

The Ego and the Spirit

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Chapter 1: Egoic Life

I. Introduction

In the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, one of the world's earliest recorded narratives, the mighty king Gilgamesh is portrayed as an arrogant and abusive ruler who rapes and pillages his own people while boasting all the time that he is "the strongest of all." When the elders of the community cry out to the gods for help, they respond by creating an equally mighty man, Enkidu, to counter Gilgamesh and keep him in check.

But instead of checking one another the two become fast friends. Together they prove even more of a terror to the community than Gilgamesh was alone, now challenging even the gods for supremacy. Finally the offended gods send a deathly illness upon Enkidu, who dies in anguish while Gilgamesh looks helplessly on. Beside himself with grief and horror, Gilgamesh asks, "Must I die too? Must Gilgamesh be like that?" He strips himself of his royal garments and sets off on a desperate journey to find the secret of immortality. Finally, learning that there is no escape from death, he returns to his own city humbled and chastened, now prepared to serve his subjects – mortal like himself – as the benevolent ruler he was meant to be, with due reverence for the gods.

In their different ways, all the religions of the world tell us that we must undergo this journey of Gilgamesh – a journey, as I will put it, from life under the governance of ego to life under the governance of spirit.

But just what does this mean? What is wrong with the life of the ego? What is the life of the spirit and how does it differ? In the following we will attempt to make some progress in answering this question.

II. The Human Predicament

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world. The paragon of animals. And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? (Hamlet)

The basic human predicament can be expressed simply enough: Our lives crave life, but we are destined to die.

And yet this may state it just a bit too simply. To make sense of this we must say something of what we mean by 'life' and what we mean by 'death.' By life we do not mean mere physical

survival. Bare survival does not, in itself, satisfy the thrust of human life. No one would be happy to survive indefinitely in endless pain or paralysis. Nor by 'death' do we mean mere physical demise. Indeed, having never died, we really have no idea what literal death might be like.

At their extremities both *life* and *death* refer to states of being we can scarcely envision with any clarity. What we strive for is not survival per se but the 'fullness' of life, life's *summum bonum*--supreme good--whatever this may mean. What we dread is not demise per se but the 'nothingness' of death. Neither this fullness nor this nothingness can be represented in straightforward, concrete, terms, which is why the great wisdom traditions of the world invariably represent them symbolically. Still, we know when we are approaching the one or the other. In our social successes, our appetitive gratifications, our sexual and romantic excitements, our exercises of power, we feel we approach life's fullness. In our failures, our lonely isolation, our rejections, our humiliations, our illnesses, we feel we approach life's nothingness. We struggle for the former and dread the latter, and yet--though we spend much of our time in denial of this--the arc of human life seems bent ineluctably toward nothingness. In the end, however successful our lives, our bodies become fodder for the worms.

What I call the 'ego' refers to that psychological complex of largely habitual feelings, beliefs, and thoughts through which we seek life's fullness and seek to avoid life's nothingness. The specific configuration of the ego differs in each of us, shaped by an interaction of genetic endowments and life experiences--'nature and nurture.' Still, the basic thrust of the ego--toward life's fullness, away from life's nothingness--is the same in all. It is this thirst for life's fullness that Nietzsche calls the 'will to power.'

Broadly speaking, the ego might be said to have two primary tasks, which, as we shall see, are constantly conflated with one another. The first is that of providing for the satisfaction of our basic physical and social needs and desires: our need for food, shelter, clothing, companionship, etc. Let us call this the *material* task of the ego, the ego's task of providing for its life in the material world. The second task is more subtle, and more difficult to render into words, but, I would posit, even more pivotal in lending to our lives their specific texture: It is that of securing our *standing in being*, our ontological status. Let us call this the *ontological* task of the ego. It is this second, ontological, task, and the way it is related to the first, that we must spend some time considering.

III. The Ontological Task of the Ego

To be or not to be, that is the question.

Well, not really.

Life has always already answered this question with an emphatic: to be! As Augustine points out, the suicide does not flee from life but from the painful ways in which she has been deprived of life. Her suicide is an attempt to escape her misery, a misery that stems from her inability to secure life's goods, which she continues to desire. Indeed, if she did not desire these goods she

would not suffer from their absence. The suicide, like everyone else, desires *to be*, desires the wholeness, fullness, of being.

And yet there is more to this desire than a mere longing for worldly goods. Above we characterized the human predicament as one of struggling for life but being subject to death. We must now examine more carefully what it means to be ‘subject to death.’

In the terminology of an older theology, we might say that we are subject to death insofar as we are *contingent* beings, i.e., beings who depend upon something other than ourselves for our power of being and who, therefore, can be deprived of that power. In contrast, the *idea* of God is distinguished as that of a being who is not contingent, a *necessary* being, i.e., one who contains the power of being within itself and who, therefore, cannot be deprived of being. Thus we say that God is eternal. As Thomas Aquinas puts it, God’s essence and existence are one, *God is God’s existence*, whereas human beings merely *partake* of an existence conferred upon them from without, and can, therefore, be deprived of it.

