

5.  
Managing the Social and Moral Costs  
of a Culture of Choice

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1. INTRODUCTION

The central theme of Margaret Archer's essay, and the book in which it originally appeared<sup>1</sup>, is the emergence in late modernity of what Archer calls the "reflexive imperative" –the increasing necessity of finding our place in the world less through routinized behaviour, role playing, and unreflective adherence to convention, and more through independent discernment about how to build a meaningful life. The fundamental intuition which Archer finds some support for in her interviews with college students<sup>2</sup>, is the following: recent decades have seen an increasing disintegration of traditional communities guided by

1. See Margaret Scotford Archer, *The Reflexive Imperative in Late Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), esp. chap. 3, "Reconceptualizing socialization as 'relational reflexivity'."

2. Archer herself admits in the conclusion of *The Reflexive Imperative* (292-294) that the peculiarities of her sample interviewees do not warrant ambitious extrapolations to the wider culture. Nonetheless, I believe the interviews are illustrative of a wider cultural shift, and even if this shift has not been demonstrated empirically, it can be observed that many people's way of looking at their life prospects and future is much less informed by inherited career paths and community norms than it was in earlier generations.

stable norms and life expectations and the emergence of fragile, “post-traditional” communities whose members receive mixed signals about how to live, and find themselves ill-prepared by their received culture and skill set for building a viable future in a rapidly changing society.

Archer underlines two critical factors contributing to this decline in traditional communities: first, the breakdown of traditional family structures, and second, the changing shape of careers and career incentives. Although family relationships have a significant impact on the forms of deliberation individuals engage in, Archer’s interviews with college students<sup>3</sup> would seem to suggest that recent changes in the logic of *professional opportunity* affect the nature of community life even more pervasively. A global and dynamic labour market creates a powerful incentive for people to relocate, if necessary multiple times, in order to advance their careers, shedding their previous communities along the way. As post-traditional, culturally diverse, and transient communities proliferate, established social norms, roles, and expectations become, if not irrelevant, much less adequate as guides to action, and a normative vacuum is left in their place. In this sort of environment, people are compelled to deliberate rationally about what sort of life to lead, and how to give a satisfying or meaningful “shape” to that life. In short, deliberate discernment of life projects is no longer a luxury, but an inescapable *necessity* for an ever-growing proportion of people coming of age in the new millenium<sup>4</sup>.

3. These interviews are described and interpreted in Archer, *The Reflexive Imperative in Late Modernity*.

4. A similar thesis, concerning the increasing inadequacy of social custom and convention as a guide to how to live, and the consequent centrality

We need not accept all of the details of Archer's approach –for example, her categorization of agents as communicative, autonomous, meta-reflexives, and fractured reflexives– in order to accept her argument that modern social circumstances are conspiring to generate a “reflexive imperative.” Nor need we pronounce upon whether it is really the 1980s generation, industrialization, World War II, or some other historical moment that marks the full onset of the “reflexive imperative” as a powerful and growing trend in developed societies, in order to acknowledge its existence. What matters for the purposes of my analysis is Archer's central claim that (a) we appear to be witnessing an age marked by a “reflexive imperative” to a degree unknown to earlier generations; and (b) recent developments in the labour market, in particular its increasing globalization and the rate of transformation in working conditions and demands, have played a crucial role in effecting the social changes that give rise to the reflexive imperative.

Rather than enriching her sociological description of the reflexive imperative, the task I have set myself is to reflect on some of its normative implications. In particular, I would like to do two things: first, to consider whether, or to what extent, the advent of a culture in which reflexivity is a fact of life (what I shall refer to, for convenience, as a “culture of choice”) represents a genuine improvement in our way of life when compared with *less* reflexive, more conventional, cultures; and second – assuming with Archer that neither culture nor economy are necessar-

of the “individual” and his or her choices to our contemporary social order, is advanced in Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and Its Social and Political Consequences* (London and New Delhi: Sage, 2002).

ily self-perpetuating or immune from reform by human agents – what sorts of steps agents can take, whether acting individually or collectively, to avail of the benefits of such a culture while reducing its social and moral costs to a minimum.

