

conflictual nature itself. We feel compelled to simplify, compartmentalize, and minimize tension (*Thanatos*); and we are drawn toward new relationships and increased complexity (*Eros*).⁵³

For us “patchwork” creatures, integrity is not given but forged. Ideals conflict with wants and needs; desires themselves pull in different directions; experience layers without knitting. The necessary work of personal integration is difficult, even harrowing. It requires tolerance of ambiguity, courage to face the unhandsome parts of ourselves, and creativity in finding novel harmonies. Even then, solutions are flawed. The work remains ongoing. And we should admit that while we are sometimes drawn to it, we are even more often repelled by this work. One feature of our inconsistent nature is our reluctance to plumb these inconsistent depths and “sift ourselves to the bottom.”⁵⁴ We are wired to avoid cognitive dissonance and to seek comfort. We are drawn to disavow the inconvenient and unhandsome in ourselves. We prefer the simplicity of “either-or” to the complexity of “both-and.” We edit out the bad side of good things and the good side of bad things; or, we settle for facile compromises or false syntheses. We look for conventional shortcuts to escape the task of creative integration. But the twofold task remains: to develop the worthy parts of ourselves into a livable unity. In the next section, we take a closer look at some of the ways in which we may fall short of and live up to this double demand of personal formation.

ROOTS AND BRANCHES

And so the two precepts are perhaps not contradictory? Perhaps the first merely declares that man should have a center, the second that he should have a circumference?

—Friedrich Nietzsche⁵⁵

What good are roots if you cannot take them with you?

—Gertrude Stein⁵⁶

The call to educate the whole person has a fairly prominent place in the museum of fine ideas. Docents usually stop to point it out and say a few words about the importance of well-roundedness. However, when the tour group moved on, we stayed behind to try an experiment: plug the injunction in to some live intellectual current and see if it still works. So far it

seems to hold a pretty good charge, and, once we have it back in operation, it is clear that the museum didn't quite realize what they had: not a helpful reminder or finishing touch, but the very starting point of education; not a clear reading of north, but a conversation about how to build a compass; not a mildly appealing, impersonal policy proposal, but a direct personal injunction setting us two related tasks, each as intimidating as it is inescapable. To cultivate all of the important dimensions of yourself, you must strive to understand what you are made of and what you stand for. To integrate these diverse lines of development into a coherent character or outlook, you must engage in arduous and inventive soulcraft.

In one respect, these twin formative tasks are obviously complementary: if you don't develop multiple aspects of yourself, there is nothing to integrate; if you don't integrate, there is no coherent "you" to hold these separate interests. Here are the opening stanzas of a poem by Thoreau that speaks to this latter possibility:

- (1) I am a parcel of vain strivings tied
- (2) By a chance bond together,
- (3) Dangling this way and that, their links
- (4) Were made so loose and wide,
- (5) Methinks,
- (6) For milder weather.

- (7) A bunch of violets without their roots,
- (8) And sorrel intermixed,
- (9) Encircled by a wisp of straw
- (10) Once coiled about their shoots,
- (11) The law
- (12) By which I'm fixed.

- (13) A nosegay which Time clutched from out
- (14) Those fair Elysian fields,
- (15) With weeds and broken stems, in haste,
- (16) Doth make the rabble rout
- (17) That waste
- (18) The day he yields.

- (19) And here I bloom for a short hour unseen,
- (20) Drinking my juices up,

- (21) With no root in the land
- (22) To keep my branches green,
- (23) But stand
- (24) In a bare cup.⁵⁷

By the end of the first line, we realize that the opening phrase is more complicated than it seems. This is not the confident “I am” of first-person narration. This is a poem about the struggle for coherence and agency, a first-personal poem about the difficulty of achieving a first-person perspective. Clearly the narrator has projects, and the image of violets (line 7) leads us to believe that these projects have flowered. But apparently none of these sundry “strivings” is worth mentioning by name (1). The narrator is worried about what holds together these diverse inclinations, “dangling this way and that” (3). But the problem goes beyond the fact that the links between them are “so loose and wide” (4). The narrator fails to see himself in the linkages, in the act of linking, opting instead for the third-person description, “*their* links” (3, emphasis added). What makes a person distinctive is the way that they organize their aspirations and carry their commitments. Thoreau provides only generic collection and container words, such as “parcel,” “bunch,” and “cup” (1, 7, 24). What lends a person substance is the way that they lay claim to the history that birthed their enthusiasms. There is no personal history in this not-quite-a-self portrait, only the hazy “once” of myth (10).⁵⁸

If autonomy means self-legislation, this narrator is very far from discovering a binding law of the self. What ties together his desires and ambitions is only a “wisp of straw” and even this is not knotted but only “encircled” or “coiled” (9–10). While the narrator’s agency does eventually peek out in the final stanza’s “I bloom” (19), the preceding stanzas offer a litany of manipulation and constraint verbs in the passive voice: “tied” (1), “bond together” (2), “made” (4); “encircled” (9), “coiled” (10), “fixed” (12), “clutched” (13). Nor does the narrator experience this as the hand of providence. While capital T “Time” is at work, it is not guiding him to heaven but precisely ripping—“with weeds and broken stems”—him from “Elysian fields” (13, 15, 14). This violent image suggests not only heteronomy but capriciousness. Forget a self-authored life-plan, there is no plan. His nosegay-self was made in “haste,” representing only “a chance bond” (15, 2). And he pays a steep price for even this wisp-of-straw unity. Rather than find a taproot in the soil

of experience, he stands, broken-stemmed, “in a bare cup” (24). “Drinking [his] juices up,” his once green inclinations desiccate into “vain strivings” (20, 1). In this way, Thoreau captures well one possible dead-end in formative experience. Nascent interests develop, experience branches, but somewhere along the way we lose track of the fundamental human need for rooted integrity.

