

Introduction: On Living in a Liquid Modern World

In skating over thin ice, our safety is in our speed.
Ralph Waldo Emerson, *On Prudence*

'Liquid life' and 'liquid modernity' are intimately connected. 'Liquid life' is a kind of life that tends to be lived in a liquid modern society. 'Liquid modern' is a society in which the conditions under which its members act change faster than it takes the ways of acting to consolidate into habits and routines. Liquidity of life and that of society feed and reinvigorate each other. Liquid life, just like liquid modern society, cannot keep its shape or stay on course for long.

In a liquid modern society, individual achievements cannot be solidified into lasting possessions because, in no time, assets turn into liabilities and abilities into disabilities. Conditions of action and strategies designed to respond to them age quickly and become obsolete before the actors have a chance to learn them properly. Learning from experience in order to rely on strategies and tactical moves deployed successfully in the past is for that reason ill advised: past tests cannot take account of the rapid and mostly unpredicted (perhaps unpredictable) changes in circumstances. Extrapolating from past events to predict future trends becomes ever more risky and all too often misleading. Trustworthy calculations are increasingly difficult to make, while foolproof prognoses are all but unimaginable: most if not all variables in the

equations are unknown, whereas no estimates of their future trends can be treated as fully and truly reliable.

In short: liquid life is a precarious life, lived under conditions of constant uncertainty. The most acute and stubborn worries that haunt such a life are the fears of being caught napping, of failing to catch up with fast-moving events, of being left behind, of overlooking 'use by' dates, of being saddled with possessions that are no longer desirable, of missing the moment that calls for a change of tack before crossing the point of no return. Liquid life is a succession of new beginnings – yet precisely for that reason it is the swift and painless endings, without which new beginnings would be unthinkable, that tend to be its most challenging moments and most upsetting headaches. Among the arts of liquid modern living and the skills needed to practise them, getting rid of things takes precedence over their acquisition.

As the Observer cartoonist Andy Riley puts it, the annoyance is 'reading articles about the wonders of downshifting when you haven't even managed to upshift yet.' One needs to hurry with the 'upshifting' if one wants to taste the delights of 'downshifting'. Getting the site ready for 'downshifting' bestows meaning on the 'upshifting' bit, and becomes its main purpose; it is by the relief brought by a smooth and painless 'downshifting' that the quality of 'upshifting' will be ultimately judged . . .

The briefing which the practitioners of liquid modern life need most (and are most often offered by the expert counsellors in the life arts) is not how to start or open, but how to finish or close. Another Observer columnist, with a tongue only halfway to his cheek, lists the updated rules for 'achieving closure' of partnerships (the episodes no doubt more difficult to 'close' than any other – yet the ones where the partners all too often wish and fight to close them, and so where there is unsurprisingly a particularly keen demand for expert help). The list starts from 'Remember bad stuff. Forget the good' and ends with 'Meet someone new', passing midway the command 'Delete all electronic correspondence'. Throughout, the emphasis falls on forgetting, deleting, dropping and replacing.

Perhaps the description of liquid modern life as a series of new beginnings is an inadvertent accessory to a conspiracy of sorts; by replicating a commonly shared illusion it helps to hide its most closely guarded (since shameful, if only residually so) secret.

Perhaps a more adequate way to narrate that life is to tell the story of successive endings. And perhaps the glory of the successfully lived liquid life would be better conveyed by the inconspicuousness of the graves that mark its progress than by the ostentation of gravestones that commemorate the contents of the tombs.

In a liquid modern society, the waste-disposal industry takes over the commanding positions in liquid life's economy. The survival of that society and the well-being of its members hang on the swiftness with which products are consigned to waste and the speed and efficiency of waste removal. In that society nothing may claim exemption from the universal rule of disposability, and nothing may be allowed to outstay its welcome. The steadfastness, stickiness, viscosity of things inanimate and animate alike are the most sinister and terminal of dangers, sources of the most frightening of fears and the targets of the most violent of assaults.

