

# In search of the numinous

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I fundamentally believe that deep down, all people are ultimately in search of peace, love, happiness, harmony, fulfillment, and a penetrating feeling of purpose and connection to something in life (even if amorphous or ill-defined),<sup>1</sup> although we may not know what that is in any tangible sense or how to find it. This pull or attraction often comes from an inner voice, as muted and opaque as that may be, what we may refer to as an unconscious call or summons from the beautiful soul—the best part of us—looking to accomplish its ideals. Our psychological symptoms (and every human being has them) as internal dynamic conflicts or compromises are thwarted or failed expressions of these encumbered strivings that may or may not be known to those who pine or suffer. The growing awareness of this need (let alone the striving itself) is emotionally noteworthy and often leads to a shift in one's reflective function and impetus to seek out greater or nobler inner experiences by encountering and crafting life in more meaningful ways. This impetus has been generally referred to by humanistic psychologists as a process of self-actualization. This complex endeavor, which is based on an internal desire, motivation, or compulsion (sometimes brought about by life events that precipitate an inner awakening or revelation of self-reflection) to deepen and expand one's *core*, such as one's emotional resonance states and their expression, or to develop a deliberate cognitive state of mindfulness toward self, other, and world, and to enhance moral, aesthetic, and spiritual value, is what we may signify as the pursuit of the numinous.

There are many different forms of numinosity, from the non-rational *sensus numinus* that has been historically elaborated within academic

<sup>1</sup> This universal propensity also applies in a lesser degree to the misanthrope and the psychopath who lack these internalized qualities and meaningful attachments to others, as they suffer. That is why they hurt others.

religious studies and its interface with mysticism, to our psychological encounters with natural phenomena. The meaning, depth, and scope of numinous experience are contested among scholarly circles, hence emphasizing many variants in content, form, and typology, but they often refer to affections that are deemed beautiful, ecstatic, moving, intoxicating, magnificent, splendid, inspirational, and so forth. Some varieties illuminate the value of lived experience while bracketing metaphysical claims, while others point toward a transcendent realm of union with an absolute reality that may champion both philosophical and theological tenets. Although I believe numinous experience is itself a form of spiritual authenticity, we do not need to get bogged down in debate over its metaphysical origins in order to appreciate the psychological functions it serves and the qualitative value it brings. It may be generally said that our encounter with the numinous often involves a form of unitive experience with the collective, namely, a greater feeling of unity or connectedness to humanity and cosmos as a whole. We may view this experience solely from the vantage point of naturalized psychology or human phenomenology without importing onto-theology, and it is from this perspective that the secular quest for spirituality is often initiated.

Where does this leave us? If we view self-actualization as a burgeoning process of becoming, a journey not a destination, then each person is their own microcosm transpiring within the internalized psychosocial matrix in which we are situated. In other words, we are our own becoming and fashion our own actualization experiences. Psychoanalyst and religious scholar Dan Merkur argues that unitive phenomena involve an underlying mystical union of incorporation and inclusion that all people possess,<sup>2</sup> but he differentiates between autosuggestion, self-deification, and pathological instantiations yet ultimately adopts a favorable position grounded in negative theology (*via negativa*),<sup>3</sup> although he has been faithful in explicating naturalized accounts of mysticism without venturing

2 See Merkur (1999), pp. 22–23, 25, 34. This sentiment is best captured by his statement:

A great deal of everyone's everyday thinking is unitive. Much of what passes for rational thought is either explicitly or unconsciously unitive. Most of us do not ordinarily think of ourselves as mystical; but mysticism is nevertheless universal in our species (p. 35).