This complicates our initial assumption that our core formative tasks are obviously complementary. If Nietzsche is right to say that there is no logical contradiction between these precepts, Thoreau is right to remind us how difficult it can be in practice simultaneously to define a center and expand a circumference. The ideals of well-roundedness and integrity do not form a simple Venn diagram: their intersection inscribes an ethical ideal, a vision of the self as a differentiated unity or dynamic whole.⁵⁹ That such robust personhood is difficult to achieve is evident from our two characteristic ways of falling short of this ideal. True dynamic wholeness is rare; most of us sacrifice coherence to complexity or vice versa. Thus, we encounter *monomaniacs* who seek an axiological Rosetta stone that can translate the diversity of genuine goods into a single language of value and aspiration. The price of their unity is the winnowing of self, narrowing of experience, strain of disavowal, and hollowness of overspecialization. Their wholeness is not a dynamic equation, but a static remainder of their repeated factoring. And we encounter *compartmentalizers* who manage the heterogeneity of self and diversity of goods by dividing traits and experience into separate silos. The compartmentalizer purchases complexity at the price of incoherence and inauthenticity, as the unified person dissolves into a roster of role players.

If I am correct that differentiated, dynamic integrity is difficult to achieve, then we all know something about monomania or compartmentalization. However, to strengthen the argument that each represents a short-circuiting of the quest for robust personhood, let's put some flesh on the ideal types. To see how a person might trade complexity for unity or vice versa, we will need a working model of the dimensions of personhood. I will adopt the well-known division of formative labor into five domains: aesthetic, spiritual, civic, intellectual, and moral. First, let's consider the lives of monomaniacs, before turning to the character of the compartmentalizer.

Meet the Monas, a set of quintuplets distinguished only by their middle initials. Fearing a divided soul, all five found ways to unify their interests and development:

Mona A. had an epiphany that life is art and art is life. Now, the whole world is her gallery. Attending a town hall meeting is like watching a film. Moral dilemmas are material for her novel. Because she loves the beautiful stained glass windows and sublime organ, Mona A. sometimes goes to church with her sister, Mona S.

To be perfectly frank, though, Mona S. worries that Mona A. is going to hell. Back in her college days, Mona S. had enjoyed how different subjects brought out different sides of her. Later she decided that spirituality is empty if it only applies on Sundays and came to view secular subjects as the devil's diversions. Now Mona S. runs a blog criticizing liberal activists and godless scientists, including her sisters Mona C. and Mona I.

Mona C. is passionate about grassroots democracy and devotes all her energy to community organizing.

The egghead of the bunch, Mona I. is an empirical psychologist who studies how religious and political zealotry are rooted in basic personality factors. Mona S., Mona C., and Mona I. no longer speak to one another.

And none of the sisters have seen Mona M. for years: instead of attending the annual family reunion, she sends a card with a receipt for a carbon offset for the amount she would have spent on a plane ticket. It's the moral thing to do.

It should be clear that each Mona has paid a heavy price for her coherence, narrowing her sympathies and her world. Perhaps, though, this is the best we can do. After all, the jack-of-all-trades might end up with no pursuit deep enough to open up the interest of the world. At least each Mona has one rich vein of interest. Not so fast, says John Dewey, arguing that,

as a man's vocation as artist is but the emphatically specialized phase of his diverse and variegated vocational activities, so his efficiency in it, in the humane sense of efficiency, is determined by its association with other callings. A person must have experience, he must live, if his artistry is to be more than a technical accomplishment. He cannot find the subject matter of his artistic activity within his art; this must be an expression of what he suffers and enjoys in other relationships—a thing which depends in turn upon the alertness and sympathy of his interests. What is true of an artist is true of any other special calling, . . . so that the scientific inquirer shall not be merely the scientist, the teacher merely the pedagogue, the clergyman merely one who wears the cloth, and so on.⁶⁰

The prognosis is more dire than is commonly thought: it is not just a matter of missing out on the other things—the hyperspecialist misses out on their one thing!

Let us turn now to the second thought experiment. Meet Silas, the only person who manages to get along with all five Monas. Silas has been sure not to neglect any of these five aspects of his formation. He has developed adequately and proportionately his intellectual acuity, moral judgment, civic responsibility, aesthetic sensitivity, and spiritual awareness. However, Silas has constructed these not as interconnected and overlapping concerns but as separate silos. He relies on his intellect at work, attends the town meeting in a civic spirit, activates his aesthetic side at the museum, gets in touch with his spirituality at church, and weighs values in the face of dilemmas. This is a tidy solution for dealing with life's complexity—too tidy in fact. It turns out that Dewey's critique applies equally to Silas.⁶¹ He is not an ordinary hyperspecialist, but his rigid compartmentalization makes him into a kind of serial monomaniac. Let's explore how sealing off these capacities distorts and impoverishes each.