## 2. COSTS AND BENEFITS OF A CULTURE OF CHOICE

The social conditions fueling the reflexive imperative are complex and multi-faceted. They include the urbanization of modern life, the triumph of liberal constitutionalism in the West, the romantic movement and its individualist, expressivist legacy, the unprecedented ease of long-range communication and transport technologies, the decline of religious practice in the West, and the emergence of a highly dynamic and global labour market. Rather than exploring these conditions at length, suffice it to say that they have produced what we might call a “culture of choice,” viz. a culture in which a premium is placed on authenticity, self-fulfilment, and professional advancement, in which an array of career and lifestyle opportunities seem to proliferate, and in which the pursuit of one’s dreams seems to require following the relevant opportunities wherever they lead, not being bound to the place of one’s birth, the profession of one’s parents, or the traditions of one’s elders.

This “brave new world” where innovation and choice are the order of the day, has both upsides and downsides to it. On the upside, it seems to incentivize people to be more reflective about the direction and shape of their lives, and to make independent choices –that is, choices that are not predetermined by more or less fixed role models or by one’s received culture– about how and where to live. Arguably, the necessity of making difficult

choices about our lives forces us to engage in salutary reflection about who we are and what we want to make of ourselves. The fact that we live in a culture that heavily underdetermines the direction of our lives thus represents a rare opportunity, that many previous generations did not enjoy, to carefully discern our personal goals and our place in society. This sort of reflexivity, it could be argued, is intrinsically valuable and enriching for a human life, as suggested by John Stuart Mill's famous aphorism, "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied."

Apart from incentivizing a more reflexive spirit, the proliferation of lifestyles and career paths that are made available in a global capitalist economy can empower agents to live lives that express in a meaningful way their own talents, aspirations, and sense of calling in life<sup>5</sup>. Instead of being shunted into a career and lifestyle in which we may or may not be especially competent or interested (in the manner of a son of a farmer in an agrarian society), we can now forge career paths and lifestyles that respond, somehow, to our own unique set of interests and capacities. For instance, some people are drawn to "high-powered" legal work; others to teaching children, volunteering, or development work; others to academic research; yet others to

5. This fit between lifestyle, on the one hand, and personal talents and aspirations, on the other, closely resembles what Mill called the value of "individuality." See John Stuart Mill, "On Liberty," in *On Liberty and Other Essays*, ed. John Gray (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), Section 3, "Of Individuality as one of the Elements of Well-Being." Mill's notion of individuality (which, by his own admission, is indebted to Wilhelm von Humboldt's account of moral development) has two basic elements: first, living a life that gives full scope to one's native character and talents; and second, living in a way that reflects one's own considered judgments about the meaning and purpose of one's life.

agriculture, engineering, or some other trade, each career with its distinctive values, competencies, and goals. Besides the proliferation of career paths, the circumstances of modern societies, in particular communication and transport technology, allow individuals to exit unsatisfactory communities and seek out communities more to their liking, whether on religious, moral, or cultural grounds, rather than finding themselves condemned to live cheek by jowl with people with whom they have little in common, or worse still, whom they find obnoxious, tyrannical or domineering. In short, the circumstances that give rise to the “reflexive imperative” not only favour reflective attitudes, but enable agents to tailor their lives to their own sense of what gives life meaning and value.

Of course, *if* the reflexive imperative and the culture of choice it presupposes did nothing but promote reflectiveness and empower agents to live out their dreams, we might look on them as unmitigated improvements on more “primitive,” traditional cultures in which people were not required to engage in such complex and creative forms of deliberation about the shape of their lives, or were compelled to exercise the profession of their ancestors, whether as laborers or as part of a wealthy elite. But this would be to look at the culture of choice through rose-colored glasses. The new opportunities associated with a culture of choice can easily be overstated, and, as Archer points out, are not without their human costs<sup>6</sup>. To grasp the true contribution of a culture of choice to the quality of our lives, we must beware

6. For example, she considers that “fractured reflexives,” those whose capacity to take ownership of their lives and make significant decisions is greatly debilitated, are often unable to thrive in a culture dominated by the reflexive imperative. See chap. 7, “Fractured reflexives: casualties of the reflexive imperative.”

of overstating its advantages, and we must also acknowledge its downsides.