Life in a liquid modern society cannot stand still. It must modernize (read: go on stripping itself daily of attributes that are past their sell-by dates and go on dismantling/shedding the identities currently assembled/put on) – or perish. Nudged from behind by the horror of expiry, life in a liquid modern society no longer needs to be pulled forward by imagined wonders at the far end of modernizing labours. The need here is to run with all one's strength just to stay in the same place and away from the rubbish bin where the hindmost are doomed to land.

'Creative destruction' is the fashion in which liquid life proceeds, but what that term glosses over and passes by in silence is that what this creation destroys are other forms of life and so obliquely the humans who practise them. Life in the liquid modern society is a sinister version of the musical chairs game, played for real. The true stake in the race is (temporary) rescue from being excluded into the ranks of the destroyed and avoiding being consigned to waste. And with the competition turning global, the running must now be done round a global track.

The greatest chances of winning belong to the people who circulate close to the top of the global power pyramid, to whom space matters little and distance is not a bother; people at home in many places but in no one place in particular. They are as light, sprightly and volatile as the increasingly global and extraterritorial trade and finances that assisted at their birth and sustain their nomadic

existence. As Jacques Attali described them, 'they do not own factories, lands, nor occupy administrative positions. Their wealth comes from a portable asset: their knowledge of the laws of the labyrinth.' They 'love to create, play and be on the move'. They live in a society 'of volatile values, carefree about the future, egoistic and hedonistic'. They 'take novelty as good tidings, precariousness as value, instability as imperative, hybridity as richness'.² In varying degrees, they all master and practise the art of 'liquid life': acceptance of disorientation, immunity to vertigo and adaptation to a state of dizziness, tolerance for an absence of itinerary and direction, and for an indefinite duration of travel.

They try hard, though with mixed success, to follow the pattern set by Bill Gates, that paragon of business success, whom Richard Sennett described as marked by 'his willingness to destroy what he has made' and his 'tolerance for fragmentation', as 'someone who has the confidence to dwell in disorder, someone who flourishes in the midst of dislocation' and someone positioning himself 'in a network of possibilities', rather than 'paralysing' himself in 'one particular job'.³ Their ideal horizon is likely to be Eutopia, one of Italo Calvino's Invisible Cities whose inhabitants, the day they 'feel the grip of weariness and no one can any longer bear his job, his relatives, his house and his life', 'move to the next city' where 'each will take a new job, a different wife, will see another landscape on opening the window, and will spend his time with different pastimes, friends, gossip'.⁴

(Looseness of attachment) and revocability of engagement are the precepts guiding everything in which they engage and to which they are attached. Presumably addressing such people, the anonymous columnist of the Observer who hides under the penname of the Barefoot Doctor counselled his readers to do everything they do 'with grace'. Taking a hint from Lao-tzu, the oriental prophet of detachment and tranquillity, he described the life stance most likely to achieve that effect:

- * Flowing like water. . . you swiftly move along, never fighting the current, stopping long enough to become stagnant or clinging to the riverbank or rocks – the possessions, situations or people that pass through your life – not even trying to hold on to your opinions or world view, but simply sticking lightly yet intelligently to whatever presents itself as you pass by and then graciously letting it go without grasping. . .⁵

Faced with such players, the rest of the participants of the game – and particularly the involuntary ones among them, those who don't 'love' or cannot afford 'to be on the move' – stand little chance. Joining in the game is not a realistic choice for them – but neither have they the choice of not trying. Flitting between flowers in search of the most fragrant is not their option; they are stuck to places where flowers, fragrant or not, are rare – and so can only watch haplessly as the few that there are fade or rot. The suggestion to 'stick lightly to whatever presents itself' and 'graciously let it go' would sound at best like a cruel joke in their ears, but mostly like a heartless sneer.