Consider first the danger in Silas' compartmentalization of moral judgment. There is an important line of ethical thought suggesting that leading a good life is less about weighing dilemmas and more about waking up.⁶² "The opposite of morality," Maxine Greene writes,

is indifference—a lack of care, an absence of concern. Lacking wide-awakeness, I want to argue, individuals are likely to drift, to act on impulses of expediency. They are unlikely to identify situations as moral ones or to set themselves to assessing their demands. In such cases, it seems to me, meaningless to talk of obligation; it may be futile to speak of consequential choice.⁶³

Indeed, this habit of dignifying as dilemmas selective moments from life's ceaseless flow of relation, valuation, and conduct may be one of our most effective sleep aids. When we commit the "mistake which makes morality a separate department of life," Dewey observes, "anxious solicitude for the few acts which are deemed moral is accompanied by edicts of exemption and baths of immunity for most acts. A moral moratorium prevails for everyday affairs."⁶⁴

Now let's head to the museum, where we find poor Silas so tuned to the aesthetic that he misses the art. He is able to identify Yoko Ono as neo-Dadaist but unable to look in the moral mirror that is *Cut Piece*. He can tell you that Rothko's canvases are prepared with a sizing of rabbit-skin glue but is immune to the spiritual resonances of the color fields. He can engage in a debate over the site-specificity of Doris Salcedo's *Untitled* (2003), her Istanbul Biennial

installation, but is unable to join her in civic mourning. Art suffocates when locked in a compartment, even—perhaps especially—when that compartment is a temple of art. As Claes Oldenburg puts it, “I am for an art that is political-erotic-mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum. I am for an art that grows up not knowing it is art at all.”⁶⁵

And so it goes, as Silas moves from sphere to sphere. To ensure the development of each of these five capacities, Silas planted each in a separate pot; in the process, he denied each its deeper roots in the soil of human experience. Silas’s pursuits are varied but malnourished.

One might accept that a life splintered in this way would be impoverished while denying that anyone really is so divided. Perhaps the moral of the story is that these five experiential domains inevitably interpenetrate. After all, many have attested to the close connections among truth (intellectual and spiritual), goodness (moral and civic), and beauty. Are there any Silases out there? While Silas may seem bizarre, I contend that there is more than a little Silas in all of us. Western modernity is defined by distinctions—secular-religious, reason-tradition, reality-imagination, subjective-objective, fact-value, individual-social—that sever the connections between art, science, ethics, religion, and politics.⁶⁶ To be modern is to experience these as largely autonomous realms. Admittedly, this is not a flattering self-portrait. We saw how Silas’s pigeonholing of the ethical and the aesthetic made him oblivious to the true nature of each. Are we really that bad off?

In the aesthetic realm, the answer is a decided yes. Following Hans-Georg Gadamer, we can see a distortion and enervation of aesthetic experience, more than two centuries in the making. This diagnostic history suggests that my depiction of Silas struggling to make genuine contact with Rothko, Ono, and Salcedo, while fictional, was hardly fanciful. Let me offer some anecdotal evidence on this score, before saying more about Gadamer’s diagnosis.

When I lived in New York City, my subway route (what was then the 1/9) included a stop at Lincoln Center. Often, we would pull up just as a performance was letting out, and my subway car would fill up with people hanging on to a strap with one hand and a *Playbill* with the other. Crowded together as we were, I couldn’t help but overhear their discussions of plays, symphonies, and operas (as someone interested in aesthetics, I had a duty to listen carefully!). What I found consistently missing in these discussions was any attempt to articulate what the artworks revealed about our world and ourselves. What I heard instead were endless variations on the same theme:

the difficulty of hitting that high F, the questionable casting of Ophelia, the virtuosity of the first violin, the poor pacing of the second act, and so on. Even without buying a ticket, I had a front-row seat for the performance of what Gadamer calls “aesthetic consciousness.”

According to Gadamer, the modern aesthete is characterized by his selective attention and his sovereign bearing.⁶⁷ Sophisticates, such as those at Lincoln Center, have learned to focus on “what is supposed to be the work proper,” differentiating proper aesthetic qualities from the supposedly “extra-aesthetic elements that cling to it, such as purpose, function, the significance of its content” (74). In order to further home in on “what is aesthetically intended,” the modern aesthete then differentiates between “the original (play or musical composition) and its performance” (74). Thus, the focus on virtuosity that I witnessed on the 1/9.

Aesthetic consciousness not only differentiates but abstracts. Instead of meeting the artwork in the concrete world of unfolding experience, the aesthetic encounter is staged in “some alien universe into which we are magically transported for a time” (83). To ready it for transport, the artwork must be radically transformed. To enter the “timeless present” of aesthetic experience, its historicity must be erased (83). The audience will know that the work dates to a certain period but not that it is an “act of a mind and spirit that has collected and gathered itself historically” to find its voice anew in our own moment (83). Wrenched out of historical time, the work must also be abstracted from the social world, where it arose as one more human attempt to understand what is and identify what matters.