It is this contingency, more than the limitations we face in securing worldly goods, that constitutes our *finitude*. We are, in essence, finite beings just insofar as we do not possess the power of being within ourselves and are, therefore, dependent upon whatever does.

Existentialist thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have sought to examine the character of this finitude from the inside-out, so to speak, i.e., to explore how it *feels* to be finite, and how these feelings shape the lives we lead.

Heidegger speaks of a ‘deficit in being’ (*Schuldigsein*) that we experience as a result of our ignorance of our ontological basis. We do not know where we have come from nor what ultimately supports us. We seem suspended above a fathomless abyss, thrown into a world not of our making, on which we physically depend but from which we will eventually be severed. As a result, our being feels forever in question, subject to revocation. He suggests that this experience of ontological deficit underlies the Christian idea of original sin.

Sartre speaks of a ‘nothingness’ inherent in the openness of consciousness itself, a nothingness we are forever, futilely, trying to make into something. Thus we are forever trying to turn ourselves into some fixed idea of ourselves, so as to *be* something rather than nothing.

Paul Tillich speaks of ‘non-being’ as integral to finite being itself, rendering human beings ontologically unstable, striving for being but threatened with its absence.

All of these thinkers have helped make clear that we experience our finitude more or less constantly, although, generally, without overt awareness of it. It presents itself to us, not as an idea, but as an all but perpetual, underlying, unease over our standing in being. This unease has come to be called *existential anxiety*, anxiety over our ability--or inability--to provide a solid ground for our existence.

We are all familiar with anxiety. In the ordinary course of life we experience anxiety over many things: Will I pass the test? Will I get the job? Will she say ‘yes’? Will my health deteriorate?

Will my children fare well? Etc., etc. We feel anxious whenever life presents us with a task, or goal, we are unsure we can accomplish. The intensity of the anxiety is proportional to the importance of the task and the extent of our sense of inadequacy with respect to it. The existentialist writers have helped us see that all anxiety is rooted in, or at least colored by, our existential anxiety, for our projects--even the most mundane of them--*gain* their importance from their relation to that which would support, or undermine, our status in being.

On the basis of the above we can now say more clearly what we mean by the *ontological task* of the ego. The ego's ontological task is to satisfy the terms of its existential anxiety, i.e., to establish itself securely in being and place itself on the sure path that will lead it to fullness of being.

Given, however, that our being is finite, i.e., contingent, in essence,--that is, given that by our very nature we haven't the power of being within ourselves--given, furthermore, that the things of the material world through which we strive to fulfill this task are *themselves* contingent, finite, impermanent, limited, ultimately unstable and unreliable--this is a task at which the ego cannot possibly succeed. *There* is the rub.

IV. Absurdity and Despair

The structure of human life as we know it, then, has assigned to the ego an impossible task--that of establishing itself securely in being. This is what existentialist writers have spoken of as the 'absurdity' of the human condition. In Albert Camus' celebrated work *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus likens the struggle of human life to the punishment visited upon the ancient Greek figure Sisyphus, condemned by the gods to eternally roll a heavy rock up a hill only to have it roll down again once he is done. This, says Camus, is the nature of human life: we struggle endlessly for something we cannot achieve and are doomed to watch, helplessly, as our hopes and dreams unravel, again and again and again.

In Franz Kafka's *The Trial* the central character, Joseph K., is arrested one morning for an unspecified crime whose nature is never revealed to him. He spends the rest of his life trying to defend himself, a futile effort given that, on the one hand, he does not know the nature of the charges against him, and, on the other, the court adjudicating his case seems utterly chaotic and arbitrary. Finally, without ever having learned what he did wrong, Joseph K. is condemned to death and executed. Such, Kafka seems to be saying, is what human life is like: condemned to death at birth for a 'crime' of which we are unaware, struggling desperately to vindicate ourselves in the eyes of some judge who cannot be reached and who presides over a madhouse court.

Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* presents a similar idea: Two derelicts wait day after day on the side of a road, complaining irritably to one another of their various pains and annoyances, with no sense of where they can or should go. They wait for the coming of a man named Godot, who, they have heard from a mysterious messenger, will somehow save them from their predicament when he arrives. But every evening the messenger shows up to tell them that Godot cannot come that day but will be sure to come the next. When they complain that they

have been told this again and again the messenger professes not to remember. This goes on day after day after day.

The existentialist authors all tell a similar tale: human life manifests itself as a desperate struggle to achieve some elusive goal, scarcely conceivable, that cannot in fact be achieved. As such it is, in the words of the existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre, a “futile passion.”

