

PASSION IN WINTER

This is the fifth in a series of essays about self-assertion. “Assertive Individuality”, “The Good and I”, “Beauty, Meaning, and I”, and “Comprehensible Originality” make up the other four.

My conversation with myself about self-assertion grew out of weariness with the assumption that if only it could be made clearer what we ought to do as a society and why, then it would eventually get done. But it has been clear for a long time that economic injustice is a devastating blight on the quality of life and community worldwide. It has also been clear how to eliminate it. If we stopped taking advantage of one another, then economic injustice would be half-way to its demise. Generosity to those in need would take it the rest of the way.

Everyone knowing that has made no practical difference whatsoever. Like an aggressive weed, economic injustice proliferates unchecked. In the face of that fact, continuing efforts to make the truth still clearer, in hopes that doing so might eventuate in changes on the ground, seems maladaptive.

Reflecting about my own efforts on that front, it struck me that there had to be something about the situation that I did not understand. Nor, as far as I could tell, did anyone else. Invoking some incomprehensible flaw or evil at the core of human nature does not constitute understanding; it merely concedes its absence. Hence, my conversation with myself, undertaken with a view to tracking down this supposed evil so as to get a better look at its face.

I discovered no evil at the core of human nature. Instead, I found a deep need for self-assertion, characteristic of us both as a species and as individuals. We are passionately proud of who are and fiercely determined to assert it.

That pride speaks loudly, for example, in the immense efforts we make to free ourselves from subjugation by the forces of nature. Civilization is largely the product of our collective efforts in that regard. One of its achieved aims is relative freedom from interference with us by the natural world, as well as by one another.

Each of us replicates that effort individually in his or her striving to achieve independence and self-sufficiency, whether in the form of earning an adequate living, of protecting our health, or of contributing to the sustenance of institutions that protect our individual freedoms.

Self-assertion also reveals itself in the promulgation of norms respect for which protects our sensibility from outrages to it. Those norms represent assertions of that shared

sensibility.

Self-assertion speaks again in individual convictions and behaviors that, though they may deviate from collective norms, assert our *personal* sensibilities. As an example, the sight of economic injustice may not offend you, nor even the society at large, but it offends me. That sight is an outrage to my personal sensibility. That's enough for me to stand up *against* the outrage and *for* my sensibility. Or again, depriving people of their freedom also offends me, so much so that I will strongly resist remedies to economic injustice that would privilege justice at the expense of freedom. That, too, is standing up for my personal sensibility.

Finally, the voice of self-assertion is audible in art, where art is the endeavor to create beauty and/or meaning in excess of functionality, as though for their own sakes. Art is assertion by us of the beings we are – beings who see, hear, and feel, for example. That is the only reason why felicitous color compositions, fine images, music, and well crafted stories matter. And as individual humans, we are particular beings, each with his or her own eyes, ears, and heart, seeking, when possible, to make art that asserts that particularity by giving voice to what makes each of us individually different from everyone else.

So far, so good. But how do we get from here to economic injustice? How do we get from an individual need to assert ourselves to a society where we do so at one another's expense, and this despite the fact that our shared sensibility generally rebels at the sight of the result? Even as it continues to spread, most of us endlessly deplore the spread of poverty. We are appalled by the widening gap between the rich and the poor, yet it continues to widen, not infrequently as a consequence of our own behavior.

(It strikes me as disingenuous to lay exclusive responsibility for the situation at the door of Wall Street or of some other set of predatory capitalists. Anyone – me, for instance -- whose retirement income depends on the functionality of our economic institutions contributes, however innocently, to the ongoing state of affairs.)

As I have been tracing it in these essays, the conceptual path from individual assertiveness to an unjust society leads through a landscape defined by the following realities among others.

- Not all self-assertion is equally satisfying.
- Opportunities for satisfying self-assertion are relatively scarce.
- Taking advantage of those opportunities even when they are available is typically both hard and risky.

Up against those realities, we try to make do with substitute satisfactions. The acquisition of ordinal goods is one of those substitute satisfactions. (By “ordinal” goods, I mean those that involve rank as an essential component: not wealth, but greater wealth than others; not social standing, but standing superior to that of other people; etc.)

While the inherent scarcity of ordinal goods recommends them as objects of self-assertive prowess, that scarcity brings with it the necessity of competition. And because the possession of ordinal goods is not genuinely satisfying as self-assertion, no such good by itself is ever good enough. More always looks better. Competitive excess is the natural result. Apart from chronic restlessness and dissatisfaction, the side-effects include social and economic injustice.