Nevertheless, 'stick lightly' they must, as 'possessions, situations and people' will keep slipping away and vanishing at a breathtaking speed whatever they do; whether they try to slow them down or not is neither here nor there. 'Let them go' they must (though, unlike Bill Gates, with hardly any pleasure), but whether they do it graciously or with a lot of wailing and teeth-gnashing is beside the point. They might be forgiven for suspecting some connection between that comely lightness and grace paraded by those who glide by and their own unchosen ugly torpidity and impotence to move.

Their indolence is, indeed, unchosen. Lightness and grace come together with freedom – freedom to move, freedom to choose, freedom to stop being what one already is and freedom to become what one is not yet. Those on the receiving side of the new planetary mobility don't have such freedom. They can count neither on the forbearance of those from whom they would rather keep their distance, nor on the tolerance of those to whom they would wish to be closer. For them, there are neither unguarded exits nor hospitably open entry gates. They belong: those to whom or with whom they belong view their belonging as their non-negotiable and incontrovertible duty (even if disguised as their inalienable right) – whereas those whom they would wish to join see their belonging rather as their similarly non-negotiable, irreversible and unredeemable *fate*. The first wouldn't let them go, whereas the second wouldn't let them in.

Between the start and the (unlikely ever to happen) arrival is a desert, a void, a wilderness, a yawning abyss into which only a few would muster the courage to leap of their own free will, unpushed. Centripetal and centrifugal, gravitational and repelling

forces combine to keep the restless in place and stop the discontented short of restlessness. Those hot-headed or desperate enough to try to defy the odds stacked against them risk the lot of outlaws and outcasts, and pay for their audacity in the hard currency of bodily misery and psychical trauma – a price which only a few would choose to pay of their own free will, unforced. * Andrzej Szahaj, a most perceptive analyst of the highly uneven odds in contemporary identity games, goes as far as to suggest that the decision to leave the community of belonging is in quite numerous cases downright unimaginable; he goes on to remind his incredulous Western readers that in the remote past of Europe, for instance in ancient Greece, exile from the *polis* of belonging was viewed as the ultimate, indeed capital, **punishment**.⁶ At least the ancients were cool-headed and preferred straight talk. But the millions of sans papiers, stateless, refugees, exiles, asylum or bread-and-water seekers of our times, two millennia later, would have little difficulty in recognizing themselves in that talk.

At both extremes of the hierarchy (and in the main body of the pyramid locked between them in a double-bind) people are haunted by the problem of identity. At the top, the problem is to choose the best pattern from the many currently on offer, to assemble the separately sold parts of the kit, and to fasten them together neither too lightly (lest the unsightly, outdated and aged bits that are meant to be hidden underneath show through at the seams) nor too tightly (lest the patchwork resists being dismantled at short notice when the time for dismantling comes – as it surely will). At the bottom, the problem is to cling fast to the sole identity available and to hold its bits and parts together while fighting back the erosive forces and disruptive pressures, repairing the constantly crumbling walls and digging the trenches deeper. For all the others suspended between the extremes, the problem is a mixture of the two.

Taking a hint from Joseph Brodsky's profile of materially affluent yet spiritually impoverished and famished contemporaries, tired like the residents of Calvino's Eutopia of everything they have enjoyed thus far (like yoga, Buddhism, Zen, contemplation, Mao) and so beginning to dig (with the help of state-of-the-art technology, of course) into the mysteries of Sufism, kabbala or Sunnism

to beef up their flagging desire to desire, Andrzej Stasiuk, one of the most perceptive archivists of contemporary cultures and their discontents, develops a typology of the 'spiritual lumpenproletariat' and suggests that its ranks swell fast and that its torments trickle profusely down from the top, saturating ever thicker layers of the social pyramid.⁷

Those affected by the 'spiritual lumpenproletarian' virus live in the present and by the present. They live to survive (as long as possible) and to get satisfaction (as much of it as possible). Since the world is not their home ground and not their property (having relieved themselves of the burdens of heritage, they feel free but somehow disinherited – robbed of something, betrayed by someone), they see nothing wrong in exploiting it at will; exploitation feels like nothing more odious than stealing back the stolen.