Consider, for example, the claim that a culture of choice motivates a more reflective attitude toward life. Although it is true that a culture of choice increases the need for reflection, it certainly does not guarantee the *quality* of this reflection. To deliberate among eligible career paths, for example, need not involve a mature, probing, or sincere discernment of the meaning of one's life. It may simply involve an inquiry about which way of life can afford one more material comfort or prestige. In a fluctuating labour market where the very definition of professions and the demands of the market are unstable, a single-minded careerist may find that "climbing the career ladder" is no longer as straightforward as it used to be – it may, for example, require "retooling" one's skills on an ongoing basis, or being flexible about how one defines one's professional aptitudes. But this sort of reasoning is largely calculating and may be employed in the service of a fairly narrow, unreflective, and conventional vision of what makes a life meaningful and worthwhile. The point is, the mere fact that we are compelled to reflect and deliberate about our futures by no means guarantees that we will be freed from superficial conceptions of what gives life meaning and value, nor does it guarantee that we will reason in truly unconventional or innovative ways.

As to the proliferation of choice, on the one hand it cannot be denied that a modern global capitalist economy breaks open many people's life expectations, enabling them to assume a wide variety of careers and lifestyles. Many people are no longer bound to follow the profession or lifestyle of their parents, and people are often confronted with quite diverse careers options: many people can choose to adopt any one of numerous

professions, or to relocate to practically any continent. But this advantage must be offset by two observations: first, the sheer *quantity* of options does not guarantee that people can navigate such choices in a competent and wise manner –indeed, in some cases they may find themselves overwhelmed as if at sea without a rudder. Second, it is well known that the range and quality of choices available to us is not distributed evenly across the population. For example, even a diverse and dynamic labour market can be quite merciless toward those, such as a large chunk of the older generation, who have adapted their attitudes and skills to a more stable and conventional set of occupations. And being born into the “right” sort of family, having the “right” sort of educational headstart in life, and moving in the “right” sorts of social circles, can be decisive in expanding the pool of eligible choices. Thus, while it is undoubtedly true that our destinies are more malleable than they were in more traditional and stable societies, it is also true that the range of choices available to people is quite unevenly distributed.

To sum up, neither the impetus to reflect seriously about one’s life, nor the explosion of options associated with post-traditional societies, are unmitigated blessings. But I would go further than this, and argue –perhaps more explicitly and forcefully than Archer, who is constrained, after all, by a discipline not especially receptive to forthright normative judgments– that the social and cultural conditions that give rise to the “reflexive imperative” also stack the decks against very important goods, in particular values that tend to be fostered in local, face-to-face communities, such as loyalty, solidarity, friendship, and the acquisition of human virtue. Insofar as these values are put in jeopardy, the risks of social fragmentation, the collapse of civil society, and “soft despotism” loom large. Let me explain.



A world in which there is a coincidence between an “ethics of authenticity” and self-fulfilment on the one hand, and realistic opportunities to pursue one’s dreams (very often dominated by career goals) in alternative communities on the other, generates strong incentives to look upon one’s current place of residence and one’s current community less as a permanent home and more as a temporary resting-place, a “launching-pad” so to speak, for the next adventure<sup>7</sup>. The ethics of self-fulfilment, now that it has encountered opportunities for free reign, has radically transformed people’s attitudes toward family and local community. When there is a strong incentive to chase career opportunities wherever they can be found, goods such as loyalty, solidarity, and friendship are valorized less than they would be in more traditional and stable societies. That is because optimal access to the opportunities associated with post-traditional societies requires an extraordinary degree of detachment from one’s family, friends, and neighbours: one must be prepared to abandon those ties when opportunity calls, if one wishes to compete efficiently in the labour market, or explore one’s dreams in an unfettered way.