Add to this that doing the non-obligatory right thing is, *as self-assertion*, imperfectly satisfying. There is rarely enough in it for us as individuals. Although subject to some qualifications, the truth of that contention explains why, once in place, social and economic injustice will remain largely unremedied.

Obviously central to this picture is the contention that not all self-assertion is equally satisfying. That contention instantly invites the question what makes for satisfaction in this context and why.

But before addressing that question, I would like to reformulate the basic problem in general terms. There appears to be a universal human need the nature of which precludes its universal satisfaction. We all feel a need to assert ourselves as individuals. Adequate opportunities for doing so are severely limited. Therefore, either the problem is unsolvable or something will have to give.

In other words, one can tell one of two stories here. According to the first, the problem is unsolvable and a lot of human behavior consists of vain and generally maladaptive attempts at solving it. According to the second, the problem is real enough, but not unsolvable. Its solution includes the multiplying of opportunities, on the one hand, and the constructive reconfiguration of self-assertive need, on the other.

This broad perspective on the situation helps move into view the challenge involved in describing that situation objectively. If I assume that the problem is unsolvable, I will describe some forms of self-assertion as a reaching for substitute, but ultimately inadequate, satisfactions. I did that a moment ago when I characterized the competitive questing for ordinal goods in just those terms. By contrast, if I assume that the problem has a solution, I am likely to describe the same behavior in different terms. The questing for ordinal goods, for example, may then look like a plausible attempt to multiply opportunities for genuinely satisfying self-assertion. (That assumes, of course, that the need for self-assertion is effectively reconfigurable in such a way that the possession of

ordinal goods will satisfy it.)

Nowhere is the challenge of objective description more apparent than in art (conceived as self-assertion). Here is one way of talking about what goes on in art.

What makes for self-assertive satisfaction? When that question is asked in art, its answer is obvious: originality! While not just any form of originality will do – incomprehensible originality will not, for example, these qualifications are unimportant at the moment. Why originality itself? Why suspect that, in order to satisfy, artistic self-assertion must be original?

The question answer itself. As individuals, we have a sense of ourselves as unique. There is no giving voice to that uniqueness except by asserting it in ways that are equally unique. As a quality of our self-assertion, originality constitutes that uniqueness.

Art is conspicuously self-assertion. An artist strives for originality. S/he remains dissatisfied until or unless s/he achieves it.

Similarly, the viewing public appreciates originality in art, and deprecates its absence, as though knowing, without ever even thinking about it, that that is the point of the exercise. The issue does not require thinking about because, as an individual, every member of the viewing public senses intuitively that the same truth holds in his or her own case. Art is the public theater, if you will, of self-assertion finding its satisfaction in originality.

At the same time, however, art is also the public theater of another truth. Originality is hard to come by. Its achievement requires struggle, endless work, and the occasional flash of inspiration. Consequently, much of what passes for originality in art is parody and posturing, an innocent or a desperate attempt at self-assertive satisfaction without paying the full price.

Except when it colludes with artists' self-deception and deceives itself, the viewing public knows that too. It intuitively dislikes what it sees.

In striving for originality, a person pits him-or-herself against all that has been achieved in the course of several thousand years of human history. The odds of coming up with something genuinely new disfavor the striver. The odds therefore also disfavor the achievement of satisfying individual self-assertion. On the one hand, that makes successful self-assertion as hard as it is. On the other, it explains both the ubiquity of recourse to substitute satisfactions and the ultimate inadequacy of those satisfactions.

Extrapolating from this kind of talk about art to life in general, we may end up with

something like this:

Posturing and parody in art can seem like the unpleasant side-effects of a narrow enterprise that, when all is said and done, makes little real difference to human life in general. Absurd fashions in literature or poetry, or in scholarship, for that matter, come and go. Meanwhile, real life continues unfazed.

A less reassuring picture of the overall human situation comes into view when one considers that what is true in art is so across the board. Deprived of opportunities to assert our individuality in genuinely satisfying ways because originality is hard to achieve, we too posture and reach for substitute satisfactions the quest for which is not only maladaptive, but ultimately unsatisfying when it succeeds. That this questing is generally innocent of what we are actually after does not detract from the generally appalling effects of its pursuit. They include a restless, strife-torn, human world and unjust societies.

