

# Modernism and the Career: An Investigation of Nonconformity and Self-Invention

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# 1 Thesis

In this paper, I will proceed to describe the greatest strength and the greatest weakness of what we have discussed as the “project of non-conformity and self-invention.” To do so, I will first define the ideas of non-conformity and self-invention in modernism, which allows us to explore specific qualities characterizing non-conformity and self-invention, with these qualities taking on extended meanings in context of a “career” in the modern world defined by “modernism.”

The focus of this essay will investigate the strengths and weaknesses of non-conformity and self-invention, and relating these strengths and weaknesses into one’s career in the modern world. By extending the significance of these strengths of non-conformity and self-invention into notions of career, we better frame the challenges of the working man in the modern world. This framework is necessary in helping us answer fundamental questions of how to identify worthwhile values in working society, how to best achieve those values in a working society, and how to maintain those values in an overarching project concerning the conduct of life.

## 2 A Definition of Modernism

Unger defines modernism as a moment in the transformation of a Christian romantic idea of the self. This definition carries several implications. For one thing, an established Christian-romantic tradition represents an assumption of existing societal order, where certain principles like love and faith are established as prevailing values for the individual to strive for. The very “transformation” of a Christian romantic idea in modernism suggests that modernism is colored with new developments deviating from original, pure Christian romantic ideas, as these developments and events over the course of human history have created new paradigms that original definitions may have been unable to account for. However, these new developments do not war against Christian romantic ideas of the self because such war-

ring would not constitute a transformation, but provide an antithesis, when framing this relationship under Hegel's "dialectic."

Using this definition of modernism, non-conformity and self-invention present a fundamental characterization of the individual never being content with the world, that is, according to Unger, "the man is never at home in the world." To make this world more homely, individuals can transform the world by infusing more faith, hope, and love into this world, as such ideas are consistent with the values of the Christian-romantic tradition.

The striving of these Christian-romantic values creates nonconformity in that the individual is unwilling to accept a certain social order that characterizes the current world, because social order is often at odds with a deeper encounter with the ideas of faith, hope, and love. Moreover, because these ideas of faith, hope, and love are personalized to the individual experience, the manner in which individuals define themselves by the way they strive for these ideals forms the basis of self-invention in this world of modernism.

### **3 Christian-Romantic Traditions and the Career of the Working Man**

We can identify the parallels between the journeys of the hero in early Romantic tradition with that of the working man embarking on a career in contemporaneous society. Using this parallelization, we can better identify elements of non-conformity and self-invention characteristic of modernism for the working man in today's society.

In typical Christian-romantic tradition, the familiar protagonist is one of a young adventurer who tries to remove the specific obstacle to human happiness, usually one that stands in the way of personal happiness. Through this journey of seeking personal happiness, the individual experiences greater understanding of the self, casting away a certain naivety of initial expectations for how the journey will unfold. Despite the forces that clash with the individual's aspirations, the individual still retains a basic confidence and faith in morality

and the self at the end. In this way, the values of the individual are strengthened over the course of this journey.

A career is no less different in the sense that the career is a long journey where the hero, in this context the working man, experiences many obstacles that stand in the way of his own personal happiness. A fulfilling career exhibits the ultimate narrative arc of the Christian-romantic tradition, where the working man is able to build upon his work and experiences to achieve a long-lasting happiness and celebration of personal values accumulated over many years of sustained and devoted effort. A fulfilling career incorporates great challenges and obstacles that are not trivial, for these challenges ultimately provide the greatest impetus for strengthening an individual's value by the end of this journey.

In both the hero's quest within Christian-romantic tradition and the working man's career within contemporaneous society, elements of self-invention and non-conformity appear. Self-invention exists in that the working man has the option to choose his career, and to make decisions that reflect deeper values over the course of this career. By looking back upon this career, the working man is able to identify a sense of self that has been "invented" by these decisions.

Finally, the working man's career exhibits possibility for non-conformity by how the individual is able to fight against obstacles of an impersonal society that threaten the accomplishment of the individual's goal. The creation of a fulfilling career demands not giving in to society's pressures until that vision of happiness is truly realized, to ultimately not conform. Having established non-conformity and self-invention as elements prevalent in both the Christian-romantic tradition and contemporaneous society, we now proceed to analyze strengths and weaknesses within each of these values. These strengths and weaknesses will help us identify the underpinnings of an optimal balance and the ultimate achievement of a fulfilling career in contemporaneous society.

