

PREFACE

One of the peculiarities of this book is that it presents relatively complex ideas in relatively simple language. I chose this approach because I believe that my topic—the question of what makes each of us a unique and idiosyncratic character—should be accessible to readers beyond the academy. At the same time, I have sought to avoid the overly simplistic tone of much of the popular writing on the theme. When self-help or New Age gurus tackle the question of what it means to lead a fulfilling life, the kind of life that feels worth living, they tend to advocate a streamlined program of (concrete or spiritual) steps that is supposed to lead to a harmonious existence, thereby sidestepping all the ways in which human life is not designed to be harmonious. Likewise, they tend to fall back on an untheorized notion of what it means to be a human being in the first place, talking as if the matter were completely straightforward. It's not. As a result, if this book has a goal, it is to remain

faithful to the complexities of human life without resorting to the mystifications of specialized academic idiom.

Three interventions run throughout this book that are meant to counter the manner in which the so-called good life is usually discussed in our culture. The first asserts that self-cultivation is not a matter of nurturing an essential core of being that makes us who we are, but rather of dwelling in the world in ways that allow us to add ever new layers of meaning into an identity that is always in the process of forming itself. That is, I start from the premise that our self is not a private possession (or achievement), but rather something we construct gradually through our engagement with our surroundings, including other people. Second, I argue that our quest for existential equilibrium is not only largely unrealistic, but perhaps also somewhat undesirable—that there may be something quite hollow about our cultural ideal of a balanced, composed, and unruffled life. Pointing out that sometimes it is the most tormented lives that are also the most rewarding, I propose that there might be advantages to a life that is a little neurotic but also hugely ardent and committed. Third, I posit that there is an almost astonishing specificity to human desire and that it is precisely this specificity that underpins our attempts to actualize our character. I believe that the more alienated we are from this specificity—from what the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan called the “truth” of our desire—the more alienated we also are from our character. Conversely, the more loyal we stay to this specificity, the better we are able to resist the dominant social norms that strive to suppress our character.

I evoke Lacan’s name in part to alert the reader to the fact that many of the insights of this book are indebted to his thinking. But I also evoke it in order to render concrete the main rhetorical dilemma of this book—namely, that it draws on the work of some of the most demanding theorists of the previous century while at the same time trying to maintain a mainstream-friendly tone. Not only is this combination hard to achieve, but it raises some thorny conceptual concerns. Thinkers in my field—contemporary theory—tend to be proud of the impenetrability of its rhetoric,

and with good reason, for they see this impenetrability as a theoretical intervention in its own right; exasperated by the notion that meaning should be transparent and easy to process, they often intentionally create an opaque textual surface in order to force the reader to grapple with the ways in which meaning is never obvious but open to a variety of interpretations. One might even say that there is an ethics of a sort to this willful opacity in the sense that it seeks to challenge the lenses we customarily use to comprehend the world, thus opening a space for alternative lenses, alternative points of view. I have a deep-seated respect for this attitude. Yet I also admit to being increasingly impatient with texts whose convoluted rhetoric hides the fact that the concepts being formulated are not, in the final analysis, very difficult at all. When I feel that I can state in twenty-five pages of clear prose what a book I am reading spends three hundred torturous pages articulating, I experience an exasperation of my own. This exasperation is one of the motivating factors of this book: it explains, in part, why I have made the rhetorical choices I have.

One might say that my deliberately lucid prose is my little act of defiance, my way of heeding the call of my character, for I never feel as connected to my writing as when I adopt this style. The second component of the book that grates against the conventions of my field is its understated but irrepressible hopefulness. For personal reasons—having to do with a relatively painful history of both material and emotional deprivation—I have never been able to fully accept contemporary theory’s insistence on our lack of agency and disempowerment in relation to the world. Simply put, I have not been able to afford the idea that I have no way of actively improving my lot. At the same time, experience has taught me what I repeatedly communicate in this book—namely, that there is a difference between, on the one hand, the facile notions of self-improvement and “positive thinking” that circulate so widely in our culture and, on the other, the act of mindfully stepping into the cadence of a complicated life; I have learned that the easy answers that crowd our collective space have no teeth, that they cannot even begin to bite into the formidable and often

genuinely frightening endeavor of living, relating, and—let's not forget about this—carrying on when we no longer see the point of it all. Particularly when it comes to experiences that cause us suffering, our culture's easy answers are almost patronizing in their cheerfulness. This is why the optimism of this book is cautious and keenly aware of its limits. And it is also why its propositions are tentative at best, shying away from the insincere certainties of prescriptive thought.