But we did not have to wait for the modern existentialists to point this out to us. We find the same insight in the religious works quoted above. Ordinary life is vanity, says Ecclesiastes, a lost cause, says Jesus, hopelessly out of kilter, says the Buddha. The difference, of course, is that whereas the existentialists, in general, see no solution to this problem--other than, perhaps, to tough it out in existential rebellion against life's absurdity--the religions see the possibility of resolving the absurdity of egoic life at a higher level, the level of spirit. It is this possibility that we will explore in subsequent chapters.

For now, though, what we wish to do is examine some of the ways in which the ego configures itself in its desperate and futile effort to become for itself its own foundation.

V. Ontological Inadequacy and Self-Worth

The ego is unable to succeed at its ontological task of establishing itself in being, of making itself ontologically sufficient unto itself, and, on some level, knows this. This knowledge is not comfortable. Underlying the petty annoyances and irritations of Didi and Gogo, the derelicts of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, is a more profound distress: a desperation they can neither fully understand nor address. *Because* they can neither understand it nor address it the strain of it gets deflected onto those things they can: the thousand petty annoyances of mundane life, hence their constant irritability. But however much they may succeed at addressing these annoyances at the mundane level they will not succeed in easing their irritation, for it is rooted in a deeper malaise. In some sense, then, they *require* their mundane irritations in order to give themselves something to deflect their distress upon. To paraphrase Voltaire: If mundane irritations did not exist we would have to invent them.

Let us now attempt to penetrate more deeply into what underlies these irritations. ‘Ontological inadequacy,’ of course, is a very abstract phrase. The existential-psychological issue to which this phrase points, however, is well-known. In our society it is most commonly thought of in terms of ‘self-worth.’ It will be helpful, then, to examine the idea of self-worth. What is it we are questioning when we question our ‘self-worth’?

We might put the question this way: By what standard of value would it be possible for us to question our *own* worth? It would seem, at first, that this would be impossible. If our native values stem from our desires and needs, and everything that has value for us does so to the extent that it satisfies these desires and needs, then this would seem to place us at the very center of value. If everything of value derives its value from *my* desires and needs, then mustn't I regard myself as of supreme value?

Not necessarily. Not if I myself am an insufficient vehicle for the satisfaction of my own fundamental desires and needs.

And this is the predicament of the ego. Our desire for life's fullness presents us with a standard of value that the ego itself cannot meet. In this respect we are a disappointment to ourselves. Our being hasn't the *status in being* we would wish for it to have. It falls short. It is deficient. It is not enough. Our very lust for life judges us inadequate, insufficient, defective.

The problem here isn't simply that we haven't all the abilities we would wish to have. More fundamentally, it is that we aren't the *sorts of beings* we would wish to be. We want to be immortals, supermen and women, but have only a tenuous hold on being, a hold that is always slipping, and that we seem ultimately destined to lose. How have we come into this situation? What terrible calamity has deprived us of the status we *require*? But we have no idea. Joseph K. doesn't know what crime he committed. Sisyphus doesn't know why the rock he pushes must always fall. Didi and Gogo do not know how they came to be stranded on the side of their desolate road, nor why Godot never arrives.

There is something terribly wrong--by our own standard--but we don't quite understand what it is nor how to fix it--some worm has invaded the center of our being, gnawing at us, threatening us with decay and demise. We feel a hole at the core of ourselves that we fear we will fall into. Call it 'non-being,' call it 'nullity,' call it 'nothingness,' call it 'death.' The ontological task of the ego is to eliminate this hole, plug it up, fill it in--but it cannot, because the hole is our finitude itself. So the ego does the next best thing. It seeks to *persuade itself* that the hole is not there. It pursues denial and self-deceit as a life strategy. It seeks to prove to itself--like Gilgamesh--that it is the "strongest of all" and thereby convince itself (though always partially, hauntedly, in 'bad faith') of its ontological *prowess*. How does it do so? Largely by looking upon its ability to procure worldly goods as *indicative* of its ontological proficiency. Thus the basic goods of material life take upon themselves *symbolic* significance. We pursue them, not merely, or even primarily, for what they bestow, but for what they *mean*. At the same time, we resist the honest self-examination that would have us recognize this, for to recognize it is to be exposed, again, to the abyss at the core.

VI. Wealth, Fame, and Power: The Symbols of Ontological Sufficiency

The ego's distress over its own inadequacy is symbolically represented in the Garden of Eden story as Adam and Eve's shame over their nakedness. Why exactly nakedness, with its sexual connotations, should serve as a symbol of inadequacy is itself an intriguing question, which we will have occasion to consider as we proceed. Nevertheless, the story indicates that--after eating the forbidden fruit--their exposed nakedness is intolerable to them. To hide it from themselves, from each other, and from God, Adam and Eve cover themselves up with fig leaves.