One valuable practice that depends on coherent and enduring communities is the fostering of human virtue. Traditional communities, though no utopia, at least have the social resources to cultivate some conception of the good life in their members. They are able to transmit to their members a series of stable dis-

7. While large parts of the world are not dominated by the ethics of self-fulfilment and entire populations are very far from being “socially mobile,” it is hard to deny that both social mobility and the ethos of authenticity and self-fulfilment are well-entrenched features of the mainstream culture in advanced industrialized nations. Cf. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1991).

positions of character through a way of life and a series of rituals that involve the imitation of examples of good conduct in the community. This formative process happens most obviously in the family, where children acquire a series of habits and attitudes from their parents and elders. But it continues outside the family, in the public life of the community, where models of human virtue can be exemplified in church, the workplace, the neighborhood, social clubs, courtrooms, and so on. To the extent that the moral culture of the community is more or less stable and its members are sufficiently sedentary to develop mutual bonds of trust and respect, community life can be a powerful educative force, preparing people to make a responsible contribution to the common life of the community, rewarding them for their contributions with the approval of their peers, and disincentivizing reckless, anti-social, and apathetic attitudes with social disapproval<sup>8</sup>.

I do not wish to deny that small communities can and have been oppressive toward their members, stifling their capacity to think for themselves and make their own way in the world. However, this susceptibility to abuse and injustice should not blind us to the positive function that community bonds can play in setting forth vivid examples of virtue and providing relationships, rituals, and practices that gradually habituate people to be honest, courageous, generous, kind, caring, and solicitous to the common good. The problem with the culture of choice is that by incentivizing a permanent state of social transience

8. For a seminal discussion of the connection between the transmission of virtue and communities built around more or less coherent traditions that embody some more or less coherent vision of the good life, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981), esp. chap. 15, "The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life and the Concept of a Tradition."

and by tending to subordinate community loyalties to career choices, it attacks the very possibility of stable and enduring communities in which a coherent set of values can be transmitted from one generation to another, and in which bonds of trust, accountability, and moral apprenticeship—all essential tools in the cultivation of human virtue—can be consolidated over time.

The net outcome of the progressive exaltation of individual choice and self-fulfilment, combined with rapid advances in social mobility, is that many people, while they undoubtedly feel a strong sense of loyalty to themselves, their families, and to some extent (though to what extent this is true in a globalized world is an arguable point) their nation, frequently fail to build enduring bonds with civil society—that is, communities and associations *other than* the family and the nation. Yet it is precisely these sorts of communities that provide a sustainable infrastructure beyond the apparatus of the state for the cultivation of the virtues, such as justice, magnanimity, charity, prudence, compassion, and temperance. As people increasingly embrace a transient way of life, and the virtue of loyalty either disappears or is transferred exclusively to the realm of family and state, we are likely to see a marked decline in the vibrancy and health of intermediate associations such as bowling clubs, neighborhood associations, churches, and universities, which depend on the enduring loyalty and commitment of their members. Concomitantly, we are likely to see the State and State bureaucracies step in to meet the needs traditionally met by intermediate associations—such as healthcare, education, and care for the needy. Indeed, this hypothesis seems to be borne out by recent history<sup>9</sup>.

9. The decline of civil society associations in America was famously documented in Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of*

The gradual replacement of civil society with government bureaucracy is a very worrying development, for at least two reasons. First, government bureaucracy operates according to general rules that are very often blind to special circumstances and liable to cause unintended harms, such as the infamous “welfare trap,” which can make it unattractive for welfare recipients to seek low-paid or part-time work. Of its very nature, it must routinize and regulate everything before it, and leave little to the judgment and discretion of its agents. More importantly, the instalment of government as the principal overseer of community life outside of the family creates an unhealthy dependency of ordinary citizens on the State, a level of dependency inimical to the virtues of self-government. Even if we wished to resist government policies or edicts, to do so would be to bite the hand that feeds us. It is not that government would actively oppress people using police force (though historically, that is always a possibility); but that citizens, anticipating the benefits and social protections they would lose if they attempted to escape the regulation of bureaucracy, and finding no succour in alternative communities, become virtual “wards of state,” helpless subjects cradled in the arms of the Leviathan. This state of abject personal dependency on the State was referred to by Alexis de Tocqueville as “soft despotism”—a despotism of regulations, not of physical violence. He saw soft despotism as the logical outcome of the democratizing impulse, insofar as it

*American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), while the increasing importance of government bureaucracy as a dispenser of social welfare over the course of the twentieth century is a well-known fact that needs no demonstration here. Tocqueville would think it no coincidence that the expansion of the welfare state has coincided with a decline in civil society.

tends to erase local dependencies, creating a vacuum that the State steps in to fill<sup>10</sup>.