A discerning reader will already have noticed that the distinction between the terms *self*, *identity*, and *character* remains somewhat ambiguous. I am going to let that ambiguity stand, for I trust that the appropriate nuances will arise contextually from the arguments I will be presenting. But it may help to know that of these terms, *self* is the broadest, often encompassing the other two. *Identity*, in turn, includes both our private everyday sense of who we are and our social persona—the culturally intelligible personality that others relate to. Finally, *character* is what in many ways resists the confines of sociality, expressing, instead, something about the most eccentric frequencies of our being. It is out of a tentative deference for the latter—as well as, perhaps, out of the realization that it may still be somewhat difficult for female thinkers to claim their distinctive voice—that I have chosen to write this book with few quotations and references. This choice of course does not mean that the ideas contained in it have arisen in a vacuum. They have developed over a decade of engagement with the work of others, and I have done my best to point the reader to some of the most important influences in my notes. These notes, however, are insufficient to capture the full extent of my indebtedness to the multitude of borrowed thoughts that seep into my prose. Readers interested in a more detailed account of how my work intersects with that of others are invited to consult my more academic books.¹

This book is divided into three sections, each of which focuses on a slightly different aspect of what it means to be called to one's character. Part I looks at the art of self-fashioning by arguing that the specificity of our character reflects the specificity of our desire. I propose that it is impossible to honor our character

without honoring the distinctive contours of our desire and that this is the case even when our desire seems utterly irrational or socially inconvenient. Our desire—our impulse to reach out into the world in quest of things that might satisfy us—may render us vulnerable to injury, but it also ensures that we do not settle into a fixed definition of who we are; it ensures that the meaning of our lives remains malleable and open-ended. And insofar as it arises from the always idiosyncratic way in which we experience loss and deprivation, it gives rise to a code of conduct that can be quite different from prevailing social values, thereby making it possible for us to resist our culture's attempts to dictate the parameters of our behavior. To express the matter plainly, when the specificity of our desire is activated, we no longer care about what others think we should desire but feel compelled to obey the enigmatic directive of our own desire.

Part II looks at the art of self-responsibility by positing that the specificity of our desire makes us deeply responsible for the well-being of those who are its objects. In our society, it is common to assume that we cannot be held fully accountable for the portion of our desire that remains unconscious. In contrast, I assert that the fact that our actions are often unconsciously motivated does not absolve us of responsibility for the suffering we might inflict on others. I maintain that if we are repeatedly driven to hurt others in the same way, a big part of claiming a character is the ability to recognize such repetitive patterns and to learn to intervene in them before they cause devastation in the lives of others. The flipside of this is the realization that who we are—the distinctiveness of our character—has a great deal to do with how we have been injured, so that owning the full weight of our character is, to some extent, a matter of owning the full weight of the personal traumas that populate our past. The key to the good life, in other words, is not the ability to avoid pain, but rather the capacity to metabolize it so that we become capable of a more rewarding relationship to ourselves. This capability, in turn, allows us to develop a more rewarding relationship to others, including those we relate to intimately.

Part III looks at the art of self-surrender by examining events that—however fleetingly—transport us beyond the banalities of everyday life. Such events can feel life altering, as when we, for example, fall in love or are summoned to a creative, political, or professional destiny that we never imagined for ourselves. But they can also be as seemingly minor as learning to observe the details of our life-world from an unfamiliar perspective. “Transcendence,” according to this view, does not require that we leave the world behind, but merely that we agree to experience it in a new way. In the first of these instances, we are invited to translate life’s unpredictable swerves into a calling of some kind. And we are asked to cope with a degree of upheaval, which is exactly why anxiety—and particularly the capacity to bear the uncertainties and ambivalences of existence—tends to be an intrinsic component of a life that feels worth living. In the second instance, we are invited to translate life’s more mundane stretches into something personally resonant. We may, for instance, choose to embrace the kinds of experiences—frequently broadly erotic in nature—that cause us to lose track of our customary way of being in the world; we may find ourselves ushered beyond our social persona to the elusive edges of immediate self-experience. Both of these modalities of self-surrender, I suggest, can potentially contribute to the articulation of our character.

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