3 This position is outlined in his recent book, *Relating to God* (Merkur, 2014), pp. xi, 44–45, 156–158. Also see Keith Haartman's (2004) influential work on the psychoanalysis of unitive ecstasies in the Methodism of John Wesley in *Watching and Praying*, pp. ix–x, 20, 42–44, and Ch. 5.

into metaphysical waters. But regardless of such caveats, we cannot avoid making metaphysical commitments. Here the presence of *unio mystica* employs its own divinity principle since the contents, affects, and relational intensities produced are radically subjective and private, hence psychical. What anchors unitive thinking in this tendency toward incorporation, linking, synthesis, integration, and unification is, I suggest, that human consciousness is (at least in part) oriented toward transcendental acts of processing perceptual and fantasized events through a priori cognitive faculties,<sup>4</sup> hence modes of thinking and emoting that are largely unconscious. And part of unitive experience is the *feeling* of the transcendental—our psychic positioning toward meaningful value, even though we have argued there is no definitive transcendent, other than that which is conceived through human ideation.

The spiritual quest is ultimately personal and solitary, although it often includes others (by necessity) in forms of relatedness and communion that are deeply intimate and psychologically rewarding; yet this aesthetic supplement is secondary to the internal work of the soul in dialogue with itself. There is a certain uncertainty and obscurity in initiating this task, as one cannot simply go out and purchase this ready-made commodity, for it must be renovated continuously, sometimes contemplated while other times stumbled upon experimentally, or spontaneously enacted out of our unconscious creativities or potencies. While the variety of spiritual experiences generate various psychic penumbras, they are often spurred and inspired, whether consciously realized or not, by our being in relation to finitude, namely, our being toward death.

### **The oceanic feeling**

Not only is feeling an ontological constituent of religiosity, it further becomes the pivotal attribute underlying the phenomenology of spiritual value. Here the quality of the lived experience becomes the overarching criterion for spiritual satisfaction. Religious or spiritual feeling may enjoy many possible enduring forms with varying degrees of meaning and

4 I say “in part” because, although we seek greater degrees of psychic integration, the mind is also dialectical and preserves complementation and difference. To say that mind integrates and unifies all bifurcations, polarities, and complementarities is to miss the point that unitive experiences may only involve a certain moment or movement in the dialectic that is attuned to its experiential immediacy, not its totality.

intensity, but is there a certain type of feeling that supersedes others? This leads us to focus upon a particular aspect of spirituality that may be said to lie at the heart of religious sentiment. It is what Freud called “the oceanic feeling,” named after his friend Romain Rolland’s appeal for him to understand the true source of religious conviction. Freud states:

It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of ‘eternity,’ a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded—as it were, ‘oceanic.’ This feeling, he adds, is a purely subjective fact, not an article of faith; it brings with it no assurance of personal immortality, but it is the source of the religious energy which is seized upon by the various Churches and religious systems... One may, he thinks rightly call oneself religious on the ground of this oceanic feeling alone, even if one rejects every belief and every illusion.<sup>5</sup>

The oceanic feeling is an emotionally aesthetic event one may rightfully call sublime—so idiosyncratic and arcane that it may lay beyond that which words can define. This core experiential event, however, is the sensation of a particular emotive tone, namely, the feeling of unity or Oneness. Here we are justified in calling this phenomenon mystical,<sup>6</sup> yet the experience of “oneness with the universe”<sup>7</sup> also has metaphysical overtones. This *unio mystica* of oneness with cosmic totality is characterized by the loss of personal boundaries through the felt suspension of agency, a surrendering of one’s sense of identity with a totalizing collective that obliterates all notions of singularity and difference. Like enveloping space, the engulfing presence of Being is oceanic and all consuming, where particularity is dissolved and becomes incorporated into a momentary feeling of absolute unity.

What distinguishes the oceanic feeling from belief is the felt nature of the *apeiron*—the infinite or eternal: oceanic intuition is boundless while doctrinal belief is delimited—hence bound to set ideation belonging to *doxa*. Here we may further highlight the ontology of religiosity as felt-sensation phenomenologically realized as unbounded experience. More

5 *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 64.

6 See Robert Segal’s (2011) cogent analysis of Rolland’s emphasis on the mystical origin of religion as the feeling of oneness with the world versus Freud’s psychological claim that mystical union originates in infantile delusion where the ego has not yet differentiated or formed a sense of separation from its external environment (pp. 2, 4).