If I am right, and the culture of choice tends to erode the structures of civil society and lay the foundations of an insufferable bureaucratic tyranny or “soft despotism,” then this naturally raises the question, “what can we do to avoid or mitigate these worrying tendencies?” Although Archer, being a sociologist, describes the tendencies inherent in our existing social order, rather than prescribing how agents *ought* to act, she is no determinist: she recognizes that structural influences on agency are not necessarily the last word, and that we can choose against the grain of structural influences, or even reform the structures themselves with our choices<sup>11</sup>. In this spirit, I here offer a few preliminary reflections on how individual agents and communities might realistically push back against these structural influ-

10. The specter of soft despotism is eloquently depicted in Vol. II, part 4, chap. 6 of Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000): “Thus, after taking each individual by turns in its powerful hands and kneading him as it likes, the sovereign extends its arms over society as a whole; it covers its surface with a network of small, complicated, painstaking, uniform rules through which the most original minds and the most vigorous souls cannot clear a way to surpass the crowd; it does not break wills, but it softens them, bends them, and directs them; it rarely forces one to act, but it constantly opposes itself to one’s acting; it does not destroy, it prevents things from being born; it does not tyrannize, it hinders, compromises, enervates, extinguishes, dazes, and finally reduces each nation to being nothing more than a herd of timid and industrious animals of which the government is the shepherd.”

11. For example, Archer endorses the “openness of every social system to contingency,” and insists that “[t]here is no finalism whatsoever. Nothing but agential doings, agential engagement with other groups and agential commitment (individual and collective) shapes and reshapes the social order” (Archer, *The Reflexive Imperative in Late Modernity*, 315).

ences, and act to protect the values and goods, such as loyalty, solidarity, and virtue, that are eroded by the culture of choice. My suggestions must necessarily remain starting-points for future inquiry rather than elaborate proposals, but if they do no more than gesture in the right direction, they will have served their purpose.

### 3. MITIGATING THE COSTS OF THE CULTURE OF CHOICE

If the cost of the culture of choice is the corrosion of local community along with its characteristic values of loyalty, solidarity, and the cultivation of virtue, then there are basically two ways to recover these values: first, to turn our back on the culture of choice and simply become radical “localists,” entrenching ourselves in small communities and walling ourselves off from the surrounding culture; or second, to take certain steps to mitigate the destabilizing effects of that culture for the life of communities without entirely repudiating the opportunities offered by modern technology, the global economy, and social mobility.

The first choice, embodied in certain ultra-orthodox Jewish and Islamic communities, in certain Amish villages, and in certain monastic communities, may be a legitimate strategy for some people, but it depends on a very high degree of moral and/or religious homogeneity within the community, a considerable degree of self-restraint on the part of community members (for example, they must keep their dealings with strangers to a bare minimum), a radical separation with the surrounding culture, and a fairly high degree of control by leaders of the community over the terms of membership (cultural “dissidents” and

“modernizing” influences must be curtailed or purged from the community). While these sorts of communities persist in certain corners of the world, they are unlikely to become a major strand in societies where freedom of association and freedom of religion are considered sacro-sanct, since their social and moral preconditions are extremely demanding and fly in the face of our seemingly insatiable hunger for adventure and advancement, neither of which is possible without professional and social mobility. The whole world will not become Dominican monks or ultra-orthodox Jews: walled communities of these sorts will remain the preserve of a small minority of citizens of the “free world,” whatever about communities that enforce their isolation through the threat of force.