Speaking very broadly, we might identify the three most common 'fig leaves' through which the ego seeks to cover over the abyss at its core as *wealth, fame, and power*. These three are also directly related to the first task of the ego: the establishment of material security. We need some amount of wealth--i.e., access to material goods--to be able to survive physically. We need some

amount of fame--i.e., positive regard from others--in order to function healthily in human society. We need some amount of power--i.e., ability to successfully implement our will--just to get by at all. The utter privation of any of these--abject poverty, complete ostracism, total paralysis--would threaten our very survival.

In the context of the ego's ontological task, however, these take upon themselves *symbolic* significance; they come to serve as mirrors through which the ego gazes upon itself to convince itself that, perhaps, it is not as ontologically inadequate as it fears. In this respect it is not wealth per se but the *appearance* of wealth, not positive regard per se but the *appearance* of positive regard, not power per se but the *appearance* of power, that is all important. What matters here is not what we can *do* with our wealth, fame, and power but the sense of self-worth that comes from knowing we are able to acquire them. We must really *be something*, we tell ourselves, to be so wealthy, so famous, so powerful. And to be something, of course, is better than to be nothing.

And because it is the appearance of these things that is all important to us, rather than their utility, we can never have enough. Where utility is the standard we determine how much we need by the requisites of the project we are engaged in. We need just as much as necessary to achieve our concrete goal. But where our desire is symbolic there is no natural limit. We want it all, *hence*, we measure our success by how much we have relative to others. To the extent that others have more than we do, we know we do not have as much as can be had; we feel our inferiority vis-à-vis the other, our inadequacy exposed, the fig leaf slipping, our nakedness revealed. This creates the phenomenon the ancient Greeks called *pleonexia*--the limitless desire for more and better. This is the root of envy and its counterpart *schadenfreude* (delight over another's misfortune). Another's good fortune is my misfortune, and vice-versa, just to the extent that I measure my own adequacy by my status relative to that other.

Here we have the roots of *malice*, and of some of the more horrific moral evils humans commit against each other. In general, we might divide moral evils into two classes: those in which we violate the vital interests of others in pursuit of our own separate ends, and those in which we actively seek the diminishment of the other as an end in itself. We might call the first *incidental* evil, insofar as the harm done is incidental to the goal sought. If we could achieve our goal without doing harm we would be just as happy. We might call the second *malicious* evil: here the goal itself is the diminishment of the other, from which we derive some satisfaction. The Holocaust is an instance of malice taken to an extreme, but we need not look to such an extreme example to find it. The delight we feel in the cutting remark, the sarcastic put-down, the ridicule and humiliation of others, are common instances of malice.

What is the provenance of this delight? The psychological dynamics of this can be quite complex, but in broad outline they seem to be as follows: First we see in the other an example of, or the threat of, the ontological inadequacy we disdain, and then we prove to ourselves that we are *not* subject to that inadequacy by asserting our power over it. Our contempt for the other's weakness is an echo of our dread of our own. Thus, ironically and tragically, the very weakness and vulnerability of the other can be a spur to our cruelty. By demonstrating our superiority over the weakness of the other we symbolically demonstrate our superiority over weakness itself. And this is delightful.

Of course the response of the egoic victim to such humiliation will be, for the very same reasons, a desire to assert *her* power over her victimizer. Hence the need for, and the *sweetness* of, revenge. The desire for revenge is often confused with the desire for just retribution, and, given the complexity of the human psyche, they are often conflated in practice. Still, revenge and just retribution can be sharply distinguished conceptually. The vengeful person is motivated by the desire to reassure herself of her own ontological status, which her victimization has called into question. The more she can *get back* at the other, prove her *power* over the other, *hurt* the other, the more she will feel restored. The truly just person, on the other hand, is motivated by the desire to restore just relations. These are quite, quite different goals. Revenge is a goal of the ego, justice a goal of the spirit.

The full tragedy of these malicious power dynamics cannot be fully appreciated until we examine more closely the nature of the spirit. Malice, of course, is the diametric opposite of love. Through these destructive dynamics we deprive ourselves of the love of one another that would be, if we could but realize it, ‘heaven on earth.’ We will have much more to say about this as we proceed.

Given how fundamental our struggle for ontological sufficiency is, much, if not all, of human psychology can be understood in its terms. In the next few sections we will take a (necessarily broad) look at how some of these dynamics play out in relation to the three primary symbols of ontological sufficiency we have identified: wealth, fame, and power.

VI. Wealth

**Little Jack Horner
Sat in a corner
Eating his Christmas pie
He stuck in his thumb
And pulled out a plum
And said, “What a good boy am I!”**

In the 1951 British film version of *A Christmas Carol* there is a brief scene in which Scrooge is eating dinner in a pub all by himself on Christmas Eve. A waiter passes by and Scrooge growls at him, “Waiter, more bread!” The waiter informs him that more bread will cost twopence, a trifle. Scrooge’s brow furls. Finally he lowers his head and growls, “No more bread!”