Flattened into a perpetual present and filled to the brim with survival-and-gratification concerns (it is gratification to survive, the purpose of survival being more gratification), the world inhabited by 'spiritual lumpenproletarians' leaves no room for worries about anything other than what can be, at least in principle, consumed and relished on the spot, here and now.

Eternity is the obvious outcast. Not infinity, though; as long as it lasts, the present may be stretched beyond any limit and accommodate as much as once was hoped to be experienced only in the fullness of time (in Stasiuk's words, 'it is highly probable that the quantity of digital, celluloid and analogue beings met in the course of a bodily life comes close to the volume which eternal life and resurrection of the flesh could offer'). Thanks to the hoped-for infinity of mundane experiences yet to come, eternity may not be missed; its loss may not even be noticed.

Speed, not duration, matters. With the right speed, one can consume the whole of eternity inside the continuous present of earthly life. Or this at least is what the 'spiritual lumpenproletarians' try, and hope, to achieve. The trick is to compress eternity so that it may fit, whole, into the **timespan** of individual life. The quandary of a mortal life in an immortal universe has been finally resolved: one can now stop worrying about things eternal and lose nothing of eternity's wonders – indeed one can exhaust whatever eternity could possibly offer, all in the **timespan** of one mortal life. One cannot perhaps take the time-lid off mortal life; but one can (or at least try to) remove all limits from the volume of

satisfactions to be experienced before reaching that other, irremovable limit.

In a bygone world in which time moved much slower and resisted acceleration, people tried to bridge the agonizing gap between the poverty of a short and mortal life and the infinite wealth of the eternal universe by hopes of reincarnation or resurrection. In our world that knows or admits of no limits to acceleration, such hopes may well be discarded. If only one moves quickly enough and does not stop to look back and count the gains and losses, one can go on squeezing into the **timespan** of mortal life ever more lives; perhaps as many as eternity could supply. What else, if not to act on that belief, are the unstoppable, compulsive and obsessive reconditioning, refurbishment, recycling, overhaul and reconstitution of identity for? '**Identity**', after all, is (just as the reincarnation and resurrection of olden times used to be) about the possibility of 'being born again' – of stopping being what one is and turning into someone one is not yet.

The good news is that this replacement of worries about eternity with an identity-recycling bustle comes complete with patented and ready-to-use DIY tools that promise to make the job fast and effective while needing no special skills and calling for little if any difficult and awkward labour. Self-sacrifice and self-immolation, unbearably long and unrelenting self-drilling and self-taming, waiting for gratification that feels interminable and practising virtues that seem to exceed endurance – all those exorbitant costs of past therapies – are no longer required. New and improved diets, fitness gadgets, changes of wallpaper, parquets put where carpets used to lie (or vice versa), replacements of a mini with an SUV (or the other way round), a T-shirt with a blouse and monochromatic with richly colour-saturated sofa covers or dresses, sizes of breasts moved up or down, sneakers changed, brands of booze and daily routines adapted to the latest fashion and a strikingly novel vocabulary adopted in which to couch public confessions of intimate soul-stirrings . . . these will do nicely. And, as a last resort, on the vexingly far horizon loom the wonders of gene overhaul. Whatever happens, there is no need to despair. If all those magic wands prove not to be enough or, despite all their user-friendliness, are found too cumbersome or too slow, there are drugs promising an instant, even if brief, visit

to eternity (hopefully with other drugs guaranteeing a return ticket).

Liquid life is consuming life. It casts the world and all its animate and inanimate fragments as objects of consumption: that is, objects that lose their usefulness (and so their lustre, attraction, seductive power and worth) in the course of being used. It shapes the judging and evaluating of all the animate and inanimate fragments of the world after the pattern of objects of consumption.