For these reasons, those of us who worry about the deleterious effects of the culture of choice, especially its corrosion of community values such as loyalty, solidarity, and tradition, have good reason to embrace the second option I mentioned above, namely counter-cultural strategies that permit a significant degree of constructive engagement with the culture of choice, or even of a harnessing of certain elements of that culture in order to bolster community life. For convenience and simplicity, I will divide these pro-community strategies into personal and collective tasks. By *personal* tasks, I simply mean tasks that primarily involve the attitudes and actions of individual persons; while by collective tasks I mean tasks that require a significant degree of collaboration among individuals in joint enterprises.

Let us begin with personal tasks which could help promote cohesive and enduring communities within a culture of choice. The first is to critically interrogate our own attitudes toward community. Since we are, to a certain extent, the product of our culture, this sort of self-interrogation requires us to reassess

the practical priorities of our peers and our culture, in light of their impact on the development of strong communities and the promotion of community values such as loyalty, friendship, and solidarity. This does not mean that we need to be constantly judging or moralizing about other peoples' lifestyles and preferences, but it *does* mean that we cannot assume that the dominant schedule of priorities in our society is one that supports the emergence and maintenance of strong, flourishing, and enduring communities. We must bravely strive to cultivate a critical spirit, both toward our culture's values and our own values. This critical attitude does not come naturally because there is a deep and all too often unconscious psychological impulse to assimilate, and consider as "normal" or "natural," the dominant customs and preferences of our society<sup>12</sup>.

To take a simple example, in contemporary Western nations (though admittedly more in some than others), it is commonplace to assume, at least if one is to judge by people's talk and behaviour, that (a) excelling in one's career in ways that have a tangible reputational payoff is an essential component of a decent, worthwhile life; and that (b) it is worth spending a large chunk of one's life moving around, settling for short periods, and then uprooting, again and again, in order to build a prestigious career. Whether explicitly acknowledged or not, this may well be a significant factor motivating the dramatic level of social mobility to be observed in the contemporary world. But is this strong evaluation of career goals *justified*, all things considered?

12. This does not commit me to accepting a deterministic picture of socialization. On the contrary, the very possibility of adopting a critical attitude toward one's socialization assumes the falsity of a deterministic account of socialization.



On the one hand, it might seem obvious that a successful career is worth paying a social price for. After all, to many of us, a life deprived of geographic and social mobility would seem a rather drab and dreary one, and the notion of being “tied” to a locality hardly appeals to our spirit of adventure. But reassessing the comparative value of career goals alongside the value of participation in robust communities does not require us to “throw out the baby with the bathwater”: it may simply require us to be willing to scale back our career ambitions for the sake of anchoring our lives in a more or less stable community or, more likely, a more or less stable set of overlapping communities. While there is a time to be “on the road,” there is surely also a time to build a home and to make a long-term commitment to a community. Yet is very difficult for many of us to make this sort of long-term commitment. We seem to be afraid of failing in the eyes of the world, of turning down “golden” career opportunities for the sake of old-fashioned virtues like loyalty and friendship. Yet if I am right in suggesting that this is precisely a part of the pathology of our times, then we need to take corrective action of some sort. And part of that corrective action is to begin to entertain the possibility that career prestige is actually something that is worth sacrificing for the sake of family, friendship, and community. What this adjustment in priorities implies in practice is of course a matter of personal discernment, but one thing it clearly rules out is the uncritical pursuit of professional opportunities regardless of their implications for community life.

But the individual who sets his face against the dominant individualist culture all too often finds himself overwhelmed by anti-communitarian social structures: many of the social structures of contemporary culture tend to foster an attachment to oneself or at most one’s family unit, rather than an attachment

to a larger community. To mention a few: the market for consumer goods, which tends to form a relationship with individuals or nuclear families cut loose from their surrounding communities, a tendency only exacerbated by the growth in online stores; the labour market, which tends to value employees for their prestige and productivity, as individual producers rather than as persons embedded in communities with shared, non-commercial values and goals; mobile communication technology, which permits a large amount of communication between individuals largely disembedded from their surrounding social contexts; and state welfare agencies, which tend to interact with people “objectively” as individuals or wards of state rather than as members of communities with their own distinctive values and goals<sup>13</sup>.

