

Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self – Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*

Reviewed by Ben Pakula

There is no question that the concept of the *self* in Western thought has undergone radical change throughout the last century; perhaps especially in the last three decades. Whilst not the *cause* of such change, the sexual revolution, along with the proliferation of the sexual ‘identity politics’ to which it contributed, provide the contexts in which the change in notions of selfhood have, arguably, been most visible.

Such cultural evolution should be of deep interest and concern not only to protestant or reformed evangelicals, for as Calvin famously establishes at the beginning of the *Institutes*, knowledge of God and knowledge of self are inextricably linked. Yet perhaps on account of intellectual laziness, or because of an understandable reticence to toeing the fashionable line of ‘cultural contextualisation’ when engaging with our communities at large, many evangelicals and others acknowledge and challenge only the ‘what’ of current Western thought, instead of also addressing the ‘why’.

It’s for this reason that I’m especially thankful for Carl Trueman’s *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self – Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism and the Road to Sexual Revolution* – a work I hold to be a serious contender for the most important book of the decade, if not beyond. In eloquently distilling what must have been long hours of painstaking research, Trueman traces the sociological, philosophical and psychological paths that have culminated in the current Western conception of the self. He makes the compelling case that the convergence of these paths has resulted in the thinking that any conception of selfhood necessitating a transcendent referent, be it God, gods, or the perceived cultural norm, is not only outdated, but also damaging and immoral. Trueman then shows how political and legal discourse has evolved to reflect and enshrine such thinking, to the extent that one of the core components of selfhood – that of self-determined sexuality and sexual expression – has become something of a Western cultural ‘shibboleth’. To impede one’s inherent right to sexual identity and expression originating from nothing other than individual psychological emotivism, is to oppress and dehumanise. *That* this is the case in much of Western thought today is self-evident, but *how* it came to be the case, as Trueman establishes, is a result of the convergence of a number of strands of sociological, philosophical, including economic philosophy, and psychological influences.

On the sociological front, Trueman seconds the work of Philip Rieff to provide the helpful conceptual framework within which we can track the movement of Western thought regarding the self. Rieff

identifies three basic types of cultures (which he labels '1st world', '2nd world' and '3rd world'), the third of which rejects any notion of a transcendent standard. Trueman also relies on Rieff's helpful observations about the use of art, especially poetry, in shaping the cultural landscape. His identification and explanation of 'deathworks' – artistic works or acts used as a means subverting cultural norms – is both fascinating and, sadly, ostensibly prevalent and effective.

On the philosophical front, Trueman traces the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose notion of selfhood is juxtaposed with that of Augustine. Whilst Augustine's *Confessions* argue that immorality finds its root in the core of our being, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* insist that the self is intrinsically good, and that immorality comes via the corrupting influence of the imposing cultural standards. Thus selfhood liberated from the constraints of cultural standards (which are made most perceptible by the sexual practices a culture condemns), is the 'authentic' self; the one to which we rightly aspire. Trueman points out that Rousseau's thinking was effectively disseminated and fortified through the works of poets like William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Blake – all of whom he labels 'unacknowledged legislators' in reference to the Rousseau-like cultural reshaping they achieved. Trueman then shows how Nietzsche, Marx and Darwin, in their respective disciplines, all gave political, economic and scientific validations to Rousseau's ideals of the unhindered self.

Finally, in examining the contributions of Sigmund Freud, Trueman demonstrates how any meaningful understanding of selfhood came to necessitate a psycho-sexual approach. In many ways Freud's work made for the culmination of systems of belief that undergirded the sexual revolution, such that it's to be understood as more a product than a producer of the modern Western conception of selfhood; a conception that is most readily discerned by current attitudes towards sexuality and sexual expression.

Trueman ends the book by opening the conversation about how the church can respond to current Western thinking about the self. The great strength of his work lies not so much in what it might add to our apologetics arsenal, but in that it provides a new appreciation of the indispensable correspondence between God as Creator and God as Father. Whilst most evangelicals would readily concur with J. I. Packer's assertion that the highest privilege the gospel offers is adoption as God's children, I think we can easily underappreciate that one of the biggest reasons adoption is so marvellous is precisely because our Father also happens to be our Creator. We rightly accept the basic consequences of framing humanity as 'imago dei'; that our very 'createdness' implies a transcendent referent, along with bodily integrity and purpose. Yet, Trueman's insightful mapping of the development in the Western concept of the self, highlights the inevitable decline – both towards immorality and to an effective *isolation* – when humanity seeks to define itself without reference to any transcendent standard. We can thank God that, as persons with faith in Jesus, our lives are now hidden in Christ (Col 3:3), *and*, that the core of one's being doesn't exist without an eternal Creator. Hence, we are never alone.