truly is).

How did this happen? It would be easy to point to the sexual revolution of the 60s and 70s and the rise of identity politics in the 80s. However, no historical phenomenon is its own cause. The American Revolution did not cause the American Revolution; the Second World War did not cause the Second World War. Likewise, the sexual revolution did not cause the sexual revolution. The moral and philosophical shift in the West in the last fifty years is not self-caused but the product of a matrix of historical developments stretching back over several centuries. What follows is an attempt to briefly trace of some of those developments. Following our examination of these historical roots we’ll look at the unique contribution postmodern philosophy has made to the rise of expressive individualism.

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN IDEA**

### **I. ROUSSEAU: PEARS & ASPARAGUS**

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was an 18<sup>th</sup> century Genevan philosopher whose reflections on identity, politics, and ethics have had significant implications for the cultural ethos of the modern age. In his autobiography *Confessions*, Rousseau sets out the following as his objective: “I am resolved on an undertaking that has no model and will have no imitator. I want to show fellow-men a man in all the truth of nature; and this man is to be myself.”<sup>2</sup> Later he clarifies this intent, writing:

The particular object of my confessions is to make known my inner self, exactly as it was in every circumstance of my life. It is the history of my soul that I promised, and to relate it faithfully I require no other memorandum; all I need to do, as I have done up until now, is to look inside myself.<sup>3</sup>

From these statements it is clear that, for Rousseau, a person’s authentic self is their inner self; their identity is psychological and oriented inward.

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<sup>2</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, ed. Patrick Coleman, trans. Angela Scholar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

This emphasis comes to the fore in a curious story Rousseau tells, one that he regards as critically formative for his thinking. A local man named M. Verrat convinces Rousseau to steal some of Verrat's mother's asparagus so that Verrat can sell it for profit, a plan Rousseau goes along with. In reflecting on this act of theft, Rousseau comes to the conclusion that his motive for committing this crime was not greed or envy, but to "oblige the person who was making me do it."<sup>4</sup> Rather than negative or evil, Rousseau sees his motive as intrinsically good—a desire to help Verrat. It was only the way in which he went about fulfilling his desire that was evil. This event is important for understanding Rousseau's basic tenet that human nature is inherently good but becomes corrupted by external forces and conditions. That is, Rousseau's true, inner self is good, but when exposed to outside forces, his good nature is corrupted, and he becomes an evil caricature of who he really is.

Rousseau's understanding of human nature is in stark contrast to another who wrote his *Confessions*. More than one thousand years before Rousseau recounted stealing asparagus, Augustine of Hippo recounted a similar story. He recalls an evening in which he and his friends set out to steal pears from a neighbor's garden. The prize is not in the pears themselves, for Augustine admits that he had better pears in his own garden at home. In fact, the thieves end up throwing their loot to the pigs and go on their way.

There are several points of similarity between these two stories. Like Rousseau, Augustine denies that envy or greed motivated him to steal. He did, after all, have better pears available to him. He also notes that, were it not for the influence of his friends, he would not have committed the act on his own; part of the delight was in enjoying the camaraderie with his fellow thieves. Here, however, Augustine and Rousseau diverge. Augustine identifies the sheer delight in the sinful act as the foundational motive for his actions, unlike Rousseau who pointed to a positive motivation—a desire to please his companion. Augustine recognizes it was a negative motivation innate to him that drove him to theft.

The difference between the two men is instructive. While Rousseau identified the corrupting element as something external to him, Augustine identified it as part of his nature. For Augustine, the moral corruption is internal, not external; society is not to blame for his behavior, he is. Clearly Augustine's worldview is a biblical one, identifying man as corrupt and sinful by nature (Rom 3:10-18; Eph 2:1-3), a nature we inherited from our first father Adam (Rom 5:19). Rousseau, on the other hand, sees man as essentially good. Man is only corrupted by societal forces and the pressure to conform to cultural expectations.

Though few people in contemporary society have read Rousseau, his ideas have come to increasingly dominate the moral landscape of society, the consequences of which we are currently experiencing. If a person's identity, their true self, is psychological and inherently good, then a moral society should seek to liberate individuals to express their inner self without

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<sup>4</sup> Rousseau, *Confessions*, 32.

hindrance or condemnation. In other words, individuals should be encouraged to be true to themselves, to act in accordance with how they feel. Any moral or ethical standards in a society that hinder a person's full expression of their inner self not only represses that individual but harms society by corrupting naturally good people. We see this kind of thinking in our world today, where men who feel they are women trapped in a man's body are encouraged to live and act in accordance with their feelings. To say or believe otherwise is itself deemed immoral, harmful, and violent.