Objects of consumption have a limited expectation of useful life and once the limit has been passed they are unfit for consumption; since 'being good for consumption' is the sole feature that defines their function, they are then unfit altogether – useless. Once unfit, they ought to be removed from the site of consuming life (consigned to biodegradation, incinerated, transferred into the care of waste-disposal companies) to clear it for other, still unused objects of consumption.

To save yourself from the embarrassment of lagging behind, of being stuck with something no one else would be seen with, of being caught napping, of missing the train of progress instead of riding it, you must remember that it is in the nature of things to call for vigilance, not loyalty. In the liquid modern world, loyalty is a cause of shame, not pride. Link to your internet provider first thing in the morning, and you will be reminded of that sober truth by the main item on the list of daily news: 'Ashamed of your Mobile? Is your phone so old that you're embarrassed to answer it? Upgrade to one you can be proud of.' The **flipside** of the commandment 'to upgrade' to a state-of-consumer-correctness mobile is, of course, the prohibition any longer to be seen holding the one to which you upgraded last time.

Waste is the staple and arguably the most profuse product of the liquid modern society of consumers; among consumer society's industries waste production is the most massive and the most immune to crisis. That makes waste disposal one of the two major challenges liquid life has to confront and tackle. The other major challenge is the threat of being consigned to waste. In a world filled with consumers and the objects of their consumption, life is hovering uneasily between the joys of consumption and the horrors of the rubbish heap. Life may be at all times a **living-towards-death**, but in a liquid modern society **living-towards-the-**

refuse dump may be a more immediate and more energy-and-labour-consuming prospect and concern of the living.

For the denizen of the liquid modern society, every supper – unlike that referred to by Hamlet in his reply to the King's inquiry about Polonius's whereabouts – is an occasion 'where he eats' and 'where he is eaten'.⁸ No longer is there a disjunction between the two acts. 'And' has replaced the 'either-or'. In the society of consumers, no one can escape being an object of consumption – and not just consumption by maggots, and not only at the far end of consuming life. Hamlet in liquid modern times would probably modify Shakespeare's Hamlet's rule, denying the maggots' privileged role in the consumption of the consumers. He would perhaps start, like the original Hamlet, stating that 'we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves. . . ' – but then conclude: 'to fat other creatures'.

'Consumers' and 'objects of consumption' are the conceptual poles of a continuum along which all members of the society of consumers are plotted and along which they move, to and fro, daily. Some may be cast most of the time particularly near to the commodities' pole – but no consumer can be fully and truly insured against falling into its close, too close for comfort, proximity. Only as commodities, only if they are able to demonstrate their own use-value, can consumers gain access to consuming life. In liquid life, the distinction between consumers and objects of consumption is all too often momentary and ephemeral, and always conditional. We may say that role reversal is the rule here, though even that statement distorts the realities of liquid life, in which the two roles intertwine, blend and merge.

It is not clear which of the two factors (attractions of the 'consumer' pole, or the repulsion of the 'waste' pole) is the more powerful moving force of liquid life. No doubt both factors cooperate in shaping the daily logic and – bit by bit, episode by episode – the itinerary of that life. Fear adds strength to desire. However attentively it focuses on its immediate objects, desire cannot help but remain aware – consciously, half-consciously or subconsciously – of that other awesome stake hanging on its vigour, determination and resourcefulness. However intensely concentrated on the *object* of desire, the eye of the consumer cannot but glance sideways at the commodity value of the desiring *subject*. Liquid life means constant self-scrutiny, self-critique and

self-censure. Liquid life feeds on the self's dissatisfaction with *itself*.