7 Freud (1930), p. 72.

specifically, we may say that oceanic experience is our subjective emotional relation to the *sensation* of an indefinite cosmos as unlimited expanse, that which goes on forever, the feeling of infinity. Here we may locate the kernel of our unconscious wish to transcend our personal mortality as a fusion with an endless cosmos.

Because such a sensation is so epistemologically private and foreclosed from objective verifiability, its realized meaning resists universal consensus or generalized understanding. This unbounded experience may be tied to natural phenomena such as an awe inspiring sunset, music so moving that it makes you weep, or the beauty and mutual recognition of falling in love—all leading to an elevation of consciousness that transcends the parameters of self-interest or a personal sense of self. The oceanic feeling may be said to be spiritual based on the elevation of consciousness alone, a feeling that evokes the deepest sense of personal satisfaction as a transcendental act. When understood for its total worth, the oceanic experience becomes an aesthetic expression of the soul intimately conjoined with the nature of the moral—what may be conceived in these moments as an ultimate goodness underlying the structure of the universe.<sup>8</sup> I simply prefer to call this the beauty of *wonder*.

Freud himself admits, “I cannot discover this ‘oceanic’ feeling in myself. It is not easy to deal scientifically with feelings.”<sup>9</sup> But it is precisely this feeling that constitutes the spiritual experience. Freud goes on to dismiss the feeling as a regression to the symbiotic stage of infantile development where the ego boundaries of the infant are not yet individuated and thus are merged with the undifferentiated unity of the mother-child matrix. On his psychogenic account, this feeling is rendered a deposit of unconscious desire, a need to remain tied to the maternal union experienced as the limitless “bond with the universe.” Yet he goes on to say that “there is nothing strange in such a phenomenon, whether in the mental field or elsewhere” for “in mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish—that everything is somehow preserved and that in suitable circumstances (when, for instance, regression goes back far

8 Here I do not mean to imply that value exists in-itself as an objective datum of the universe independent of the human being, as some proponents of moral realism will have, nor the rather pedestrian view of Ronald Dworkin (2013) who equates religion without God as a form of mind-independent value that structures one’s life and underlies the physical structure of the universe that furthermore has an objectively inherent beauty; rather these judgments and experiential realities are necessarily contingent upon human consciousness.

9 Freud (1930), p. 65.

enough) it can once more be brought to light.”<sup>10</sup> Although an argument can be made that one should not hold onto such puerile desires, for the mark of a mature ego is one that relinquishes the need for the fulfillment of such a basic wish, the feeling is nevertheless important here. In fact, here Freud may be accused of committing a genetic fallacy: just because developmental precursors condition later experience does not invalidate the experience itself. Even if we grant Freud the presumption that the oceanic feeling is merely an unconscious artifact, it nevertheless is experienced as such, which serves spiritual needs the psyche cherishes as the reality of the life within. From this standpoint, one’s spirituality does not stand in isolation from the common values we all share or aspire toward. This is the shared meaning of humanism, an ideal worthy of worship.

### Life as art

Nothing can deny the reality of the interior—the life of feeling—something secret, something sacred. Feeling is the ontological basis of spirituality and thus is the necessary condition for all religious experience. A person who does not feel is spiritually languid and suffers internal deprivation, the affliction of a sick soul. Because the order of feeling maintains an ontological priority, it may well be a sufficient condition for leading a spiritual life. In all qualitative variations of religiosity, the value of the lived feeling becomes the essence of spiritual fulfillment.

John Dewey reminds us that experience is aesthetic:<sup>11</sup> life is art and one must live it artfully. The aesthetics of living is enhanced by the spiritual encounter, an experience we may duly call beautiful. The quest for spiritual fulfillment is a process that enjoys many adventures of change, veering from the mundane into the sublime. And for James, “Religion . . . is the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.”<sup>12</sup> Here James circumscribes religious experience to a relativizing tenet, indeed a totalizing self-instituting assertion of freedom as the beatific self-appraisal of the holy. Religious experience cannot stand for a single principle, and because we all have “differing

10 Ibid., pp. 68–69.

11 *Art as Experience*, pp. 3–19.