Scrooge, of course, can well afford the twopence it would cost him to satisfy his desire for more bread. Why does he deprive himself?

Perhaps we get one of the more insightful philosophical answers to this question from Plato, who examines what he calls the ‘oligarchic’ character in the eighth book of *The Republic*. The oligarch conflates wealth with the true good of the soul and, thus, misconstrues both its meaning and actual value. Money, for the oligarch, has become the measure by which he estimates his own ontological status, his own worth as a person. The furl on Scrooge’s brow is the outward

manifestation of his inner conflict over whether it is worth reducing this status, even by so small an amount as twopence, in order to satisfy his appetite. He decides that it is not.

The irony here is not to be missed. Money's actual value resides entirely in what it can be exchanged for. It has no value at all in itself. The oligarchic hoarder denies himself the *actual* good of money for the sake of its *symbolic* good. This, in turn, distorts both the manner in which he will use his money and the manner in which he will estimate the worth of others. And, of course, this misestimation, and overestimation, of wealth sets up an intensive and destructive rivalry for money, leading, as Plato again points out, to a society divided between extremes of wealth and poverty: The poor can't get enough to feed their stomachs because the rich can't get enough to feed their egos.

The counterpart to the oligarchic hoarder is the oligarchic splurger. The extravagant person makes a show of her wealth in order to make a show of her worth. It is in extravagance, moreso than in miserliness, that we see the conflation of appetitive gratification, which the body desires for its own sake, with the ego's desire for ontological sufficiency. Of course there is natural pleasure in satisfying the appetites. But the need for such pleasure, and the satisfaction we take in it, is heightened and altered by the ontological significance it is given. The pleasure itself becomes symbolic of our *worthiness* to enjoy it: I must be special to have been afforded so special a pleasure. In modern times 'prosperity gospel' proponents have made a theology of this. Their wealth, they claim, is a sign of God's approval of them. Class prejudice, snobbery, etc. have their roots here.

In modern consumer-capitalism this conflation of appetitive gratification with ontological status is employed as a sales technique. Consumer goods are represented in advertising as having magical qualities that will make us powerful and happy. At a rational level, of course, we know that they do not have these powers, and we suppose that we are not taken in. But the advertisers know what they are about. They are willing to spend billions producing such ads because they tap into something pre-rational or subrational: the association we make between the material and the ontological. We *want* to believe that material things, to which we have access, have the magical powers we seek. The advertisers merely help us to do so. But, of course, it is all in bad faith. We are complicit in our own deception, and feel constantly that we are living in a world of falsity.

As a result of all this, poverty is miserable not just for the material deprivation suffered by the poor, but perhaps even more, for the sense of ontological failure it bestows on them. The poor are seen, and come to see themselves, as of inferior ontological status, without worth as people. They suffer, not just from their poverty, but from *being seen* as poor by themselves and others. And, of course, this intensifies the competition for wealth. But to understand all this at a deeper level we must examine the *social* dimension of egoic life.

VII. Fame

**I want a photo opportunity
I want a shot at redemption
Don't wanna end up a cartoon
In a cartoon graveyard
(Paul Simon)**

As many philosophers have noted, human beings are social by nature. This does not simply mean that we like to socialize, nor even that we spend much of our lives in the company of others. It means, much more fundamentally, that the structure of the ego, and of our self and world understanding, are *constituted* in terms of our relations with others. Egoically we are, largely, what our relations with others have made us. In this sense, the sharp distinction we make between self and other is somewhat illusory. Our sense of ourselves is intimately bound up with our sense of how we stand with the others who matter to us. How we view ourselves is largely a function of how we imagine we are viewed by others. Our sense of self, thus, always already includes our sense of our relation with others.

To make this clear it will be helpful to distinguish between the ego, as the complex of psychological dispositions through which we seek material and ontological security, and the ego's *ego-image*, i.e., the ego's conception of itself as a particular person in the world. The ego identifies itself with its image of itself. When we say 'I' it is the ego referring to this image. The ego measures its ontological success or failure by the status it is able to claim for its ego-image: *I am smart, I am funny, I am beautiful, I am wealthy--or--I am ugly, I am inept, I am poor, I am a failure*, etc. The 'I' here refers to the ego's *image* of itself, which is to be sharply distinguished from the ego itself as a complex of psychological traits. The ego-image is the ego's 'token' for itself, so to speak, and thus, for that which must be secured.

In egoic life, the ego's sense of the *status* of its ego-image is largely mediated to it through others and through the standards it has imbibed from others. This, of course, is directly related to our sense of self-worth. We take ourselves (as reflected to us in our ego-image) to have 'worth' to the extent that we are *deemed* of worth by others and/or to the extent that we have succeeded according to the societal standards prevalent in whatever society we belong to. Thus the space, or field, in which we pursue our ontological task is largely a social space. The symbols of ontological sufficiency (e.g., wealth, fame, and power) are not symbols we simply adopt on our own. We inherit them from our society. Different societies will emphasize different symbols and/or represent the meaning of the same symbols in different ways. We prove our worth to ourselves by being *judged* as worthwhile within the society of others.