The arts are distinguished by their medium specificity, their interest in authenticity and style, and their stress on formal values such as clarity, economy, and freshness, but artistic intentions are hardly only aesthetic. Artists seek to map interior and exterior worlds; to document absences, witness presence, and capture “the music of what happens”; to expose impropriety and to question propriety; to fortify resolve, reckon with consequences, and mourn losses; to interest us in the workings of our souls and help us to get over ourselves; to behold the beautiful, befriend the abject, and honor the sacred; to disperse illusions and assemble hope; and so on.⁶⁸ These projects are intellectual, moral, civic, and spiritual. The attempt to sort them into separate buckets is a folly worthy of Erasmus or Borges (thus we must add one more artistic intention to our list: to dramatize folly).

The irony, as Gadamer explains, is that “abstracting down to the ‘purely aesthetic’ obviously eliminates it.”⁶⁹ In bracketing off the elements that “situate the work in its world and thus determine the whole meaningfulness that it originally possessed,” the modern aesthete “abstracts from all the conditions of a work’s accessibility” (74). The aesthete is like someone who can measure every inch of a building’s exterior without ever finding an entrance (just as Silas knows his way around Ono, Rothko, and Salcedo but can’t access their moral, spiritual, and civic provocations).

What explains such obtuseness? Here is where Gadamer’s critique of the “sovereignty of aesthetic consciousness” comes in (74). In an actual encounter with a work of art, we are drawn into the work. In effect, the work plays with us. As we are turned this way and that, we see our lives from new and perhaps disturbing angles. By contrast, aesthetic consciousness remains “the experiencing center from which everything considered art is measured.”⁷⁰ The aesthete is not swept up. Having reduced the work to an aesthetic object, he turns it over in his hand, dissecting its intentions and judging its formal effects (just like Silas has a handle on Rothko, Ono, and Salcedo). In this way, Gadamer reads aesthetic consciousness as a form of self-protection, as a flight from true encounter.

It is not only the museums, theaters, and concert halls that are stuffed with Silases. Consider the world of science and technology, where we find a dangerous tendency to separate facts from values. The classic example here is Robert Oppenheimer. Eventually, Oppenheimer grew into the realization that he had “made a thing that by all the standards of the world we grew up in is an evil thing.”⁷¹ But it was too late. Like Silas, Oppenheimer and his colleagues on the Manhattan Project brought their intellects to work, sealing ethics in some other compartment. Oppenheimer describes their working mindset: “When you see something that is technically sweet, you go ahead and do it.”⁷² The Oppenheimer story is often treated as exceptional, with the early Oppenheimer seen as especially amoral or the later one as especially conscientious, or both. It is better read as illustrative of a general problem in our disjointed modernity. As Max Weber famously put it, we have become, “*Fachmenschen ohne Geist*.” While the alliteration in Parson’s translation, “specialists without spirit,” is nice, given that Weber casts his diagnosis in the form of a Zarathustra-like epigram, we might render *Fachmenschen* more expressively as “department men,” “compartment

creatures,” or “pigeonhole people.”⁷³ If the Silas case is an argument *ad absurdum*, then it is we moderns who are absurd.

In the previous section, we distinguished two tasks built into the call to form ourselves as whole persons: to cultivate the full range of our capacities and to integrate the diverse dimensions of ourselves into a coherence of character and outlook. Having identified some of the difficulties of each task, we turned to exploring the tension between them. We are tempted to take shortcuts, like the Monas and Silas, achieving coherence by winnowing the self or cultivating complexity by compartmentalizing it. Between these extremes lies the ideal of dynamic integrity. But what does this complex coherence look like?

In *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf provides a striking contrast with Thoreau’s simultaneously immobilized and rootless parcel-self. In a pleasurable recognition of her own capaciousness, a confident avowal of her polychromatic, even contradictory, nature, Jinny declares, “I feel a thousand capacities spring up in me. I am arch, gay, languid, melancholy by turns. I am rooted, but I flow.”⁷⁴ In this moment of, as it were, exuberant self-possession, we have a beautiful evocation of the ideal of personhood we have been tracking. Despite the tensions in her makeup, her myriad capacities, Jinny remains dynamically whole; even as she grows, and her energy flows along its branching paths, she remains rooted.

But should we take Jinny at her word, or is this just a sign of false consciousness? After all, Jinny makes this exuberant declaration at a dance, as her potential partners begin to approach her. Perhaps her flowing rootedness is simply an expression of internalized misogyny. Maybe she mistakes as a thousand capacities what are merely the many poses she must strike to attract and please; and mistakes as rooted integrity what is merely the coherence of the ritual in which she plays her part as one of the available women on display. Thus, as the guests begin to arrive, Jinny thinks,

This is the prelude, this is the beginning. I glance, I peep, I powder. All is exact, prepared. My hair is swept in one curve. My lips are precisely red. I am ready now to join the men and women on the stairs, my peers. I pass them, exposed to their gaze, as they are to mine. Like lightning we look but do not soften or show signs of recognition. Our bodies communicate. This is my calling. This is my world.