12 *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 31–32, italics in original.

susceptibilities of emotional excitement, [with] different impulses and inhibitions,”<sup>13</sup> religiosity is relegated to the domain of radicalized subjectivity. Whether bathed in belief or feeling, in the end the personal subjective quality of the lived experience becomes the fundamental phenomenal criterion for judging spiritual sentiment.

One’s spirituality is an extremely intimate enterprise. Ultimately we must decide whether the subjective value of our own quest is justified, and for this we will have to appeal to the overall quality of our lives. The answer may be *prima facie*, available to the bona fide associations of each individual, but sated or not, the question of spirituality existentially moans for a response. The real question is, What enhances the quality of your living? How about others? Does your relation to life bring you overall fulfillment and well-being—the *eudaimonia* of which Aristotle spoke? This is Aristotle’s word for happiness attained when individuals fully realize their lived potential expressed through their inherent capacities. This striving for self-actualization symbolizes the essence of what it means to be fully human.

### **The love of nature**

There is a certain immediate affective response to our encounter with nature. We are drawn to it in its imposing presence, are astonished by the sheer magnitude of its diversity, and accept its beauties and dangers in all its visceral majesty and disgust. Although nature itself is impersonal, showing wholly indifference to the variegated species of life, our relationship to nature can be much more personal and particularized. Fascinating the ponderous soul since antiquity, our love of nature is reflected in the great works of philosophy, poetry, art, architecture, literature, and science that have infiltrated every domain of society throughout human civilization. And the new environmentalists, animal rights advocates, and the guardians of Gaia are astutely aware of our global need to foster a sustainable world where natural habitats, ecosystems, and the biosphere are preserved and protected from human exploitation threatening to destroy our planet.

The romanticism of nature that defined the transcendentalism movement, from Emerson’s *Nature*, to Thoreau’s *Walden*, underscores how the spiritual may be found in solitude as “an original relation to the

13 Ibid., p. 265.

universe.”<sup>14</sup> Being in natural environments, from forests to mountains, country sides to seas, produces an unconscious resonance that connects with the primal earthy dimensions of our animal sensate beginnings, where affective bodily rhythms, melodies, and the prosody of intrapsychic states mirror the topography of our external surroundings. Early sensory and affective organizations tend to cluster into patterns of inner experience that form the foundation in which we construct our personal sense and appreciation of the world.<sup>15</sup> Our earliest experiential relations to sensible objects where desire, sentience, feeling, form, and image often coalesce in an embryonic unconscious language, where difference is contained within symbiotic unification, the particular within the universal given as the whole of nature. Here our relation to nature in its particularized forms and in its given totality conditions the backdrop of meaning we extend to our being in the world, one that is both radically subjective and individualized yet participatory of a greater collective process as shared universality.

Just like seasonal light features and the absence of sun affects our mood, as does the dazzling variety of hues on the color spectrum and the audibility of certain sounds, being in nature returns us to our basic equiprimordially of being at home with our inner world. This return to the organic, to original form, echoes internal natural regulatory processes we equate with stillness, peace, comfort, tranquility, seasonal change, beauty, awe, inclusiveness, unity, love, and so on. From primeval landscapes since the dawn of prehistory to the wonder of life in all transforming ecological environments, the presencing of nature discloses the givenness of our world that transcends a known particular purpose, for we are merely thrown into the blind teleology of existence. The intricacies of natural forms and patterns in all matter and animal bodies, from elemental particle physics to the colossal celestial masses that populate our universe, delight the senses and stimulate a wonderment that allows for aesthetic satisfaction. The visual world of images weds our inner sensuous, affective life to a vibrant corresponding external reality, not merely as a bland cerebral processing of informational events, but as the synthetic binding of feeling to Being.

Just as the sounds of natural phenomena such as crickets on a summer night, pouring rain, thunderstorms, forest life, ocean waves, trickling

14 Emerson (1990), p. 3.

15 See Marilyn Charles (2002). Cf. Mills (2010), pp. 232–233.



brooks, and so on soothes the senses and induces blissful sleep, we cannot help but be drawn to natural aesthetics and the ensuing flow of emotional resonance states that subsequently unfold. From the cosmic panorama of deep infinite space to the enigma of fractals, our fascination with botany, animal species, geography, land masses, bodies of water, and their myriad inhabitants speaks of our profound attraction to the phenomena of nature. In the poetic words of Whitman, “A morning-glory at my window satisfies me more than the/ metaphysics of books.”<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the natural instantiation of Being itself is where we may find our divinity principle.