## 4 Relating the Strengths and Weaknesses of Nonconformity and Self-Invention

The strengths of self-invention and non-conformity are largely attributed to its necessity in realizing the values of the Christian-romantic world that lead to a fulfilling career. As stated in the previous section, a fulfilling career is one predicated on removing obstacles and not conforming to the pressures of society. This struggle against obstacles and the pressures of society ultimately leads to the triumph of the individual by removing these obstacles in achieving a truer, longer-lasting happiness.

Seeing that the strengths of nonconformity and self-invention are readily apparent in the path to a fulfilling career, it may be important to acknowledge that adhering too strongly to these values of nonconformity and self-invention can lead to self-destructive effects, thus indicating a certain weakness within nonconformity and self-invention.

Self-invention and nonconformity, when pursued in excess, have the potential to incur delusion and disillusionment. A classic example would be the story of Miguel Cervantes's Don Quixote, who misrepresents certain realities of the world as obstacles to overcome. For example, Don Quixote mistakes windmills for ferocious giants and designates Aldonza Lorenzo, a neighboring farm girl, as a princess.

Don Quixote exhibits self-invention by the way he defines his challenges and by the way he proceeds to overcome these challenges. Don Quixote is indeed striving for faith, hope, and love in his own world, a striving that is consistent with self-invention in the Christian-romantic sense. Moreover, because Don Quixote contends against these challenges, Don Quixote exhibits nonconformity by not giving in to the pressures of these challenges, to ultimately not accept defeat.

While Don Quixote exhibits nonconformity and self-invention in this sense, his nonconformity and self-invention does not feel quite right as how we interpreted nonconformity and self-invention in the Christian-romantic sense. It is clear to the reader that Don Quixote

lives under a certain delusion where he misrepresents his relationships with the world, a misrepresentation that makes him look less like a hero on a journey but more as an insane individual creating chaos in the world.

When reading Don Quixote, we come to understand that while Don Quixote is trying to create faith, hope, and love in his own world, he is unable to instill faith, hope, and love in a broader sense, one where the worlds of everybody around him are all instilled with greater faith, hope, and love. We come to understand that while maintaining and striving individual ideals is commendatory, these ideals are worth striving up to a fault. When these ideals are inconsistent with moving the faith, hope, and love of the world at large, perhaps these ideals were more self-delusional.

In addition to the weakness of self-delusion in nonconformity and self-invention, a major problem is also the possibility that the ideals and goals harbored by the individual actually produces no true triumph of happiness for the individual, leaving the individual a “hopeless” romantic.

One of these mishaps and illusions lies in the temptation to recreate the past amidst the struggles of the present. We can view Don Quixote’s journeys as the projection of inner desires to realize past glories and stories akin to that of King Arthur and the knights of the round table. Don Quixote, rather than assessing the true nature of his situation and how the times have changed, lives with his sights set on the past. By doing so, Don Quixote is unable to truly realize a unique vision of faith, hope, and love that is isolated from the constraints of past events. In this way, a statement is made that in order for faith, hope, and love to possess its true meaning in the Christian-romantic sense for the individual, it must take on a timeless quality, transcending past precedence and also transcending future obstacles.

## 5 Nonconformity and Self-Invention in the Career

Just as how modernism is a transformation of Christian-romantic ideas, so too is the modern career a transformation of the hero's journey. While technology, politics, and culture have significantly changed from the times of Christian-romanticism, the fundamental challenge of the individual trying to realize ideals of hope, love, and faith amidst impersonal societal obstacles still remains the same.

A fulfilling career has the capability of establishing hope, love, and faith amidst impersonal societal obstacles. The career is characterized by a search for a justified task where the individual is able to elevate his craft and devote his relationship to a certain form of work, asserting his self-invention by the quality of work he produces. This career is often at odds with the conventions of modern society, where the individual's aspirations do not conform to the guidelines of work in present-day society. As a result, society will initially reject the individual's work, resulting in obstacles that prevent the individual from truly realizing career aspirations.

At the same time, if the individual becomes too self-absorbed in his career, he is prone to experience the weaknesses of self-invention and nonconformity, becoming a slave to his work, driven by obsessive tendencies. These obsessive tendencies are no different than delusion, for the individual has constructed a world that has deviated so far from the realities of hope, love, and faith of the broader world such that the individual's world ceases to possess meaning any more. Such a career prospect is not desirable.

Ultimately, the full narrative arc of Christian-romanticism manifests itself by how the individual maintains his convictions in his career aspirations, perfecting his craft without overextending his pursuit of craft into that of obsession. It is with these ideas of balancing the strengths and weaknesses of nonconformity and self-invention that allows an individual to live meaningfully through a fulfilling career and to embark on a hero's journey in the modern world.