In order to resist these individualizing influences, we must collaborate with others to develop social structures and institutions that incarnate values such as loyalty, solidarity, and friendship. Specifically, concerned citizens will need to gradually build up communities that value and reward members who demonstrate loyalty, friendship, and a sense of mutual solidarity, communities that somehow reconcile the value of loyalty with the possibility of pursuing an interesting, even if not optimal, career.

How might these counter-cultural communities come about, and what might they look like? Obviously, there is no universal answer to this question. Each person and each group of people is differently positioned. However, an example may serve to illustrate the sort of thing I have in mind. Realistically, many young people will “spread their wings” and follow

13. I do not have time here to uncover all of the ways these sorts of social structures isolate the individual and/or his family from surrounding communities. I hope what I have said so far gives the reader some general sense of what I have in mind.

career opportunities far and wide, at least for a certain amount of time. But by the time they hit their late 20s and early 30s, they will probably have sufficient “adventure” behind them that they are at least open to the possibility of settling down in one place. This decision may be made by the best available job opportunity, or the highest salary, with community and family far behind. But what if a group of young people who found themselves in the same general geographic location with an acceptable even if not optimal job situation, were to make a “pact” of some sort to form a community together, to make a tentative commitment to stay in the same area for the next twenty or so years, and to pour their professional expertise and knowledge not only into their jobs, but into the development of community resources? What if this group of young people began to meet on a weekly or bi-weekly basis for a dinner or social event, and gradually, as trust between them increased, began to help each other out with babysitting, advice, some shared homeschooling for those interested, a receptive ear in hard times, or even material support – pooling their resources if one of their members falls on hard times? Such a community may or may not live closely adjacent or in the same neighborhood. Indeed, many modalities of their life together, such as the frequency of social events and the forms of joint collaboration, would have to be decided by the community in a maximally consensual fashion.

Admittedly, this sort of practical collaboration could be challenging, given our busy schedules and diverse lifestyles, and given the way social and economic structures currently reward social mobility. Such a project would have to confront and overcome the dominant schedule of priorities, which tend to be individualistic, materialistic, and career-driven. To do this,

it would have to alter existing social incentives, by catering to the material and social needs of its members in tangible and credible ways. It would have to generate some sort of social infrastructure of its own, even while participating, to some extent, in the mainstream culture. For example, it might eventually found its own school, hospital, recreation center, insurance scheme, security system, or even university.

Daunting as these and other community-building tasks may be, they are certainly not impossible. People have build entire villages, universities, and towns from scratch. Indeed, it seems to me that to build community in the modern world, notwithstanding its obvious challenges, is an exciting and fascinating prospect. The very fact that communities must be built in a more deliberate fashion than before (when they tended to arise spontaneously or when they simply carried forward the way of life of parents and grandparents) presents new opportunities for introducing a greater element of rationality, deliberation, and friendship into community life. Whereas before, communities were, so to speak, “inherited,” with the main lines of community life already set in stone, now we often have to be more deliberate in laying or re-laying the foundations of a healthy community<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, the significant front-end investment presupposed by a community-building project of this sort may pay high dividends, for the sort of intensive collaboration required by community-building can forge bonds of trust and mutual respect, the sine qua non of any flourish-

14. Of course, we must avoid the danger of accepting an overly stylized account of pre-modern communities. For example, we should not assume that they afforded zero mobility or choice to their members. Rather, the point is that modern communities are much less fixed in their basic structure by tradition, land, and inherited social norms than their pre-modern counterparts.

ing community. Finally, as people experience the real benefits of social collaboration, trust, and civic friendship, they would have an extra motive to “buy in” to the project, even if this requires them to turn down attractive career opportunities that would require relocation.

Any community that is strong and enduring involves mutual trust and vulnerability, and involves the possibility of mutual harm, disappointment, or even betrayal. Given that we are not angels, disagreements would be bound to erupt on the distribution of community resources and on the correct way for community members to interact. To ensure that these disagreements are not fatal, a strong community would require that its membership not only submit their disputes to authoritative arbitrators, but be personally committed to a set of values that overlap in fundamental ways. Ideally, shared values and norms would be embodied in the day-to-day life, customs, and practices of the community, but they could also be articulated more formally in some sort of community charter.