Environmental self-consciousness is itself a form of spiritual communion with nature, as a coextensive ethical relation to the Earth. The religious and secularist alike cannot deny the inherent spiritual expression of our relation to natural environments, as it broaches multifarious overlapping feelings of beauty, admiration, aesthetic taste, peacefulness, emotional warmth, moral consciousness, and so on united in an ideal or conceptual appreciation of the interdependency of psyche and world as a dynamic complex holism. This spiritual awareness occurs when spending time outdoors and may be cultivated in a variety of ways, as any ecologist, conservationist, forester, bird watcher, or gardener will tell you, or it may be more directly pursued through physical activity in specific natural ecosystems, such as hiking or canoeing, including thrill seeking behavior designed by extreme sports enthusiasts in search of a natural high or peak experience. Here the love of nature involves a concrete engagement with the material world as an authentic expression of the soul.

## **Happiness**

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle provides the first comprehensive treatise on virtue in the history of Western philosophy. Here he introduces many notions that point toward living a good life, among which is the pursuit of happiness. As psychological creatures we seek something that is good, as this is what we ultimately aim to achieve in our thoughts and actions, hence happiness is good. But what is happiness exactly? Living well and doing well is often associated with being happy, but this is far from a sufficient condition. Conventional wisdom tends to

16 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, Song of Myself, Part 24.

equate happiness with pleasure, which is both desirable and experientially fulfilling, but pleasure may be a fleeting moment that does not fully capture the phenomenology of happiness. For Aristotle, happiness is the ultimate purpose and end goal of human existence. As such, happiness is an idealized category of experience and emotional attainment that may participate of many features, some of which are more primal and conducive to the senses, while other dimensions are psychologically refined and develop from a more mature standpoint of cultivated human consciousness.

It would be very insincere, if not nihilistically deflating, to argue against the value of enjoyment in life, as most of us live for this qualitative aspect of existence. But slavish concession to base consumption and the immediate pursuit of gratification or hedonism is not what Aristotle had in mind. Happiness entails much more than pleasure, although we may say that without pleasure, enjoyment, and satisfaction in life, one could not be rightfully happy. Most of humanity faces this challenge, namely, finding happiness, especially when there is so much suffering in the world. This is why Aristotle conceived of *eudaimonia* as a nurtured process rather than something you find through a step-by-step method endemic to modern mentality hungry for quick fixes and self-help cures. In fact, we may say that the question of happiness has become a profound psychological emergency fueling the spiritual crisis in contemporary American culture desperate to embrace new age experimentation, including forays into Eastern spiritual practices like yoga, meditation, Zen, tantric sex, Feng Shui (or in more earthy fashions, the use of crystals, aroma therapy, etc.), obsessions with health, nutrition, wellness, and exercise, such as the craze of eating organic foods and utilizing personal trainers instead of initiating psychotherapy, or conversely, the resurgence in drug indulgence such as the recreational use of marijuana and psychedelics. We may rightfully conclude that all these forms of experimentation are attempts at cultivating or recovering some semblance of the spiritual.

For Aristotle, happiness is among the things that are most prized, the result of excellence derived from a special activity of the psyche aimed toward achieving the best ends.<sup>17</sup> Here happiness may be said to be a movement or action, not a condition or a procured thing, but rather a striving toward the ultimate self-actualization of a psychological *telos*.

17 *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk I, 1099b1, 26.

Among these ends are the cultivation of virtue and noble character in one's journey toward having a complete existence. In this regard, happiness is the exercise of virtue that culminates in a fulfilled life, hence it is a natural goal rather than a temporary state that is not garnered until the end of our lives. As an ideal, "happiness is an activity of soul in accordance with complete excellence,"<sup>18</sup> which contains both intellectual and moral wisdom, but it may be argued that this ideal can never be properly attained, only approximated, for we are always in a process of becoming, and hence by definition are incomplete because we lack. It is the *pursuit* of human excellence that is the main point, one we may only broach imperfectly yet value as one of the greatest goods attainable by man.

