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PHILOSOPHY

The first remarkable feature of this book is that it is translated from the original French. Charles Larmore is a philosopher working at Brown University, where he is the W. Duncan MacMillan Family Professor in the Humanities, and is well known as the author of several important books in English, including The Autonomy of Morality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). It turns out that he is Francophone as well as Anglophone, and the present book first appeared in France as Les Pratiques du Moi, where it received the Grand Prix de Philosophie from the Académie Française in 2004. Indeed, the French connection runs very deep in the book in that there are discussions of such authors as Montaigne, Stendhal, Valéry, Proust, Flaubert, Sartre, Foucault, and Ricoeur, along with notable Anglophone philosophers such as John Rawls, Bernard Williams, G.E.M. Anscombe, Alasdair MacIntyre and John McDowell. If there is anyone who still thinks there is a deep divide between Anglophone philosophy and the traditions of Continental Europe, this book serves as their refutation.

The second remarkable feature (not unexpected) is how good the book is. Larmore offers a thorough exploration of the nature of the self in the context of a post-Cartesian rejection of theories of self-knowledge that would see it as a form of introspection upon a transparent subjective reality. The Cartesian metaphysic of mind had also encouraged a notion of authenticity that defined it as a being true to some putative inner core of one’s being. It is this notion of authenticity that is the object of Larmore’s critique. He uses Stendhal to articulate the tension between understanding the self as socially formed by living a project of imitating the models and ideals set by others and seeing the self as seeking to be true to itself and to constitute itself as a unique individual. Conceived in this way this tension inevitability produces “bad faith”, as Sartre had argued. Reflection on one’s own subjectivity is the source of the problem. When one reflects one inevitably uses categories that the conventions of one’s society makes available. One sees oneself, as it were,
from the point of view of an observer and understands oneself in the
same categories that anyone else would use in understanding one. But this
would seem to make it inevitable that one's conception of oneself will be
conventional and thus inauthentic.

However, the tension need not be conceived in this way. That the self is
formed through imitation with social models is in no way a threat to the
possibility of living authentically. Authenticity does not consist in wanting to be
different from others. It consists in acknowledging and avowing what one is
because one has good reason to do so. One may be like others but one makes
oneself one's own self by committing to that identity and the roles it
encompasses.

The key to this thesis is that the self is an active engagement with the
world rather than a fixed reality of any kind. The core of one's being is not
predetermined -- whether by one's own existential history or by one's imitation
of others -- but is constantly being made by the decisions one makes.
According to Larmore there are two ways of being authentic. The first is to be
"natural" where this means to be absorbed and engaged in one's experience in
such a way as to leave no scope for reflection. In this way the distortions that
reflection can bring with it are avoided. But the more interesting way, for
Larmore, is to embrace the inevitability of social formation and to commit to
those images of selfhood which one has good reason to embrace.

The notion of "reason" here is all important and leads to the
philosophically most sophisticated aspect of Larmore's book: the normativist
theory of subjectivity. The role of reason is central to two kinds of reflection
that Larmore describes. The first of these is "cognitive reflection" in which one
tries to understand oneself and one's place in the world better. It is in this form
of reflection that one cannot avoid using the categories and models of selfhood
which one's culture presents to one. Larmore argues persuasively that there is
no Cartesian "privileged access" to oneself in cognitive reflection and that one's
knowledge of oneself is as fallible as that knowledge that others might have of
one. But the key difference between this kind of reflection and the second kind:
"practical reflection", is that the latter aims at deciding what one should do
rather than at discovering who one is. In this context reason takes on the
practical task of understanding the world as a field of possibilities and
obligations and oneself as a rational and responsible agent in that world. In this
sphere, more than in any other, the self acts on practical reasons. But reasons
are inherently public and generalizable if they are to be reasons at all. If
something is a reason for me to do X, it must be a reason for anyone to do X in
similar circumstances. Reasons are "real" in that they are binding upon all of
those to whom they apply. It is because the self is an agent in the world that it
is constituted by being responsive to the reasons that apply to it. Authenticity
consists in committing to the normativity of those reasons. One is the self that
one has to be insofar as one acknowledges those reasons and acts in
conformity to them. There is no contradiction here between the notion of
authenticity and the notion of conformity. Authenticity consists in the clear-
headed and practical acknowledgement of the reasons that apply to one.

The depth and subtlety of Larmore's argument cannot be captured in a
brief summary. It is enough here to say that the implications are profound.
Larmore himself makes comments on the conceptions of love and of virtue
which flow from it. He discusses the instability of practical reflection arising
from the tendency to adopt a view of oneself as another, and he repudiates the
Socratic thesis of the rationality of having a plan for one's life. Wisdom, he
says, consists in seeing that life cannot be planned and that the goods of life
include those which we could not have anticipated. To live authentically is to
embrace the practical challenge of living in a world of contingency rather than
to adopt a rational plan of life or an idealised self-image.

This book represents, in any language, philosophy at its best.

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Australia. He is the author of numerous books and journal articles.

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