It is beyond the remit of this paper to elaborate on potential sources of community norms and values. The most obvious source would be a shared religious tradition, which could offer, among other things, models of human excellence to be emulated (such as stories about the saints, or the availability of living role models of human virtue within the community), and a set of shared symbols, customs, rituals, and formative practices (e.g. catechesis, reading groups, theological study, volunteer work, weekly worship), to remind the community of the things that matter most to it. Communities with a religious character, at least where they participate in a historically established and well developed form of religious belief, have the advantage of relying on a “big picture” narrative and a tradition of belief and practice

with an impressive historical pedigree and a wealth of resources for fostering virtue and community solidarity (such as stories with heroes and villains, regular worship, the call to serve the poor, practices of self-denial, and so forth). Therefore, religion is, on its face, a promising resource for the renewal of community life in a culture of choice<sup>15</sup>.

If I am right about this, then religion, far from being necessarily a force for backwardness and oppression, may play a vitally important role in providing the sort of “grand narrative,” rituals, and lived ideals that can hold a community together against modern pressures toward fragmentation. This is not to deny that certain religious movements may oppose themselves squarely to hard-won achievements of modern societies, such as the equal dignity of all persons, political freedom, and so forth. But it is to insist that the mere risk of abuse, and the mere presence of objectionable types of religious practice, should not blind us to the clear advantages religion holds over more generic ideals such as human rights and equality, for sustaining and transmitting a shared set of values from past to future generations<sup>16</sup>.

15. The importance of religion as a source of social morality was recognized and discussed in considerable detail by some of the most astute observers of modern societies, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber. Of course, I am only giving religion as an obvious example of the sort of resource one would need to foster a strong community in the modern world. I am not ruling out the possibility of strong communities built on *nonreligious* resources, such as shared traditions, values, and rituals grounded in philosophical ideals of human dignity and flourishing.

16. Some of these advantages were pointed out by Tocqueville in his commentary on American democracy over a century and a half ago. See especially, de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. I, part II, chap. 9, where Tocqueville opines, “at the same time that the law permits the American people to do everything, religion prevents them from conceiving everything and forbids them to dare everything” (280).

Of course, not everyone is drawn to communities founded on religious values. But if there is one lesson we can draw from the staying power of small religious communities in the modern world, it is this: something more specific and substantive than a “live and let live” mentality, or the urbane virtues of “niceness” and politeness, are necessary to hold a community together across generations in a modern society. For in a culture that exalts personal independence and self-fulfilment, people need strong reasons to tie their “lot” to a specific group of persons or a specific locality, rather than following their personal “dreams” or tailoring their lives exclusively to their own plans and preferences. And there are few reasons for sacrificing one’s independence stronger than the solidarity one feels for a community of faith.

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The primary purpose of this essay has not been to offer empirical insights into the conditions fueling the reflexive imperative, but to directly consider some of the costs of a culture that imposes such an imperative, and some ways we might offset such costs individually and collectively. The critical component of my thesis is the claim that the culture behind the reflexive imperative, what I call a “culture of choice,” notwithstanding its benefits, tends to undermine our capacity to form enduring communities in which a set of virtues, values, and norms can be transmitted from one generation to another, and in which the dangers of a “soft despotism” of government bureaucracy can be resisted. The constructive component of my thesis is that in order to resist these sorts of tendencies, we need to become more critical of the dominant schedule of priorities and values in our culture, and be willing to collaborate in founding or developing

deeply counter-cultural communities which make it worthwhile for people to reduce their social mobility and turn down opportunities for economic and professional advancement. Only when people see and experience first –or second– hand that a more stable and geographically bound way of life can in fact yield benefits unavailable in a nomadic and individualistic way of life, such as mutual trust, solidarity, enhanced security, and meaningful and enduring friendships, will they be prepared to turn their back on the conventional priorities of mainstream society and throw in their lot with “old-fashioned” communities.

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