



THE  
ART  
OF  
LIFE

ON LIVING, LOVE AND DEATH

*edited by Jonathan Rutherford*

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Lawrence & Wishart  
LONDON

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# PREFACE

This book is about the ethics of living. It's about how we might invent new ways of speaking about relationships 'between people'. It considers friendship, identity, belonging, virtue, being alone, being alive, death, love, and the sacred.

We are living through a cultural revolution in which the relationships between the local and the global, the political and the ethical, the public and the private are being transformed. In consequence our beliefs and moral values, and our personal experiences and attitudes, are in a state of flux. The old religious authorities and political ideologies which once promised to sustain us through life have been discredited. We find ourselves alone in a society in which we are continually having to make judgements and choices affecting our life course.

The majority of us in the West may no longer fear hunger or destitution, but there are now new dreads of loneliness, failure, insecurity and disenchantment. Wealth and success are no guarantees of happiness. Depression, stress, poverty, no work and over-work, all take their toll on the quality of our lives. Politicians assiduously promote a version of modernity which defines progress in terms of instrumental competence rather than human well being. Their preference tends to be for the imposition of conformity over diversity, for control rather than innovation and creativity, and for organisational efficiency rather than human sympathy: school pupils will learn more, nurses will care more efficiently, workers will work harder. Individuals are valued by their market success or productive usefulness. This reflects an ideology of modernisation which is driven by technological imperatives, not by democracy; by the market, not society.

In reaction to this version of modernity, there has been a resurgence of popular interest in spirituality, objects and spaces of the sacred, and new practices of identity and collectivity. In a culture of individualism and privacy we need a recognition of our mutual interdependence. People can live without ideology, but, as the Polish philosopher Leszek

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Kolakowski has said, they cannot live without beliefs and shared values. We need to win back an ideal of modernity which is about democracy, personal self-fulfilment and collective well being. The Art of Life is intended as a small step in that direction.

Jonathan Rutherford  
February 2000

# INTRODUCTION: MERE LIFE

Jonathan Rutherford

This morning I wrote out a list of what I have to do at work – the phone calls I must make, the individuals I have to speak to, the photocopying to be done, the book to return to the library and the book I must borrow. Divided by a line across the page, I have written the shopping I intend to get after work: milk, margarine, butter, potatoes, vegetables, biscuits, cereals. Sometimes I pin a small piece of paper above my desk at home which lists the lists I must make for the coming week. It is a practice which I imagine will somehow settle and order the future. At least it sets it out task by unforgotten task.

This has been an era of lists – the best ever films, the top one hundred records, the sexiest men, the best dressed women, the building of the century, the twelve step AA programme, the *Cosmopolitan* lists of dos and don'ts in sex, life and love. In an age of uncertainty lists make us feel secure by ordering the contingent and making it comprehensible and manageable.

The past three decades have witnessed an increasing preoccupation with identity, an attempt to give ourselves meaning and representation by creating an itinerary of our lives. We endeavour to fasten ourselves in a narrative of memory. The past is excavated to elicit the continuity of our selves, our languages and cultures, a desire to leave nothing to chance, to thwart the vicissitudes of life and evade mortality: do not forget, remember this, remember me. Comfort in the past, together with unease with the present, has led to nostalgia and an anxious attempt to evade the turbulence of modernity. And yet identity is something more than solace in the face of an insecure future. Nietzsche argued that self-knowledge is self-creation. Richard Rorty describes identity making as an ethical practice of 'changing the way we talk, and therefore changing what we want to do and what we think we are'.<sup>1</sup> Identity-making is a process of coming to know

oneself. It does involve looking to the past, not simply to secure oneself within a safe narrative, but to discover the causes that have made us. Moreover, history connects us as individuals not just to our own personal pasts, but to the social past. It demands we make interpretations of our life experiences. And in identity-making we are also agents of history: we draw on the past, imagine the future and transform the present. 'That is what the modern search is for: where to go next', writes Theodore Zeldin in *An Intimate History of Humanity*: 'The stones of history need to be reused to construct roads which lead to where one wants to go'.

Where do we want to go? How are we to live and what are the things that matter to us which will provide us with our guiding principles? In the affluent parts of the world, we have today an historically unprecedented level of choice, affluence, mobility. Perversely this is our problem. We live with a crisis of choice in a society of secular individualism in which collective ideals expressing social solidarity and values have been dissipated. After two millennia the answer of institutionalised religion to the need for community – the dictates of a monotheistic faith or belief in the omnipotent authority of god – have, for many, come and gone. The sociologist Emile Durkheim described sacred things as being collective ideals which have fixed themselves on material objects, ideas and representations awakened in us by the spectacle of society. But this description suggests a traditional and homogeneous culture, and a relatively unchanging society, in which each individual knew their place. The Reformation began modernity's transformation of this kind of society. The Protestant revolution of the seventeenth century abstracted religion from people's everyday lives. The meaning of life was no longer fixed, but became a task of individual self-reflection and the examination and interpretation of god's word. The sacred gradually came to reside in the mind rather than the body and community. By the end of the eighteenth century there was a growing belief that individuals were endowed with a moral sense. Morality was not simply the edict of ecclesiastical authority or the calculation of divine reward or punishment; it was a voice within. The growth of this individualism raised the question of what were the bonds which held people together in society.

During this period the Romantic poets began to redefine the idea of the sacred. For them the ineffable quality of human existence was the sublime, an intimation of something which exists beyond words and which accounts for the mystery of human life. It was a representation



of the individual yearning for life and connection to something more than the self. Today we are left, like Mathew Arnold, listening to the melancholy roar of the receding tide of the sea of faith. In Arnold's poem 'Dover Beach', written in 1851, he concludes: 'And here we are as on a darkling plain/ Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,/Where ignorant armies clash by night.' For him the substitute for the loss of religious community, and the protection it offered from nihilism and arbitrary violence, is love and culture: a deep and abiding belief in the goodness of other human beings, and the expression of this faith in the finest works of art and literature. But that belief too, in our democratic age, is viewed with suspicion, as a tattered and dated example of the imposition of class cultural authority.

We can literally see our world today, in the image of earth taken from space. Globalisation has compressed space and time; tourism colonises regions of the earth once inaccessible and remote from the west; media industries lift cultures from their localities and standardise them. But all this seeing on our part does not guarantee our understanding, or even our recognition of other people different from ourselves. The paradox of globalisation is that it has encouraged our defensive concern for the local, the familiar and intimate. In contemporary post-industrial societies we shun grand narratives, global schemes, moral absolutes and big ideas, and instead have turned inward, into our selves. We eschew political parties and public ideologies. Social commentators have lamented this preoccupation with personal life and self-fulfilment as a form of narcissism encouraged by the desire for personal gain and transient satisfaction. Modern capitalism and mass entertainment, they argue, have created a solipsistic world of consumerism which promotes style over substance, image over content. Popular culture is commodified and meaningless and individuals have become rootless and caught in a spiral of transient commitments and failed obligations

This is too simplistic a description of modern western life. It is true that there is widespread cynicism about parliamentary democracy, particularly amongst the younger generation, and that notions of the public good have tended to be displaced by the ideology of individual choice. It is also true that capitalism has extended commodification into increasing areas of social life and culture, just as Marx foresaw over one hundred years ago. The sociological fact of individualisation and privatisation is largely a consequence of the resurgence of neo-liberal capitalism. But this phenomenon is also shaped by people's resistance