As a coveted end in-itself, happiness may be said to be a mixture of qualitative pleasure or enjoyment in living along with an overall sense of contentment. And for Aristotle, to be content is to look back at one's life and feel one has adequately achieved a sense of excellence in pursuing the good, where intellectual and moral refinement has been adequately attained through the activities of a contemplative and practical life. Here one must not only think and meditate on the good, truth, justice, beauty, wisdom, and so on, but one must also *act* in accordance with such worthy principles. Therefore, happiness requires cultivation of the intellect, contemplation of goodness, development of honorable character, and ethical comportment in the service of leading a meaningful life. If we may interpret the meaning of happiness following this general formula, then perhaps we are justified in thinking that the pursuit of virtue is what is truly "divine," namely, that which is present within us as *valuation* living in the soul.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps it is enough for us to say that happiness is to be found in becoming good. This is the expression of spirit, for ministering to value is what qualitatively gives life its luster. The satisfaction and contentment that comes with this type of success means making the right choices as an exercise in liberty and habituation. Such choices are informed through the multiple identifications we adopt based on our values and ideals. Here it may be said that the celebration of the human spirit is to be found in the striving and actualization of what we can potentially become, namely, happy.

18 Ibid., 1102a1, 5.

19 Cf. Ibid., Bk X, 1177b1, 27.

## Friendship

A human being cannot be happy without friends. This is why Aristotle elevated *φιλία* (friendship) to the pinnacle of happiness as the union of enjoyment and virtue (*arête*), “a single soul abiding in two bodies.”<sup>20</sup> This is spirit in its highest form, what is “most indispensable for life.”<sup>21</sup> Here friendship is a special breed of kinship that is coveted most of all, for it typifies a coalition between minds and personalities valued for their intrinsic worth, simultaneously a relation toward value and expression of the good.

While there are many types or forms of friendship, from pleasure to utility and/or mutual benefit, guest-hospitality, neighborliness, interpersonal reciprocity, companionship, and social collegiality motivated by a broad range of private and political interests, what is most prized and cherished is true or primary friendship based on a joint bond that intimately engages the emotional, intellectual, and moral dimensions of the other grounded in the mutual pursuit and appreciation of virtue for its own sake. This is an ideal for which most will never achieve.

The presence of the spiritual in friendship is based on its intimate, animating, and evolving organic nature, which is neither effortless nor automatic, for it needs continual nurturing to be sustained. Friendship is not an imposed obligation, nor is it based on extrinsic circumstances such as being born into a family or having relatives, but rather it is elective and selective. This makes friendship a matter of choice and not merely a social institution that one participates in by virtue of our thrownness. This is why you cannot have many primary friendships, as it takes hard work to maintain such commitments to others we selectively choose to value and give to. They are also not easy to find because many psychological variables often come into play that make mutual enjoyment and compatibility of fit a requisite. One should consider themselves lucky if they can count their friends on one hand in their entire lifetime.

Central to the development of these selective relationships is a special form of attachment, one based on love (*philia*), which we typically designate as non-erotic, more like the brotherly affection of *agape* as positive regard for the well-being of our fellow man, but based on love nonetheless, one that is deeply personal and emotionally gratifying.

20 This quote is attributed to Aristotle by Diogenes Laërtius in the third century ACE in his biographical work, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, Bk 5: The Peripatetics, Aristotle 9.

21 *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk VIII, 1154b1, 1, 5.

Friendship is an exemplary form of interpersonal relations where affectionate ties support a mutually reciprocal appreciation and respect for the other as distinct selves but also conjoined through collective identification and feelings of shared meaning.