. . . This is what I have dreamt; this is what I have foretold. I am a native here. I tread naturally on thick carpets. I slide easily on smooth polished floors. (82)

We can point to the powder, lipstick, and upswept hair as signs that Jinny has been subordinated into an object of the male gaze. We can read Jinny as captive in an artificial world of “thick carpets” and “polished floors,” thinking herself “native” only because she suffers from Stockholm syndrome.

While I agree that agency is key, I prefer a more recuperative, feminist reading. Jinny reports that she is in her element, feeling a sense of fit (“this is my calling”; “this is my world”; “I am a native here”) and fluency (“I tread naturally”; “I slide easily”). Shall we believe her? Or do we know more about her than she herself does? Are we sure that virtuosity in navigating the social dance before the dance cannot be a true calling? Are powder and lipstick always signs of inauthenticity? Do we know that one cannot be rooted in an artificial environment of thick carpets and polished floors?

When we take Jinny at her word, we notice other details. Not once but twice in this short scene, Jinny stresses her equality with the assembled. In the passage above she refers to the “men and women on the stairs” as her “peers,” noting that “she is exposed to their gaze, as they are to mine.” A page later, she remarks, “My peers may look at me now. I look straight back at you, men and women” (83). Underlining the mutuality of the gaze, Jinny observes how the men nervously adjust their clothes, remarking that “They are very young. They are anxious to make a good impression” (82–83). Meanwhile, in addition to this imagery of artifice, there is also a notable use of natural imagery to capture the core idea of flowing rootedness. Right after mentioning the polished floors, she observes, “I now begin to unfurl, in this scent, in this radiance, as a fern when its curled leaves unfurl” (82).

Now let’s look more closely at the key passage:

I feel a thousand capacities spring up in me. I am arch, gay, languid, melancholy by turns. I am rooted, but I flow. All gold, flowing that way, I say to this one, “Come.” Rippling black, I say to that one, “No.” One breaks off from his station under the glass cabinet. He approaches. He makes toward me. This is the most exciting moment I have ever known. I flutter. I ripple. I stream like a plant flowing in the river, flowing this way, flowing that way but rooted, so that he may come to me. Come, I say, come. Pale, with dark hair, the one who is coming is melancholy, he is romantic. And I am arch and fluent and capricious; for he is melancholy, he is romantic. He is here; he stands at my side. (83)

This is not a portrait of objectification and subordination. True, Jinny changes her colors, but not like a chameleon. She shifts her feeling hues

as part of asserting her agency, exercising her judgments of acceptance and rejection.⁷⁵ True, the men are mobile while the women must wait, but Jinny experiences this as bidding her suitor to come to her. True, Jinny shifts her mood to complement her suitor. If melancholy is one of her many moods, why must she cede the taciturn position and find the fluency and capriciousness to, in a word, chat him up? Again, this is unpersuasive, for why focus on melancholy alone? Jinny has just told us that she has a thousand capacities! And Woolf has taken the trouble to carry not only melancholy but also archness through from the one statement to the other. To make this work, the suspicious reading would have to conflate authenticity with a solipsism that says, “I never let the presence of others affect my mood or behavior.” In that case, we reply, please keep to yourself! Jinny is not a sociopath. She is a social being who finds and activates different sides of herself in the dance of interpersonal interaction. With her melancholy suitor, she taps into her archness and ebullience. One of the reasons we seek out diverse others, as we saw above with Rousseau, is to learn more of our own nature and range and potential.

This recuperative, feminist reading takes Jinny at her word that hers is a “both-and” subjectivity. She experiences both diversity of capacity and unity of self. She manages both rootedness and flowing responsiveness, discovering and activating different of her myriad affective potentials in the shift of situation and dance of interlocution. With an old man, she feels that she “should be a child”; with “a great lady,” she “should dissemble”; with girls her own age, she embraces the “drawn swords of an honorable antagonism” (84). Rather than read this as the “feminine” vice of people-pleasing inconstancy, we can see it as meeting the moment, as a form of virtuous responsiveness to a variegated universe along the lines of Homer’s *metis* or Machiavelli’s *virtù*.⁷⁶ We can only interpret such accommodations as evasions of authenticity if we ignore Jinny’s own testimony that her shifting dance partners open her to her existential possibilities: “The door opens. The door goes on opening. . . . Here is my risk, here is my adventure.”⁷⁷

In Jinny, then, we have a portrait of the self as differentiated unity, of life as vibrantly rooted and branching. And we have a suggestion of how one might knit together some of the dialectics of experience (melancholy and gay, desiring subject and object of the gaze of others) with flowing grace. However, judging from this scene at least, there is something too easy about this. Silas could not maintain links across five capacities; Jinny

flows effortlessly among a thousand. With Jinny, we are still dealing with something of an ideal type. While her dynamism is richly illustrated, we know too little about her experience of rootedness. Her integrity remains somewhat abstract. We need cases that capture more concretely the possibilities and peculiarities of soulcraft, that capture how character is forged and enacted in the very struggle to define a center and expand a circumference, in the uneasy search for roots we can take with us as we move to meet the offerings and demands of the world.