We pursue ordinal goods, for example, because in felicitous ordinality we find a substitute for originality. That has my uniqueness as an individual consisting of my being ostensibly better than others of my kind. It effectively necessitates my besting as many other people as I possibly can. That may not be appalling in its effects when the way I go about it involves achieving results that benefit all. When my being better than others takes the form, for example, of making greater contributions than they to the curing of a disease, then we all come out ahead. But when it takes the form of putting as many people in the poorhouse as possible, just so that I can emerge as better than others in the sense of being richer than most, then it is not clear that we all come out ahead.

It is not even clear that I myself genuinely come out ahead in world that, even as it cow-tows to the rich, generally views them with contempt when their wealth is not the consequence of positive achievements. In the face of that fact, I will probably tell myself a story that not even I succeed in believing, since I sense my own dissatisfaction with the quality of my originality.

Generally speaking, when felicitous ordinality – high rank – is pursued for its own sake, the originality of its achievement tends to be of the destructive kind. Just besting people typically leaves them worse off. Besting as many as possible leaves many worse off. No amount of benign story-telling about, say, ruthless competition and creative destruction being the parents of economic progress, can alter that truth.

This way of talking about art and life has a prescriptive thrust. It invites the reasonable suspicion that the speaker is headed in the direction of suggestions that the world would be a better place if more people made a genuine effort to be creative in their accomplishments. If more of them found their way to the courage and the perseverance

it takes to strive for real originality, then not only would they be happier, but society would be better off.

It is probably obvious that I myself am frequently tempted by that kind of talk. As a reader pointed out to me in a thoughtful comment about one of my previous essays, I paint a compelling picture of what drives the human being who is an artist, but I am probably wrong in suggesting that the same forces drive all of us. He politely omitted the inference that my own biases are at work in that mistake. I would have all of us be artists of one sort or another, and accomplished ones to boot, conveniently forgetting that no amount of effort and dedication in the world can make up for the inherent scarcity of achievable originality. If we were all artists, the vast majority of us would lead lives of constant frustration.

More importantly, it is not clear at all that we would be better off as a society even if achievable originality were less scarce. Our being happier as individuals might not offset the dysfunctionality of a society constantly destabilized by innovation. The stability of society largely depends on a majority of people not seeking to be original, not insisting on asserting their uniqueness to the fullest, and making do without the satisfaction to be derived from that. While it is true that civilization is the product of our pride as a species and as individuals, it is also true that its sustainability has depended to no small degree on our keeping that pride under control through its partial self-suppression.

It seems to be one of the tragedies of human life that one of our deepest needs as individuals is for the most part unmeetable. When that truth is not internalized, chronic and ubiquitous dissatisfaction are the consequence. Among other things, civilization as norm is an attempt at constructive coping with those fundamental facts. “While there is some room for full-blown originality,” it says, “for the most part you will have to content yourself with finding your originality in remaining constructively unoriginal. Take pleasure and pride in our being that clever as a species, since the only alternative is our demise!”

I personally have some trouble heeding that speech, given as I am privately to pitting my own cleverness against that of civilization in attempts to reinvent the latter. Ultimately, that cleverness comes down to an ongoing personal rebellion against the facts of life.

While I cannot turn off that rebellion at will, I can acknowledge it as what it is. And I can strive not to get so caught up in it that I can't think straight. In the present context, that means favoring description over prescription.

So, here is another way of talking about art.

Not all unoriginality in art is parody and posturing, redolent either of the artist's failure

to achieve what s/he reached for or else of innocence as to what constitutes genuine originality. Many competent paintings are comfortably and unapologetically unoriginal and some, it seems, deliberately so. They remind us that the mundane world has its charm. Colors delight. Lines and shapes are rich with meaning. Faces glow or intrigue. Love enchants. The arrival of Spring reassures. Disharmony is redeemed by harmony, which would not be visible or interesting without the incipient presence of its opposite.

None of that is trivial. It only seems trivial in relation to a desire to convey or see something new. While every painter is aware of that desire, either in him-or-herself or simply as a cultural reality, s/he usually also knows that attempting to satisfy it carries risks. For a start, one needs to be in possession of something new to convey. Second, one needs to find a way of conveying it so that it is comprehensible. Third, absent the first and the second, the likely outcome of an attempt at originality will be a bad painting. It will either speak loudly of caprice, of an obvious but empty striving for newness for its own sake. Or it will be incomprehensible. Or both. And, fourth, anything more credible will probably take years to achieve, supposing that it can be achieved at all.

To which an individual painter may add a fifth point, namely that it is not obvious in the first place that only the truly new is worth painting or seeing. On the contrary, the cultural obsession with newness brings a lot of bad art in its train, to say nothing of endlessly wasted effort and talent. Hence, occasionally, sixth, checking the sway of that obsession by extricating oneself conspicuously from its grip might be more worth doing than striving for originality.