Three of the most common modes in which this plays itself out in our society are those of erotic love, honor, and celebrity. Let us consider each of these in turn.

VII.1 Erotic Love

That erotic desire is a desire for something more than the pleasurable sensation of sexual release is evident from the fact that we require the participation of another for its fulfillment. It is just

this need for the other that distinguishes the sexual drive from other physical drives, e.g., the drive for food. On the spiritual plane, the sexual drive is an embodied expression of the desire for intimate communion. This is why mystics the world over have likened it to the desire for union with God. We will look at this more closely in the context of our examination of the spirit. In the poverty of egoic life, however, the erotic drive frequently devolves into something else: the desperate desire for affirmation, the desire to be validated *as* someone of worth *by* someone of worth. We wish to be seen as desirable, beautiful, worthwhile, *by* someone we deem to be desirable, beautiful, worthwhile. Lovers gaze into each other's eyes and delight in seeing the worthy other (i.e., the beautiful, smart, powerful, wealthy, talented, famous, other) gazing lovingly back. They are in love with the other's love of them, which, for the moment, seems to lift them out of their egoic isolation.

The problem is that the 'beauty' of the other, the 'worth' of the other, is an illusion. For a time, in the throes of erotic passion, we *take* the other to be a bestower of ontological fulfillment. Just to touch Juliet's cheek, muses the besotted Romeo, would be ecstasy: "See how she leans her cheek upon her hand. Oh, that I were a glove upon that hand. That I might touch that cheek!" That we are charmed by Romeo's wish to be a glove, rather than find it ridiculous, is testimony to the power of erotic illusion. We can all feel vicariously the thrill of stroking Juliet's soft cheek. But suppose Romeo should discover a wart upon that cheek! This, of course, would change everything.

Erotic love often, eventually, gives way to what may be called the 'Groucho Marx' syndrome. Groucho Marx joked that he would not stoop to join a club that would have him as a member. The very 'worm at the core' that makes us question our own self-worth will eventually make us question the worth of whomever has the bad taste to fall in love with us. Now we begin to notice what we did not before: the wart on her cheek, the hair follicles poking from her nose, her malodorous breath. "Oh, Celia, Celia, Celia shits!," bemoans the disenchanting lover of Jonathan Swift's satirical love poem, distraught over the discovery that his romantic ideal is a human being. Once the other's idealized worth becomes questionable her erotic allure recedes. Now I must seek another. But shortly after I 'win' this other she will also begin to lose her erotic appeal; my very success with her proves that she hasn't the worth I require; the more I get to know her the more I come to see that she is 'human, all too human,' like myself. So now I must seek yet another. And so on.

Why and how this desire for ontological validation gets attached so strongly to sexuality is an intriguing question. It seems closely related to the vulnerability of the physical body as a sensitive, fragile, and imperiled object in the material world. The ego sees in the body's vulnerability the physicalization of its ontological contingency. It is just for this reason that nakedness is embarrassing: our subjection to the physical, which testifies to our ontological impotence, is exposed. This sense of vulnerability is expressed in, and at the same time, intensified by, sexual desire. Sexual desire is the embodiment of my longing to overcome my lonely, and threatening, isolation. Thus, my erotically charged nakedness becomes an intensified token of my ontological vulnerability and inadequacy. It is just this vulnerable inadequacy that I wish to have accepted and affirmed by one who *can* affirm it. To have my erotically charged nakedness desired, cherished, held, loved, deemed of worth, is to have it *re-deemed*, restored in value. Thus I want the (worthy) other to gaze affirmatively upon me *in my very nakedness* and

thereby lift it (and me) out of the dungeon of my aloneness and into the idealized ontological space he/she represents. It is this thrill of liberation from the dungeon that we tend to call ‘love.’

Beyond this, my ability to get the (worthy) other to desire me confers upon me a sense of power. I must be *something*, even in my fleshly contingency, to be able to get him/her so worked up over me. All of this gets invested in the passion of sexual desire and release, intensifying sexual pleasure. Sado-masochistic sexual play can be understood in these terms: here sexual partners play with the excitations of their exposed vulnerability, their delight in exercising power over this vulnerability, their longing for affirmation, etc. as a way of intensifying passion.

And, of course, the intensity of sexual jealousy can be explained in these terms as well. Just to the extent that a particular other’s love or commitment provides one’s sense of ontological sustenance, that other’s rejection and interest in another strips one of the ontological support one has come to depend upon. Now one’s nakedness is exposed in all its inadequacy--and more than exposed: spurned, shunted aside, deemed contemptible and inferior. This is unbearable. The ego responds with humiliation, depression, despair, rage, desire for revenge--often accompanied, embarrassingly, by an intensified erotic yearning for the one who has done the rejecting, to reclaim its status.