Rousseau roots this ethic in empathy, arguing that personal sentiment and pity for others ought to take the place of laws, morals, and virtues. Empathy, he argues, will naturally lead us to work towards alleviating the suffering of others by enabling them to express their true, inner self. Thus, ethics becomes a matter of psychological sentiment. Morality ceases to be rooted in natural law or something external to the individual, but rather is found in a person's natural empathy for others:

There is, besides, another Principle... which, having been given to man in order under certain circumstances to soften the ferociousness of his amour propre or of the desire for self-preservation prior to the birth of amour propre tempers his ardor for well-being with an innate repugnance to see his kind suffer... I do not believe I need to fear any contradiction in granting the only Natural virtue which the most extreme Detractor of human virtues [Thomas Hobbes] was forced to acknowledge. I speak of Pity, a disposition suited to beings as weak and as subject to so many ills as we are; a virtue all the more universal and useful to man as it precedes the exercise of all reflection in him, and so Natural that even the beasts sometimes show evidence of it.<sup>5</sup>

Empathy, he argues, will naturally lead us to work towards alleviating the suffering of others by enabling them to express their true, inner self. We see reflections of this in modern society in which an individual's right to self-expression, to being "who they truly are," is seen as the highest good, even at the expense of the rights of others, i.e. the right to freedom of speech. As Carl Trueman writes, if what Rousseau argued is true then "The key question is how to arrange society in such a way that it sets those terms [by which an individual identity is established and recognized] in a manner consonant with self-love or in a way that does not lead to an alienated, inauthentic selfhood."<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, Rousseau's influence on modern thinking is significant. The question now becomes, how did the musings of an 18<sup>th</sup> century Swiss philosopher come to hold such powerful sway over contemporary western culture? For that we turn to a group of poets known as the Romantics.

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<sup>5</sup> Rousseau, *Discourses*, 152.

<sup>6</sup> Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 126.

## II. THE ROMANTICS: UNACKNOWLEDGED LEGISLATURES

The Romantics were participants in an artistic movement known as Romanticism in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. While the movement as a whole is difficult to define, for our purposes one particular thread—that of expressive individualism in Romantic poetry—will be addressed.

The Romantic poets built upon many of the ideas of human selfhood that originated (at least as far as public awareness is concerned) with Rousseau. They believed in a basic antithesis between nature and culture and argued that the latter corrupted the former. Like Rousseau, the Romantics sought to re-engage the audience with that which is innately human but has been corrupted by societal forces. True authenticity “is to be found by freeing oneself from, or transcending, the alien demands of civilization; by returning to the impulses of nature; and by rooting what it means to be truly human in feeling prior to any consideration of reason.”<sup>7</sup>

Poets were the pop culture icons of their time, wielding influence over public opinion and popular thinking in a way akin to movie and sports stars of our day. They were, in the words of Percy Shelley, the “unacknowledged legislatures of the world,”<sup>8</sup> persons with the ability to advance political revolution and social change.<sup>9</sup> They believed that there was an ethical purpose to poetry. The pleasure that poetry induced through the emotional response it created should lead to the moral improvement of the audience as they reconnected with their true human nature. Like Rousseau, it was not something transcendent, like God, natural law or reason, which provided the basis for morality, but personal sentiment manifest in sympathy and empathy for the suffering.

In light of this moral purpose for poetry, Percy Shelley believed that poetry (and all art for that matter) was political. As poetry transforms the individual member of the audience, it brings with it a new moral consciousness with political implications. Shelley believed that poetry exposed oppression; it moved its audience with images of liberation and the possibilities of a brighter future, and thus inspires them to make those possibilities an actuality through revolution. The poet, like modern celebrities, used his platform to advance radical social and moral transformation in society.

It should also be noted that, especially in the writings of Percy Shelley, we see a particular disdain for religion. In his view, religion was a means of oppression in which the powerful manipulated others for their own gain,<sup>10</sup> something accomplished primarily through the means of sexual repression. He writes:

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<sup>7</sup> Trueman, *Rise and Triumph*, 148.

<sup>8</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Defence of Poetry*, 1821.

<sup>9</sup> William Woodsworth, *The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 606.

<sup>10</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Queen Mab*, Canto 4.203-26, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, end ed., Norton Critical Edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 40-41.

