

Editorial: Self-Authoring

Politicians are clever people. What they are mainly clever at is winning votes. If they weren't, the law of natural selection would kick in, and they would be out of a job. The cleverest of them have an uncanny knack of saying what the great public likes to hear. Even making allowances for all this, what they say can sometimes be alarming.

Thus, what should our attitude be when we hear a leading Conservative saying that he, as a progressive (naturally), is angered by all the various obstacles which stand in the way of 'people being able to be the authors of their own life story'? Is one's reason for objecting to cartels, establishments and producer interests that they stand in the way of self-authoring? Would it make any difference if it were a Liberal or a Labourite who had said this, as well they might have done had they thought of it, especially given that Michael Gove's words seem to have gone down rather well?

One does not have to go along with everything in Bradley's 'My Station and its Duties' to see the shallowness of Mr Gove's thought. But has he completely forgotten Bradley's words that 'the man into whose essence his community with others does not enter, who does not include relation to others in his very being is a fiction'? Once we begin to appreciate the extent we are in our essence constituted and bound by ties and commitments not of our choosing, and also to see the extent to which we ought to measure ourselves against standards and ideals not of our choosing, self-authoring begins to look equally fictional.

It might be said that what is at issue here is a harmless bit of rhetoric, which means little in reality. Unfortunately, in practice Mr Gove's impeccably Sartrean thought means all too much. In a different idiom, no doubt, it is just the sort of thing likely to be said by the man (or woman) who walks out on their children, pleading the need for his (or her) own space, or the drug addict insisting on the legitimacy of his *saison en enfer* by appealing to his right to discover who he is. And maybe some slight whiff of a duty to author one's own life story wafts around every time someone buys a house and proceeds to rip it apart before moving in, which, before the credit crunch, had become almost *de rigueur*. Existentialism and consumerism are closer bedfellows than might at first appear.

To come closer to Michael Gove's own sphere of activity as Shadow Education spokesman, the idea that we should author our own life

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stories will also be echoed by all those educationalists who insist that education is a process in which even five year olds are 'co-participants' in a 'community of enquiry' in which the adults involved are not teachers, but 'co-learners'. Pupils brought up in such an atmosphere will no doubt author what they learn, and not have it imposed on them from without; but they will miss what requires effort, attention and rigorous discipline, the best that has been thought and known, in short, and maybe even learning to read and write properly. This is no exaggeration. Pick up any educational journal or government directive on education and you will find acres of this sort of thing. Whether he realises it or not, Mr Gove's talk of authoring one's own life story is very much part of the unthinking fabric of our time, which is doubtless why his remark has been applauded. He should be less clever in future. As a conservative (small 'c') and as an educational leader, it is just the sort of thing he should be arguing against.