TWO IDEALS OF THE GOOD LIFE

How do people respond to the dilemmas structured around shock and naturalization? What strategies are used and what ideals of the good life\(^1\) are pursued? First we need to have a look at two ideals of the good life, which I will call the paradigms of personal identity and of inner nature. Their most influential versions were articulated in literary fiction and philosophical treaties in the classical epoch of modernity – the half centuries before and after 1900 – and most of them are deeply imprinted with the experience of shock.

The paradigm of personal identity emphasizes the need for the subject to secure a fixed identity. The ideal is to construct a more or less stable and unified personal identity, capable of remaining essentially the ‘same’ throughout the shifting situations of life. Crucial is the act of identification, i.e. the conscious act whereby the subject recognizes what it is and wants to be. Such a will is also a will to self-preservation. The self needs to maintain its own unity and continuity, and to protect itself from alienating influences in its environment. A strict dividing line between self and other is established, and qualities with which one does not identify are rejected. Shock is seen as a threatening intrusion of ‘non-identity’ that must be pacified and brought under control. That identity is a widely felt need cannot be denied. It contributes to a sense of security, of responsibility and to self-confidence. The redeeming qualities of the healing of a tormented life by achieving self-integration through securing an identity are not hard to understand.

The paradigm of inner nature, by contrast, seeks the good in the movement of self-transcendence, self-distancing or self-forgetting, in the dissolution of the self that results from the pliancy and openness to the external world and to the impulses of an essentially amorphous inner nature. It demands freedom from conceptual limitations and rigid fixations, which tend to limit, imprison and impoverish the self. ‘Identity’ is
seen as a self-reification. If the thrust of the former paradigm consists in the negation of non-identity, here it is affirmed. The truth-content of this ideal is attested by our memory of our forgetfulness of time and of the self during moments of happiness or strong concentration. When Dostoevsky describes – in *The House of the Dead* – how he is finally able to forget his ‘wretched self’ in the contemplation of a flying lark, he also conveys of sense of how oppressive a fixation on identity might feel.

We will now briefly examine how these paradigms are worked out and elaborated in philosophy and literature, in the ideal of authenticity by Martin Heidegger and in two alternatives to this ideal suggested by Musil and Adorno. These sketches will demonstrate the fruitfulness of the distinction between the two paradigms and offer us useful points of reference for the analysis of literary works in the following chapters.

**THE IDEAL OF AUTHENTICITY**

The paradigm of identity may be exemplified by what is often called the ‘ideal of authenticity’ – that is, the ideal to be true to oneself, to one’s own unique ‘inner voice’ and to one’s own way of being human. The basic conviction of the ideal of authenticity, Charles Taylor writes, is the idea that ‘each individual is different and original, and that this originality determines how he or she ought to live’ (Taylor 1989:374ff.). In this ideal, the claims of identity for stability and self-possession are often combined with a romanticist notion of an inner truth ungraspable by reason. This is true not only of Heidegger – as we will see – but also of those contemporary thinkers such as Taylor who are much more open about the need for conceptual thinking in order to define ‘strong values’ and achieve mutual recognition.

In the idea of authenticity, the two paradigms of identity and inner nature may appear to have been reconciled, but usually the primary emphasis is on identity. There is one claim that this ideal can never give up: that the good consists in being ‘oneself’ and not an ‘other’. The division between self and other is one of its most fundamental presuppositions. Marking the boundary of the self, this division serves as a guarantee of its unity and integrity and to delineate a sphere of unsullied selfhood, the source of authenticity, from the outside world, which constantly threatens to lead the self astray. Nevertheless, the ideal of authenticity attempts, in its own way, to reconcile the demands of identity and inner nature. It can be described as an attempt to satisfy the demands of inner nature from the standpoint of identity. Unlike conventional identities, an ‘authentic’ identity can only be achieved through a rejection of everyday social existence and through a confrontation with what Taylor calls the ‘inner voice’. The search for this ‘inner voice’ demands that one discard the