What is to be noted here is the extent to which all of this is ‘smoke and mirrors.’ Of course, the particular other to whom one has become erotically attached *cannot* confer the ontological standing one wishes. This is why erotic love is the roller-coaster ride it is. Each partner seeks to wrest from the other what the other does not have the power to provide. Thus, our erotic partners will always, eventually, disappoint us, and we them, so long as the erotic relationship does not mature into something more, a relationship of spiritual friendship. We will have more to say about this in our chapter on the spirit.

VII.2 Honor

The desire for honors is, in many respects, the most innocent and ‘spiritual’ of the egoic desires: it is the desire to be acknowledged as having made a worthwhile contribution to others. Insofar, however, as it is a desire for *acknowledgement* as such, as opposed to a desire to do the actual good one can do, it falls under the category of egoic desire: it is another example of the desire to reassure oneself of one’s worth. The fully spiritual person is gratified by the good he or she has done, not by the acknowledgement from others that he or she has done it.

Nevertheless, the category of honor can serve as a stepping-stone from egoic to spiritual life. Through the offer of honors, society uses the ego’s desire to be deemed of worth as a way of inducing the ego to engage in altruistic, i.e., trans-egoic, activities. At an even higher level, the spirit itself can confer upon the ego something akin to ‘honor’ as a reward for living a spirit-informed life. At this intra-psychic level one feels a sense of gratification, not so much for being honored by others, as for feeling that one has lived ‘honorably.’ This inner sense of gratification for having lived an honorable life brings us close to the gratification native to the spirit itself. Paul expresses something of this when he speaks of having “fought the good fight.” We will have more to say about this when we take up the question of heteronomous morality in the next chapter.

Still, precisely because of its roots in the poverty of the ego, there are dangers to the pursuit of honor. Most obviously, the good of such a pursuit is contingent on the good of the honor-bestowing authority. To be honored for being a tireless, self-sacrificing, Nazi SS officer can provide the same sense of psychological gratification as to be honored for being a tireless, self-sacrificing, charity worker. Insofar as one's pursuit of honor is rooted in a desire for a worth bestowed by the esteem of others there is no psychological difference between the two.

Intra-psychically, the ego's desire to be honored by the spirit—God—can lead to the self-righteousness, judgmentalism, moralism, and legalism one often finds in heteronomous versions of religion. Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees has its basis in this: The Pharisees' attachment to the letter of the law *for the sake of* receiving honors from God has led to their neglect of the true meaning of the law, says Jesus. Thus he calls them "false guides" who "strain out a gnat and swallow a camel." In their scrupulous adherence to the minutia of the law (for the sake of the honor they hope to receive) they lose sight of the real purpose of the law. In this way the law of God, which should lead us beyond egoic life, becomes just another vehicle of the ego.

VII.3 Celebrity

The desire for the esteem of others reaches a culmination in the desire for celebrity. The desire for celebrity is the desire to be fixed, as permanently as possible, in the ontological space that the *category* of 'others' represents. We wish to be known and lauded, not merely by the others with whom we have contact, but by others *as such*, and not merely by the others who live today, but by the others who will live in subsequent generations as well. We want our 'name,' our fame, to "live forever." Perhaps more than with any other egoic drive we see here the desire of the ego to project itself (in the form of its image of itself) infinitely, to provide for itself an infinite foundation in the memory and esteem of *all* others whatsoever. The ego's dissatisfaction with its finitude is never more obvious--unless it be in the institutions of religion itself.

It is as if, unable to provide an infinite life for ourselves in our own persons, we seek a vicarious infinity through recognition by the endless multiplicity of other persons. Of course we cannot *actually* live in these other persons, but our desire to escape the nothingness that threatens us derives a partial sense of satisfaction from supposing that we will.

But, again, it is all 'smoke and mirrors'--or, to use the Hindu word for such: *maya*. The one who actually achieves great celebrity, if at all self-aware, realizes that she has not in fact achieved the infinite status she seeks. A story is told of Cary Grant who once had an admiring fan look up at him and say, "I wish I were you." Grant's reply was: "So do I."

Among the sadder things that can befall the person who has once achieved some degree of fame is to become a 'has-been.' Indeed, the very phrase 'has-been' reflects the way in which celebrity serves as a symbol of ontological standing. Once one had *been*, but now one *is not*. The ego-image, once puffed up with fame, is now deflated. The aging starlet looks at her graying hair, her yellowing skin, her wrinkled eyes, her sagging breasts, and sees her own disintegration and demise.