Unchecked by dull and selfish chastity,  
That virtue of the cheaply virtuous,  
Who pride themselves in senselessness and frost.<sup>11</sup>

In Shelley's mind there is a clear connection between sexual restrictions, political oppression, and religion. Here we see a pattern of thought so familiar in the modern west: the connection between individual authenticity and sexual liberation. Man is only free to be who they truly are when they are sexually liberated.<sup>12</sup> Because ethics was increasingly viewed as a matter of personal sentiment and not based on external authorities, institutions that sought to curb or restrict natural instincts—a role traditionally played by the church—became viewed as problematic.<sup>13</sup> Part of the moral and political imperative of art and poetry is sexual liberation to promote personal happiness and authenticity:

If happiness be the object of morality, of all human unions and disunions; if the worthiness of every action is to be estimated by the quantity of pleasurable sensation it is calculated to produce, then the connection of the sexes is so long sacred as it contributes to the comfort of the parties, and is naturally dissolved when its evils are greater than its benefits. There is nothing immoral in this separation.<sup>14</sup>

One can hear in these words the modern justification for no-fault divorce and universal access to abortion: the happiness of the individual rooted in an inner sense of psychological well-being.

The poetry of the Romantics, with their over political and moral purpose, began the process of imprinting the ideas of Rousseau onto the cultural consciousness of the west. Key to what they advanced was the idea that sentiment was the proper foundation for ethics. In other words, personal taste becomes truth. Emotion becomes ethic. Feelings define identity.

### III. NIETZSCHE, MARX, & DARWIN: PLASTIC PEOPLE

Rousseau and the Romantics gave us the notion that identity is found within, that the individual must look inwards to find who they truly are. Identity is not something bestowed *on us* but discovered *by us* as we express outwardly how we feel inwardly. The third (and, for our purposes, culminating) stage in the rise of expressive individualism takes place in the late 19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Shelley, *Queen Mab*, Canto 9.84-86, in *ibid.*, 68.

<sup>12</sup> "Love withers under constraint; its very essence is liberty" (Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, corr. G. M. Matthews [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972], 32).

<sup>13</sup> As Trueman notes, "The idea that Christian sexual codes prevent people from living free and happy lives—from being true to themselves—is not of recent vintage" (Trueman, *Rise and Triumph*, 155).

<sup>14</sup> Shelley, *Poetical Works*, 806-807.

and early 20<sup>th</sup> century and is due to the influence of three men investigating very different fields of study: Nietzsche (philosophy), Marx (economics), and Darwin (biology). These men taught us that identity is something we can create and recreate according to our whims and desires. In other words, they gave identity mutability. People became plastic.

At the root of this shift is the belief that identity, being inwardly determined, is not fixed or static. Rousseau and the Romantics taught us that identity is not something external but psychological. Nietzsche, Marx, and Darwin would take this further by denying a transcendent human nature, an intrinsic essence that provided the foundation for that identity. Human nature had always been understood as something God-given and therefore inherently authoritative over who we are. In denying this essential nature, these men created an intellectual atmosphere in which identity was no longer anchored to something fixed and stable. Rather, identity was now fixed to something mutable—a person's inner psychology and feelings.

### **A. Nietzsche: The Death of God**

Friedrich Nietzsche is well-known and oft-quoted German philosopher who lived during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and who has exerted a profound impact on Western philosophy and culture. Several pathologies of our modern culture can be traced back to him and are relevant to our discussion.

The first is his profound suspicion of any claim to absolute moral truth. In what is perhaps the most famous and oft-quoted passage in all his writings, the madman passage in book 3 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche declares, "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him."<sup>15</sup> Beyond a simple affirmation of atheism, Nietzsche, through the madman character, was wrestling with the moral and metaphysical consequences of the Enlightenment in which God had been (allegedly) rendered unnecessary to explain the universe as we experience it. The problem, according to Nietzsche, was that to remove God meant removing the very foundation upon which morality and our perception of reality had been built. Though religion had been dispensed with, its influence on the systems of life and thought—the way people think and behave—continued. What the enlightenment had failed to do, Nietzsche alleged, was to recognize that these systems no longer had justification because their foundation had been removed. Nietzsche rightly recognized that without God there was no justification for transcendent morality, ethics, or knowledge:

How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to

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<sup>15</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974).

invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?<sup>16</sup>

Without God, there is no transcendent order and meaning to nature on which a metaphysic can be built as a basis for universal truth or morality. Without God, the impetus falls to man to determine them, essentially taking on the terrifying burden of creator. Thus, every man becomes the maker of his own ethic, his own knowledge, his own morality. Truth and morality become matters of personal taste (sound familiar?). As Nietzsche put it, we have unchained the earth from the sun.