Critique is self-referential and inward directed; and so is the reform which such self-critique demands and prompts. It is in the name of such inward-looking and inward-targeted reform that the outside world is preyed upon, ransacked and ravaged. Liquid life endows the outside world, indeed everything in the world that is not a part of the self, with a primarily instrumental value; deprived of or denied a value of its own, that world derives all its value from its service to the cause of self-reform, and by their contribution to that self-reform the world and each of its elements are judged. Parts of the world unfit to serve or no longer able to serve are either left outside the realm of relevance and unattended, or actively discarded and swept away. Such parts are but the waste from self-reforming zeal, the rubbish tip being their natural destination. In terms of liquid life's reasoning their preservation would be irrational; their right to be preserved for their own sake cannot be easily argued, let alone proved, by liquid life's logic.

It is for that reason that the advent of liquid modern society spelled the demise of utopias centred on society and more generally of the idea of the 'good society'. If liquid life prompts an interest in societal reform at all, the postulated reform is aimed mostly at pushing society further towards the surrender, one by one, of all its pretences to a value of its own except that of a police force guarding the security of self-reforming selves, and towards the acceptance and entrenchment of the principle of compensation (a political version of a 'money back guarantee') in case the policing fails or is found inadequate. Even the new environmental concerns owe their popularity to the perception of a link between the predatory misuse of the planetary commons and threats to the smooth flow of the self-centred pursuits of liquid life.

The trend is self-sustained and self-energizing. The focusing on self-reform self-perpetuates; so does the lack of interest in, and the inattention to, the aspects of common life that resist a complete and immediate translation into the current targets of self-reform. Inattention to the conditions of life in common precludes the possibility of renegotiating the setting that makes individual life liquid. The success of the pursuit of happiness – the ostensible purpose and paramount motive of individual life – continues to be defied by the very fashion of pursuing it (the only fashion

in which it can be pursued in the liquid modern setting). The resulting unhappiness adds reason and vigour to a self-centred life politics; its ultimate effect is the perpetuation of life's liquidity. Liquid modern society and liquid life are locked in a veritable *perpetuum mobile*.

Once set in motion, a *perpetuum mobile* will not stop rotating on its own. The prospects of the perpetual motion arresting, already dim by the nature of the contraption, are made still dimmer by the amazing ability of this particular version of the self-propelling mechanism to absorb and assimilate the tensions and frictions it generates – and to harness them to its service. Indeed, by capitalizing on the demand for relief or cure which the tensions incite, it manages to deploy them as high-grade fuel that keeps its engines going.

A habitual answer given to a wrong kind of behaviour, to conduct unsuitable for an accepted purpose or leading to undesirable outcomes, is education or re-education: instilling in the learners new kinds of motives, developing different propensities and training them in deploying new skills. The thrust of education in such cases is to challenge the impact of daily experience, to fight back and in the end defy the pressures arising from the social setting in which the learners operate. But will the education and the educators fit the bill? Will they themselves be able to resist the pressure? Will they manage to avoid being enlisted in the service of the self-same pressures they are meant to defy? This question has been asked since ancient times, repeatedly answered in the negative by the realities of social life, yet resurrected with undiminished force following every successive calamity. The hopes of using education as a jack potent enough to unsettle and ultimately to dislodge the pressures of 'social facts' seem to be as immortal as they are vulnerable. . .

At any rate, the hope is alive and well. Henry A. Giroux dedicated many years of assiduous study to the chances of 'critical pedagogy' in a society reconciled to the overwhelming powers of the market. In a recent conclusion, drawn in cooperation with Susan Searls Giroux, he restates the centuries-old hope:

In opposition to the commodification, privatization, and commercialization of everything educational, educators need to define

higher education as a resource vital to the democratic and civic life of the nation. The challenge is thus for academics, cultural workers, students, and labour organizers to join together and oppose the transformation of higher education into a commercial sphere . . .⁹