Somewhere between the idea of “having character” and that of “being a character” is a neglected, third conception of character. To “have character” is to exhibit moral integrity. In different cases, we are picking out the same moral trait, that of acting on worthy principles even when no one is looking. To “be a character” is to be unconventional. While some refusals of conformity and convention are principled and salutary, this is primarily an amoral concept. Case in point: the indie film, where only some of the characters are good but all them are quirky. What gets lost between the moral universalism of the former and the amoral particularism of the latter is the moral relevance of idiosyncratic feats of personal integration. Without denying that there may be universal features of psychic life, or at least common cultural patterns of psychological conflict, the puzzle of integrity ultimately differs for each individual, and there is even more room for divergence in the solutions. Each person is, if you will, a different way of holding oneself together.⁷⁸

In indie films, distinctive features of personality are gimmicks of differentiation. This one carries a transistor radio; that one wrings his hands; this one wears track suits and headbands; that one always plays with his food. The quirks help differentiate the characters from each other and the genre as a whole from mainstream movies. And indeed people do have distinctive ways of inhabiting their bodies and navigating social space. All artful presentations (in film and literature, painting and photography) of human beings reveal such variegation, but it takes the patience of, as it were, a slow shutter speed in low light for the distinguishing features to develop. By contrast, indies are in a hurry. They raid the cultural shelves for a can of “neurotic tics” on their way to the acting class where they quickly grab some limps and strange voices. Far from being too imaginative, they end up using stock photos of “the distinctive individual.” The other way in which indies go wrong is in their assumption that these distinguishing marks are

all vectors of dissent from what is, again, a stock version of conformity. In actual fact, some of the lines most deeply etched in faces come precisely from the long work of joining and navigating the social order. Distinctive characters are not only found in strange hotels or rolling caravans. What is frustrating about indie films, then, is not that they turn the camera from the real to the fantastical, but that they point the camera at one of the most incredible features of reality and then forget to remove the lens cap.

People are strange, as the song goes, but strangeness is normal. It is interesting, and indeed moving, to see how each human magpie finds the materials to piece themselves together; how each bridges conflicts, lives with tensions, deals with disavowals. It is these work-arounds, evasions, and compromises that constitute character in this neglected, medial sense. The inner work of integrity, the ongoing effort to forge, live with, and modify a livable unity, betrays itself in outer signs: in subtleties of comportment (timber of voice, set of jaw, slope of shoulders); habits of behavior (throat clearing, leg bouncing, food gobbling); and patterns of interaction (dodging calls, falling on swords, holding court). These peculiar settlements of character are not moral universals (thou shalt grind your teeth at night), but they have an ethical charge that can attract, repel, inspire, and instruct. The other serves not as an example of how to be a good person but as a good example of how to be a person. We cannot impose the shape of their integrity onto the differing puzzle pieces in our soul, but we can take courage from the way that they have faced up to the task and inspiration from their successes in individualization. And in fact, such soulcraft does rely on some general virtues. We admire the honesty in rejecting off-the-shelf models and the courage of living through the construction; the ingenuity in synthesizing ideas from different worlds of discourse and the toughness to live with the remaining contradictions; the independent-mindedness to find one's own lane, and the grace to travel it. Witnessing the outer signs of these inward deeds can spur on our own efforts.

I have called the work "inward" because it involves self-examination and self-construction, adding that there are outward signs of this inward-facing work. However, the work itself is also outward facing, since character formation must be bound up with reality testing. One way to deny the tensions among our beliefs and values is to insulate them from what Max Weber called "inconvenient facts."⁷⁹ For example, in its investigation of

the racial politics shaping a Brooklyn school district over time, the podcast *Nice White Parents* explores how privileged parents maintain their sense of themselves as progressive even as they continue to hoard resources. In the fifth and final episode, the host (Chana Joffe-Walt) is surprised by a parent (Amelia Costigan) who, finding herself face-to-face with a most inconvenient fact, manages to not close her eyes. Costigan had just learned that her twin boys had lucked into one of the three desirable middle schools in the district. Then something clicked:

JOFFE-WALT (VOICEOVER): Initially, Amelia was thrilled. She says her first thought was “we won.” And then she stopped herself.

COSTIGAN: And I started to think about why I had been so self-absorbed about my own family. And I didn’t think about the bigger picture. Like what does that mean for all the kids of color?

JOFFE-WALT: Wait, what made you—that seems like a really big leap. How did you make that transition?

COSTIGAN: Well, it’s almost like—you know when you just kind of lose your path in life? And I think I just lost what was important to me. And then you know once I won, I started to realize this is really fucked up, you know? Like this is what I got. I mean, and it is a wonderful school. I’m glad that my children were able to have that. But then it was like, what does that mean?

JOFFE-WALT: Amelia got stuck on that word—winning. “She won” disturbed her. If her kids won, someone else’s children lost.⁸⁰

To be clear, this is but a flicker of avowal in a decades-long story of disavowal, whose moral is that nice White parents maintain the apparent coherence of their privileged progressivism by looking the other way.