While I have argued before (in “Comprehensible Originality”) that that is itself a kind of originality, it is clearly not the same kind as “the real thing”. It contents itself with leaving everything pretty much as it is. For the most part, the painter limits his or her pretensions to reaffirming what is known, revitalizing that knowledge perhaps by painting very well. But except for doing so very insistently and with a view to challenging the culture of newness, his or her objectives do not include any genuine originality.

Now suppose one asks in what sense this sort of enterprise satisfies the painter's need for self-assertion. There is nothing unique about the enterprise or its results. In fact, however, to the extent that the painter is content with a sense of himself or herself as a master of a craft the origins of which antedate recorded history, a craft that does not consist primarily of constant innovations, but of patient and devoted practice in the making of images, his or her creating images asserts and affirms that sense. The practice of the craft comes first. Innovations come second. They matter only because the craft matters.

Valuing the craft comes with an understanding of it in terms of the role it has played, and

continues to play, as a constructive adjunct to human affairs. Portrait painting may seem pointless in an age of photography. There was a time when portraits were the only way of preserving a memory of a person's face, where it can remain an open question whether the making of such images also served vanity or merely a desire to keep someone's memory alive. Vanity, too, is part of human affairs.

No camera sees like the human eye does. In that sense, photography cannot ever displace portrait painting. But even if photography could do that, the business of painting remains the creation of images of every kind, justified, so to speak, by the multiple roles that images play in human life. They do not need to be unique or original to play that role.

In different words, the self-assertion of the painter whose well-painted images affirm the known in familiar ways finds gratification by virtue of its modesty. That modesty itself, however, is not a resignation to being only as good as one happens to be, nor an instance of depressing necessity made out to be a virtue. It is a proud affirmation of one's membership in a craft the practice of which transcends individuals, and the value of which is underwritten by the enduring role it has played in human affairs.

I spoke earlier of constructive reconfigurations of the individual need for self assertion. This looks like a good example of that. Assuming an original desire for full-blown assertion through the pursuit of originality, one may see the above as the achievement of complex psycho-cultural machinery that converts that original desire into a more modest, socially constructive ambition. The latter finds its redemption in group membership (the craft) and in the service of the group to human interests in general, and its gratification in the practice of that (not entirely modest) modesty.

That view of painting does not preclude innovation. It merely assigns to originality a place in the larger scheme of things. Nor does it devalue original creativity. But it conceives of that value in relation to others inherent in the making of images and their role in human life. Assuming that it is genuine, originality derives its value by enhancing the practice of the craft. Absent the craft, the value of originality is negligible.

Extrapolated to life in general, the view translates into a sense of perspective according to which extraordinary achievement has its place, but that place is not the only one there is. On the contrary, the continuity and sustainability of civilized life depend from moment to moment on countless modest achievements, ranging from the hard exertions of garbage collectors and plumbers, through the skilled work of electricians, to the routine practice of medicine and dentistry. More generally, it depends on the overwhelming majority of people doing the right thing most of the time without visibility or special reward. Above all, it depends, one might say, on constructive reconfigurations of the desire for full-blown self-assertion into modest and achievable

ambition, an ambition that finds its gratification primarily through the affirmation of group and team membership. Ultimately, the group or the team is the human race itself.

As for extraordinary achievement, assuming that it is genuine, its value lies in enhancing the common enterprise, whether it is that of plumbers or of physicians, or, speaking more broadly, of human beings.

Two ways of talking about art and about life. Which has it right?

If the first is driven by impatience with posturing and by dissatisfaction with the merely humdrum, the second appears animated by hostility to forms of self-assertion redolent of narcissism and immaturity, given to manifesting themselves not in furtherance of the common good, but at its expense. Instead of affirming their membership in the human race, its practitioners seem unaware of their dependence on that membership or bent on denying it.

A sober assessment would eschew both impatience and hostility, and strive for understanding instead.

The baseline situation is this: a universal human need for individual self-assertion coexists with limited opportunities to satisfy that need. Culture and civilization – with the help of the human psyche – try to remedy that imbalance by reconfiguring the need so as to multiply opportunities to satisfy it. If an individual's sense of him-or-herself can be made to find a home in some form of group identity, such as membership in a craft or profession, then his or her satisfying assertion of that sense is no longer limited by the small number of opportunities for genuine originality. The likelihood of satisfying self-assertion depends on the group playing a non-trivial role in human affairs, but, assuming that taken care of, the solution aims, in effect, at multiplying opportunities.