Nietzsche's clarity on the implications of atheism for morality lead to a second significant idea that has influenced modern thinking: a rejection of religion. Nietzsche accused religion—and all who would make objective truth claims—of dressing their own personal preferences in religious language that assigned it transcendent and objective status:

Out of this erroneous perspective on all things one makes a morality, a virtue, a holiness for oneself, one unites the good conscience with seeing *falsely*—one demands that no *other* kind of perspective shall be accorded any value after one has rendered one's own sacrosanct with the names "God," "redemption," "eternity."<sup>17</sup>

The imposition of these values on others was, in Nietzsche's mind, a case of the religious minority oppressing others to their own advantage. Nietzsche was repulsed by religion because of what he perceived as its true motivations, a feeling commonly shared in our modern society.

Nietzsche's rejection of objective truth and morality and his attacks on religion are really attacks on the idea of human nature, the third relevant feature of his thought for the modern age. Having rejected a transcendent metaphysical reality, Nietzsche rejects the notion of a transcendent human nature that is prior to and greater than any individual. He argues that to assume such a nature is to enslave oneself to external moral codes and a fixed teleology, or purpose, that one does not possess intrinsically. Rather, human beings—having replaced the 'god' they killed—ought to create themselves. This is true freedom: self-creation. A person's nature is what they invent themselves to be. As Jean-Paul Sartre would say, existence precedes essence.<sup>18</sup> The goal of this self-creation is personal satisfaction. Nietzsche shows an emphasis on the pleasure of the instant, the "psychological satisfaction of the individual in the here and now,"<sup>19</sup> as imbuing life

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<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 2003), 132.

<sup>18</sup> This is entirely antithetical to the teaching of Scripture. Essence—who we are as creatures made by God and bearing His image—determines our existence, or how we ought to live. Who we are determines what we do, not the other way around.

<sup>19</sup> Trueman, *Rise and Triumph*, 175.



with purpose and meaning. In other words, a person should create themselves to be whatever makes them feel the happiest in the moment. Their identity can, and should, change based on their momentary desires. The consequences of this thinking are clear and abundant in our culture.

## **B. Marx: Material Matters**

Karl Marx is most famous for his *Communist Manifesto* in which he advocates for communism as the natural answer to the (perceived) failure and injustices of capitalism. Significant for our purposes is his inversion of G. W. F. Hegel's understanding of human nature. Hegel, a late 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher, argued that human nature in the present finds its "being in becoming." Human nature is a work in progress, something that is not static but dynamic. Hegel believed that the understanding of human nature—how people in a society viewed themselves—determined the material conditions of that society. In other words, ideas move history forward.

Marx affirmed the dialectical nature of this process but inverted it. He argued that it was material conditions that moved history forward and determined how people think about themselves. He saw human nature as a function of the economic structure of society. Thus, as economic conditions change and history progresses, human nature changes with it. Human nature, then, is plastic, always in a state of potential flux.

There is more in Marx's philosophy that is relevant to our modern age. Just as he viewed human nature as a product of the economic conditions of a society, so he viewed moral codes. Morality is a function of the material structure of society at any given time and serves to reinforce that structure by justifying the form of life it presents as the status quo. In other words, morality is a social construct that serves to reinforce the present structure of society, for good or ill. Thus, like Nietzsche, Marx views any organization that propagates any such transcendent moral code—like Christianity, for example—with a cynical spirit, seeing in that organization the desire to benefit itself at the expense of others.

## **C. Darwin: The End of Ends**

Charles Darwin is best known for his theory of natural selection and the foundation it provided for evolution to become the prevailing scientific consensus of the day.<sup>20</sup> For our purposes we want to focus on how his theory impacted how society came to view human nature. Nietzsche rejected a transcendent human nature as a metaphysical trick; Marx redefined human nature in terms of ongoing historical processes; Darwin would strip it of any sort of transcendent destiny or purpose. In other words, Darwin stripped humanity of its teleology.

Darwin was not the first person to propose the idea of natural selection to explain the diversity and complexity of life on earth. He was, however, the first to remove the need for any sort of

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<sup>20</sup> It is beyond the scope of this class to discuss the many pitfalls of evolutionary theory, both old and new, but rest assured, evolution does not provide a satisfactory explanation for neither the origin of life nor the diversity of life.