VIII. Power

Friedrich Nietzsche famously declared that all of life can be understood as the expression of a ‘will to power.’ What Nietzsche seems to have meant by ‘power’ is what we have called the ‘fullness of life.’ If we define power, though, as the untrammelled ability to successfully exercise one’s will--to get one’s way--then the pursuit of power turns out to be just one of many symbolical ways in which the ego seeks to convince itself of its ontological sufficiency. The egoic power-seeker makes of his will the token by which he estimates his ontological standing. To the extent that his will prevails he feels ontologically affirmed, to the extent that it does not he feels diminished and threatened.

In this respect it is not power per se--i.e., what one can *accomplish* through one’s power--that is all important, but, again, the *appearance* that one has it. Indeed, it is just because it is the *appearance* of power that is all important that envy, *schadenfreude*, sadism, malice, and many of the nastier ethical attitudes have such a hold on us. It is not enough for us to have power, we must have *more* power than the others. It is through the *demonstration* of our superiority, our dominance, our supremacy, that our power (as symbol) becomes evident to us. Thus, the egoic pursuit of power is, in its very essence, a *competition* for power. The egoic pursuit of power is a zero-sum game. We only win *to the extent* that others lose.

As noted above, the Greeks had a word for what we are here calling the ‘egoic pursuit of power’: *pleonexia*. *Pleonexia* is the limitless pursuit of ‘more and better.’ ‘More’ and ‘better,’ of course, are relative terms. The *pleonektein* seeks more of what he has, and better than what he has, *as measured by* the amount and quality of what *others* have. Thus the *pleonektein* is forever seeking to increase his advantage over others. In the first book of the *Republic* Plato has Socrates point out the essential futility of *pleonektic* life: the *pleonektic*, by definition, can never be satisfied: there is always more *more* and better *better* to be had. Thus to desire more and better as a goal in itself is to live absurdly.

And yet, as the existentialists have made us aware, it is just this absurdity that is at the root of egoic life, and, as the spiritual traditions of the world point out, of the horrors that human beings inflict upon one another. The reason Chamberlain could never have appeased Hitler no matter what he offered was because there was nothing concrete that Hitler wanted. Hitler and the Nazis wanted domination for its own sake. It was not possible to achieve peace with them by satisfying their desires because their desire was for war. They desired conquest for the sake of conquest, conquest for the thrill of it. We may call such an attitude ‘evil’ but only to the extent that we recognize it as but one pole of a continuum that is all too familiar--which includes delight in the subtle put-down, the cutting remark, the overbearing demeanor, the self-satisfied feeling of superiority. Jesus declares that even to say “you fool” to another is already to be approaching hell. Human beings measure themselves against others in order to assure themselves that they do not have the weaknesses of others, and do so as a way of fleeing recognition of their own weakness.

In Ashvagosha’s *Life of the Buddha*, the soon-to-be-Buddha, beginning to see deeply into the human condition, laments:

"How wretched that ignorant man,
 blinded by pride,
 who, though himself powerless
 and subject to the law
 of disease, old age, and death,
 should treat with contempt another
 who's sick, dead, or oppressed with old age!"

What Buddha saw deeply is that the *other* for whom one has contempt is but a mirror of oneself, and that one's contempt of that other is but a projection of one's own self-contempt. Such is the wretchedness of egoic life.

IX. The War of All against All

Egoic life, thus, leads to what Thomas Hobbes dubbed "the war of all against all," but at a more fundamental level and in a more fundamental way than Hobbes himself recognized. When Hobbes coined this phrase he was primarily thinking of the struggle for material goods. But our reflections indicate that this war has its roots, not in material, but in ontological, impoverishment, and begins, not as a war of human beings against each other, but as a war of human beings against their own existential condition. All the great religions of the world are rooted in the realization that egoic life, *as such*, cannot provide for what egoic life seeks. Thus egoic life is a life of existential frustration, which plays itself out in self-destructive and other-destructive modes of feeling, thinking, and acting. Paul, reflecting on this in his epistle to the Romans, cries out: "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" (Rom 7:24).

'Death' here refers, not to physical demise, but to the ego's severance from its ontological ground, the ultimate source of its life and of all life. This severance is spoken of in terms of *Ignorance* in the traditions of the East and of *Sin* in the traditions of the West, where the former signifies the ego's lack of *experienced* connection with its source, and the latter the ego's willful insistence upon the supremacy of its isolated self. These two should not be seen as opposed ideas. Rather, Ignorance and Sin are mutually conditioning: The desperate ego seeks to overcome the insecurity of its felt isolation (Ignorance) by willfully insisting upon its individualized supremacy (Sin), an attitude that deepens its feeling of isolation (Ignorance). Thus Ignorance breeds Sin and Sin deepens Ignorance: the one expressing the noetic and the other the volitional state of the estranged ego.

"Who will set me free from the body of this death?", cries Paul. All the great religions of the world attempt to answer this question. In the following chapters we will seek to understand what lies at the *heart* of these answers.