The solution does not work especially well when the group is the human community itself. For now the “craft” consists of the doing the right and the good, often invisibly and without special rewards. It takes a certain consciousness of oneself, an induction into membership of the craft, if you will, in order to find self-assertive satisfaction in practicing it. Inducing that consciousness is hard because the individual psyche may not cooperate. It will refuse to cooperate when it thinks that it has better alternatives available. In that case, the cultural solution will strike it as applying only to other people, namely those – the majority -- limited to doing the merely good because they have no other options.

For any number reasons, ranging from alienation, through the actual or assumed possession of superior abilities, to benightedness, an individual may believe that options for satisfying self-assertion are available to him or her, the quality of which exceeds

those that the culture recommends. In some cases, that belief happens to be true, in others false. It is probably more often false than true.

In any case, however, impatience with, or hostility to people who believe that arises out of imperviousness to the feel of life as it presents itself to them. Doing the merely good, never mind the invisible good, fails to satisfy their need to assert themselves. Doing the plain good is not an attractive option. They may not even think about it. They just feel restless, dissatisfied, except when a possibility of something more interesting appears on the horizon and they start pursuing it. They are constantly on the lookout for such possibilities.

In some cases, this stance in life produces absurdities and waste; in some, great art or science. In yet others, it eventuates in attritions to the common good. If I have not made peace with normative culture, and if the only way available to me for making myself out to be extraordinary is to bring my ruthlessness to bear in the competitive pursuit of ordinal goods, I shall do so. I shall assert my human individuality by dehumanizing others. The price of my gratifying superiority will be their inferiority – hardly debatable when they end up in poorhouses, for example, in a world in which I myself have done everything possible to reduce all human values to the possession of wealth.

Unconscionable? I submit that “unfortunate” would make a more apt characterization. It would be better if this kind of thing did not happen as often as it does. I engage in it because I innocently missed a train somewhere. I did not even know the train existed or that I was supposed to be on it

The missed train was culture. I missed it because I could not hear it, because, trying to speak out of both sides of its mouth, it mumbled, or because my ears were not educated, or because they were uneducable. I missed it for a thousand and one reasons.

Meanwhile, however, there I was, left to my own devices, stuck with my unfulfilled need, and I had to do something about that. If you dislike the result, you may want to consider that it was not I who abandoned the human race. By leaving me to fend for myself as a wild animal, it abandoned me.

It is inappropriate to make victimizers out to be victims, but no one is on trial here. The point is that even victimizers are human beings from whom it is inappropriate to expect more than they can give or to suffer more than they can tolerate. Given certain circumstances, like abandonment by culture, they will do what they have to. And while it is absurd to indict culture itself as the victimizer in this instance, one might at least concede that if culture spoke with a clearer voice, socially destructive self-assertion would probably be less common than it is.

Experienced as fact, not only is ours a culture that deprecates humanistic education, but it increasingly celebrates and rewards anti-social behavior. That is itself an effect of anti-social behavior seeking to elevate itself to the status of a norm. The continuing popularity of Ayn Rand in capitalist, or aspiring capitalist, circles, for instance, testifies to the appeal of the counter-cultural message that anti-social behavior is superior behavior. At a less intellectual level, nothing is more understandable than a person, sensing his or her behavior to be at odds with traditional cultural norms, would challenge those norms in favor of others more generous to his or her conduct.

Experienced as fact, the overall effect is a culture speaking out of both sides of its mouth. Instead of saying, “Assuming that you have something extraordinary worthwhile to contribute to the common enterprise, by all means assert yourself as an individual,” the culture now adds, “But even if you don't have anything to contribute other than your ruthlessness or your combativeness, then, provided you stop short of outright crime, you may assert *that*, even if the consequences turn out socially destructive.”

In a world in which freedom from inhibitions counts as an achievement and ruthlessness as a virtue, possibly even the most important virtue of all, it is no wonder that many otherwise ordinary people would jump at the chance to distinguish themselves. After all, ruthlessness comes easy. Real achievement is hard.

We have collectively created that world and that ambiguous culture, or at least allowed it to emerge by doing nothing. Whether it continues also depends on us.

That ends my story for today and concludes this series of essays.

Happy Winter Solstice! As I pity the deer trying to find something to eat among the leafless trees or on the snowy, frozen ground, I wonder if they envy us humans contending with perpetually frozen ground even inside their warm houses.

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