Divine agency from this process, attributing it solely to natural processes, like natural selection, and having no ultimate purpose or destination. Whereas humanity had always understood itself to be specially created by God with a unique status and purpose in creation, Darwin stripped humanity of this status and purpose, utterly redefining what it means to be human altogether.

Along with this loss of transcendent purpose was a loss of transcendent morality or virtue to which humanity must conform. Like Nietzsche and Marx, Darwin saw morality as grounded in personal preference and not transcendent law.

These three men, then, advance the work begun by Rousseau and the Romantics. Identity had been psychologized and grounded in feelings. Human nature was stripped of any transcendent foundation, given it the ability to be changed and molded. The authority for crafting what it means to be human was thrust into the lap of the individual, so that every person is given the authority to determine who they are purely based on their feelings and desires in the moment, with every right to identify differently at a different moment according to that which will produce the greatest personal satisfaction.

## **A. Conclusion**

This is the history of ideas that permeate our modern culture. Though few would be familiar with all the thinkers above, their ideas have infiltrated the collective consciousness of society and are almost universally affirmed as true in secular society. These ideas give the LGBTQ+ movement its rational, explain why universities require “safe space” for students, why free speech is being openly questioned, and why identity politics is more and more dominating the political sphere. An individual is who they identify to be, and this identity is malleable and mutable according to their inner psychology. Words are thus “violent” because words cause psychological harm—that is, they harm a person’s very being by attacking *who they are*, not just *what they believe*.

We also see why there is a general disdain for religion among the non-religious. Common to all of these thinkers was the idea that religion, with its external moral codes, is part of the problem. Moral codes are an alien imposition on a person as they truly are, a repressive tool that keeps them from being truly happy or fulfilled.

These ideas have become a part of the “social imaginary,”<sup>21</sup> the common and accepted way of thinking in our society. Our neighbors think this way or have been influenced by this way of thinking, whether cognizant of the roots of those ideas or not.

We should also recognize the impact of these ideas on the church. There is a tendency among many evangelicals to seek out a church that fits their desires, from the style of music, the style of dress, the length of the service, to the style of preaching. Rather than seek to conform to a

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<sup>21</sup> A term coined by philosopher Charles Taylor to describe “a broad understanding of the way a given people imagine their collective social life.” Essentially, the social imaginary describes the common self-understanding of a particular society.

community and integrate into its standards, too often we want the church to conform to our desires. This is subtle rehashing of Rousseau and his legacy passed down through the centuries: it's all about what makes me happy.

## **THE POSTMODERN IMPACT**

We must remember that ideas do not arise in a vacuum (the above discussion makes that abundantly clear). Postmodern philosophy is critical to the development of expressive individualism and its adoption in society.

First, we see elements of the postmodern epistemology throughout this discussion, especially as it relates to knowledge being situation-dependent (i.e. our “situatedness”) and the idea that truth is something constructed by society or the individual and is therapeutic in nature. Perhaps most clearly, we see the anti-realism of postmodern philosophy come to the fore. What is “true” is what a person believes or feels, regardless of whether that corresponds to objective reality—because, remember, we create reality. This postmodern belief manifests itself in people “creating” themselves according to their inward feelings and desires.

Second, the modern conception of self and sexuality is built upon the postmodern anthropology. You'll recall that central to postmodernism's conception of humanity is the complete lack of a universal human nature. The “self” is a social construct determined by the individual's situatedness—their social, cultural, religious, and economic context. This “self,” however, is a form of oppression, something imposed on the individual by society. The postmodern goal of oppression can only be accomplished by freeing the individual to express themselves freely without any sort of societal constraints. Thus, a just society is one that promotes individual expression by removing any kind of social or religious norms that might hinder full expression.

This brings us to the third major impact of postmodernism on the modern concept of self. The postmodern ethic identifies power dynamics as the force that causes societal ills, especially those that are psychological in nature. Though classic postmodernists don't go much beyond identifying the root of what plagues society, the solution to the problem is obvious. If individual repression due to societal restraints—morals, religious standards, cultural norms, etc.—is evil, then the removal of all those restraints is good and will produce a flourishing society. As mentioned above, a just society is one in which those restraints are removed through deconstruction. Deconstruction is applied to language, institutions, and religions in order to strip away the problematics that repress the individual.

Further, moral deviancy is no longer a crime for which an individual is guilty. The issue is the idea that there is a standard from which to deviate—a standard that is socially constructed. It is a standard with no foundation in reality because there is no infinite point of reference in which to ground it. Morality is relative. The only immoral action is to repress individual self-expression.