With her portrait of Lee Sherman, Arlie Hochschild offers another nice illustration of the strain in deferring reality testing to preserve the coherence of our beliefs.⁸¹ Lee is an avid outdoorsman from Louisiana who loves the bayou and the way of life that has grown up around it. His belief in local self-determination has made him a devoted member of the Tea Party, with its small-government, anti-regulatory platform. However, local industry is spewing highly toxic filth, poisoning wildlife, contaminating his community’s food, and threatening the livelihood of all those who make their living

off the bayou. So Lee faces a choice. If he wants to preserve the apparent harmony between his naturalism, communitarianism, and libertarianism, he will have to hide from the inconvenient facts that expose the tensions among these commitments. But this risks turning his ideals into mere husks. For what is naturalism if the fish and shellfish and birds and sugarcane are all dead? What is communitarianism if the community can no longer support itself? I suppose freedom from government control is maintained, but what of the positive freedom to fish and to attend a low-country boil? And isn't local industry treading on John's community, even if the Feds are not?

Lee's other option is to try to preserve these as living ideals, but that will require attending to nature, thinking about community, and wrestling with the nature of freedom. But then, no longer fixed in an abstract accordance, the tensions among his ideals will come to the fore. He may notice that his opposition to the EPA is in tension with his hatred of socialized medicine. The unregulated local industry has created a public health emergency, driving his neighbors to rely heavily on Medicare and other forms of public assistance. And Lee might come to question the Tea Party's equation of freedom with free-market fundamentalism, forging a different philosophy of self-determination, one that does not pretend that communitarianism and capitalism go hand in hand.

One day, Lee saw a bird drop out of the air, mid-flight, paralyzed from the chemical vapors sublimating from the swamp. While it is too late for Lee to unsee this, it is an open question whether he will acknowledge its implications. After all, opposable thumbs are nothing compared with the human ability to manipulate reality through disavowal.⁸² Either way, there are consequences. To hide from the facts is to live with paper-thin ideals, forever risking that reality will bite you in the ass. But reality testing is taxing and leaves a mark.

Given our discussion of the different meanings of character, it is interesting how Weber vacillates in describing our acknowledgment of "inconvenient facts." To mark its importance and difficulty, he reaches for the phrase "moral achievement"; but he sets it off in scare quotes and adds the disclaimer that this "may sound too grandiose for something that should go without saying."⁸³ Certainly, facing difficult facts requires virtues such as humility, courage, and open-mindedness, but I am more interested in how this experience of facing up to reality shapes what I have been calling the medial sense of character. Earlier we cited Oppenheimer as an example of

someone who had to face inconvenient facts. In a fascinating redefinition of style, he captures well the idea of character I have in mind:

The problem of doing justice to the implicit, the imponderable, and the unknown is of course not unique to politics. It is always with us in science, it is with us in the most trivial of personal affairs, and it is one of the great problems of writing and all forms of art. The means by which it is solved is sometimes called style. It is style which complements affirmation with limitation and with humility; it is style which makes it possible to act effectively, but not absolutely; . . . it is style which is the deference that action pays to uncertainty.⁸⁴

Here style is understood as an expression of, not as an alternative to, personal substance. Interestingly, though, Oppenheimer sees style not as simple affirmation, as the free flow of one's distinctive personality. It is instead the collision of "affirmation with limitation." As William James remarked of his writing, "I have to forge every sentence in the teeth of irreducible and stubborn facts."⁸⁵ Style is a particular pattern of disturbance, as fluency ripples over the resistances of the real.⁸⁶ Weber was right: the struggle to acknowledge inconvenient facts is a moral achievement, but not a rare feat of moral heroism to be marked by a statue in the town square. It is the sort of remarkable, everyday achievement revealed in the leaps and hesitations, the missions and omissions, the shortcuts and roundabouts—the awkward grace—of each forged form of fluency.

We have now seen several ways in which the inner work of integration reverberates beyond the self. First, we learn from each other's successes and failures as each works to define a center while pursuing a circumference. Character is instructive. Second, the search for dynamic integrity itself must engage the world. Soulcraft requires reality testing. And with Oppenheimer, we have just glimpsed a way of knitting these two ideas together. In the moral life, each of us not only speaks for a particular constellation of prizes and projects but also speaks with a voice whose distinctive timbre is an index of our ongoing effort to come to grips with inconvenient facts.

Soul action is outward facing in yet another way, as some feats of integration end up not only shaping the soul but also reshaping society. Here I think of the example of late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. In numerous interviews, RBG shared an interesting account of her formative influences. The key figure in her development was her mother, whom RBG described as "the strongest and bravest person that I have ever known."⁸⁷

Though RBG lost her mother when she was seventeen, she continued to draw on that strength throughout her life. In an interview about maternal loss, RBG described a daily ritual of remembrance: “I have her picture on the wall in my chambers, and it’s where I can see her every day when I leave. I kind of smile when I look at it and say, ‘she would have been proud of me.’”⁸⁸ This is a nice Hallmark moment, but we all know that parental pride is too complex an object to be captured in a medium-length, soft-focus shot. Parental pride can feel empty, as automatic enthusiasm fails to confer true recognition. Or it can feel overstuffed. As we unwrap the gift of pride, we find it packed in with a parent’s own misplaced ambitions, with values forged in another time and place, with hopes too cramped to inhabit with one’s full self.