In 1989, Richard Rorty spelled out, as desirable and *fulfillable* aims for the educators, the tasks of 'stirring the kids up' and instilling 'doubts in the students about the students' own self-images, about the society in which they *belong*'.¹⁰ Obviously, not all the people employed in the educator's role are likely to take up the challenge and adopt these aims as their own; the offices and the corridors of academia are filled with two kinds of people – some of them 'busy conforming to well-understood criteria for making contributions to knowledge', and the others trying 'to expand their own moral imagination' and read books 'in order to enlarge their sense of what is possible and important – either for themselves as individuals or for their society'. Rorty's appeal is addressed to the second kind of people, as only in that category are his hopes vested. And he knows well against what overwhelming odds the teacher likely to respond to the clarion call will need to battle. 'We cannot tell boards of trustees, government commissions, and the like, that our function is to stir things up, to make our society feel guilty, to keep it off balance', or indeed (as he suggests elsewhere) that higher education 'is also not a matter of inculcating or educing truth. It is, instead, a matter of inciting doubt and stimulating imagination, thereby challenging the prevailing consensus.'" There is a tension between public rhetoric and the sense of intellectual mission – and that tension 'leaves the academy in general, and the humanistic intellectuals in particular, vulnerable to heresy hunters'. Given that the opposite messages of the promoters of conformity are powerfully backed by the ruling *doxa* and the daily evidence of commonsensical experience, it also, we may add, makes the 'humanistic intellectuals' sitting targets for the advocates of the end of history, rational choice, 'there is no alternative' life policies and other formulae attempting to grasp and convey the current and postulated impetus of an apparently invincible societal dynamic. It invites charges of unrealism, utopianism, wishful thinking, daydreaming – and, adding insult to injury in an odious reversal of ethical truth, of irresponsibility.

Adverse odds may be overwhelming, and yet a democratic (or, as Cornelius Castoriadis would say, an autonomous) society knows of no substitute for education and self-education as a means to influence the turn of events that can be squared with its own nature, while that nature cannot be preserved for long without 'critical pedagogy' – education sharpening its critical edge, 'making society feel guilty' and 'stirring things up' through stirring human consciences. The fates of freedom, of democracy that makes it possible while being made possible by it, and of education that breeds dissatisfaction with the level of both freedom and democracy achieved thus far, are inextricably connected and not to be detached from one another. One may view that intimate connection as another specimen of a vicious circle – but it is within that circle that human hopes and the chances of humanity are inscribed, and can be nowhere else.

This book is a collection of insights into various aspects of liquid life – life lived in a liquid modern society. The collection does not pretend to be complete. It is hoped however that each of the analysed aspects will offer a window into our presently shared condition as well as on the threats and chances which this condition entails for the prospects of making the human world somewhat more hospitable to humanity.

1

The Individual under Siege

Brian, the eponymous hero of the Monty Python film, furious at having been proclaimed Messiah and being followed wherever he went by a horde of worshippers, tried hard, but in vain, to convince his pursuers to stop behaving like a flock of sheep and to disperse. 'You are all individuals!' he shouted. 'We are all individuals!' duly responded, in unison, the chorus of devotees. Only a small lonely voice objected: 'I am not. . .' Brian tried another argument. 'You have to be different!' he cried. 'Yes, we are **all** different!' the chorus rapturously agreed. Again, just one voice objected: 'I am not. . .' Hearing that, the crowd looked around angrily, eager to lynch the dissenter if only he could be found in the mass of lookalikes.

It is all here in that little satirical gem – the whole infuriating paradox, or *aporia* rather, of individuality. Ask whoever you wish **what** it means to be an individual, and the answer – whether it comes from a philosopher or from a person who has never cared nor even heard what philosophers do for their living – will be pretty similar: to be individual means to be unlike anyone else. On occasion, a distant echo of God's self-introduction to Moses might reverberate in the answer: to be an individual means 'I am who I am'. Which means: a unique being, a one and only creature made (or, like God, self-made) in this **peculiar** way; so thoroughly unique that my uniqueness cannot be described using words that may have more than one referent.