It was no different in RBG’s case. Her mother left her a very peculiar aspirational inheritance. She distilled her hopes for young Ruth into two tidy epigrams. The only problem was the glaring contradiction between them. In a conversation with Jeffrey Rosen, Dahlia Lithwick captured RBG’s predicament nicely:

Justice Ginsburg always talks about the advice that her mother gave her as a young girl. And at one level it sounds kind of trite; at another level I think it is actually very deep and kind of inherently contradictory. . . . Her mother always told her two things . . . : one, “be independent”; two, “be a lady.” Now, bearing in mind that at the time “be a lady” meant “don’t be independent,” it is a life that she has actually crafted in which she has managed to do both.⁸⁹

RBG’s mother was offering this advice in the forties, two decades before the arrival of the pill and the publication of the *Feminine Mystique*, three decades before Roe, and three-quarters of a century before “me too.” To be a lady, Lithwick suggests, meant to be proper and respectable, deferential and dependent. So RBG’s mother bequeathed her a puzzle.

To many, the solution might seem obvious. Given two contradictory injunctions, one which seems like baggage from a bygone era and the other like a sign of changing times, we would not blame RBG for simply stowing the inconvenient part of this inheritance in the basement. And this is the narrative her new public prefers: “the Notorious RBG” began to throw off her decorous restraint in *Bush v. Gore*, continued to flex her independence in *Carhart* and *Ledbetter*, and finally claimed her full-throated voice as “gangsta” dissenter in *Shelby County* and *Hobby Lobby*.⁹⁰ However,

as Lithwick explains, this narrative “disserves the part of her that is . . . very much a lady,” that remains “very careful, very reserved.”⁹¹ Rosen agrees, describing RBG as an “apostle of judicial minimalism,” who exemplifies both “jurisprudential as well as personal restraint.”⁹² In an interview with Rosen, RBG herself confirms that “what really changed was the composition of the court.”⁹³ When the court became a vehicle for right-wing judicial activism with no concern for precedent, a “very small c conservative” such as RBG became a voice of dissent.⁹⁴

So, instead of dropping the outdated half of her mother’s contradictory advice, RBG took the harder path of, as Lithwick put it, crafting a life in which she could pursue both ideals. But we need to think about what this entails. It could mean that, Silas-like, she merely divides her life into two compartments, one for the expression of her independent spirit and another for her ladylike behavior. What she did instead was find a way to interpret the two ideals as not only compatible but completely interwoven. Her mother was telling her, “Be independent. Prepare for difficulty, and stand on your own two feet like Eleanor Roosevelt.”⁹⁵ And the advice to be a lady was an extension, not a contradiction, of this first edict. RBG understood her mother to be talking not about polite decorum and gender subservience, but about another kind of modesty and restraint: “My mother’s advice was don’t lose time on useless emotions. Like, anger, resentment, remorse, envy.”⁹⁶ When Rosen suggests that “it is that extraordinary self-mastery that is the advice of the great wisdom traditions of the *Bible and the Bhagavad Gita* and the Buddhist traditions to set aside your ego so that you can focus on achieving your true path,” RBG agrees.⁹⁷ RBG wanted to stand on her two feet and occupy a place in the world. Ladylike deference would not achieve this, but if genteel restraint could be directed inward at what Buddhists call the “monkey brain,” that could certainly help. RBG explains that she realized that “if I don’t get past unproductive emotions, I’ll just get bogged down and lose precious time from useful work.”⁹⁸

Here we might worry that RBG is diverting into self-restraint energy that might have been better directed against the patriarchy. But of course the work that RBG’s self-mastery allowed her to do was deeply public, and indeed has helped to push forward gender equality in significant ways.⁹⁹ Thus, RBG’s soulcraft was transformative in three distinct ways. First, for many, parental hopes remain something leaden and inert, a guilty pull from the past. RBG reworked her inheritance into a portable and livable form

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/15228.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/15228.001.0001)

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Citation:

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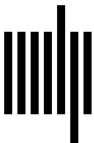
DOI: [10.7551/mitpress/15228.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/15228.001.0001)

ISBN (electronic): 9780262377607

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2024

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding and support from MIT Press Direct to Open



The MIT Press

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The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Bembo Book MT Pro by Westchester Publishing Services.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Higgins, Chris, 1967– author.

Title: Undeclared : a philosophy of formative higher education / Chris Higgins.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, 2024. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023028597 (print) | LCCN 2023028598 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780262547499 (paperback) | ISBN 9780262377614 (epub) |

ISBN 9780262377607 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Education, Higher—Aims and objectives.

Classification: LCC LB2322.2 .H487 2024 (print) | LCC LB2322.2 (ebook) |

DDC 378/.01—dc23/eng/20230814

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023028597>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023028598>