What constitutes the basic ingredient of an authentic primary friendship is the unconditional acceptance of the other. Like trust,<sup>22</sup> such acceptance is earned. It is not a generic attitude one flagrantly casts toward abstract humanity; rather, it is selective, acquired, and enduring only after confidence and trust have been repeatedly established over a period of time. It may be argued that it is very difficult to have this type of relationship with anyone at all, as it is too high of a standard to achieve, let alone with someone who is perceived to be unequal or lacking in character and virtue. While certain differences in personality, taste, aesthetics, and social attitudes may be proportional or even overlooked, a person's inherent character and moral sensibilities are adjudicated along with their honor. If people do not match on this level, true friendship is impossible.

Intellectual companionship is another mark of compatibility among equals, as we seek to acquire universal knowledge and engage the greater questions that concern the human mind. Here friends aspire to know, learn from each other, support and encourage their development, and stimulate and inspire the other to become and achieve their potential. This is often based on shared identifications even if the specific content and subjective nature of their values vary. This usually involves a simpatico in individual psychologies where concord or harmony is fostered as well as mutual play, for without playfulness, joviality, and laughter no one can be said to be truly happy. And if such cheerfulness and mirth transpires over libation, then all the more is the elevation of spirit, for there is nothing better in the moment than a good laugh over a drink.

True friendship involves empathy for the other, for we are motivated to feel for their joy and pain as a primary way of relating and being toward their personhood. Through the establishment of mutual trust and acceptance, friends confide in their secrets, relaying hopes and sorrows, where one speaks freely and openly marked by honesty and without the need to censor certain thoughts or verbalizations, including sharing in one's psychological struggles, disappointments, suffering, and emotional

22 In the *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle highlights that the mark of a stable friendship is attained through the development of reciprocal confidence and trust (*pistis*). See 1237b8–14. Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk VIII, 1156b30.

vulnerability without fear of judgment or reproach. This empathic stance conveys an internal beauty as each feels felt, understood, accepted, and loved by the other. Here true friendship is the mirror reflection and extension of the ideal self. This means that we suffer when they suffer, celebrate when they have good fortune and success, and feel their felt-relation and attunement to our subjective modes of being, as they do ours.

Although friendships can be competitive and exhibit rivalry, this is often expressed in a good natured spirit of sportsmanship without direct envy and with upmost respect for the value of the other as an individuated self. There is a lack of jealousy among best friends, as we gain from their gain and vicariously feel satisfaction, pride, and enjoyment in their accomplishments. Friends who are able to demonstrate affection, be open in discourse, and convey empathic expressions of affective attunement, acknowledgment, and support during times of vulnerability are the closest, for when our defenses are weakened and we are emotionally fragile, the unconditional acceptance of true friendship is reaffirmed through the mutual recognition and validation of the other. This also echoes an ethical stance of reciprocal love and supersedes the mere principle of friendship through the very acts of *demonstrating*—hence exemplifying—such ideal embodiments of virtue. When genuine care is displayed and received, primary friendship acts as a psychological container or holding environment for spirit to feel, heal, and thrive. Here we may say that true friendship provides necessary transitional space and fulfills attachment needs and selfobject experiences that may be compared to the God function, with the exception that the divinity of friendship is actualized in reality rather than remains interred as an internal relation to a fantasized object. But what do we have when primary friendship exceeds mere friendship? In other words, can friendship surpass itself? Here I can think of no better form of therapy than the embrace of friendship and romantic love.

### **Being in love, eros, and ecstasy**

Sexuality is spiritual, as two souls conjoin through their bodies. Sexual relations with your partner, especially when one is in love, is one of the most spiritual and intense emotional experiences one can have. As feelings of elation bathed in physical pleasure, love introduces a seemingly moral merger of minds embraced in mutual adoration and desire, to the

point that we may rapturously call it beautiful. This union of value is represented by the cosmic sexuality of Tantra, the cult of ecstasy that occupies special sentiments of Hindu religion, ritual, emotive symbolism, and art. This is why Indians adorn their temples with graphic scenes of lovers in myriad sexual positions, such as the copulation reliefs at Khajuraho, and why Tantric sex is practiced for its prolonged spiritual integration of body, mind, and soul.

It is no coincidence that visions of excess and religious ecstasy often refer to the great unconditional love of God, as in Bernini's orgasmic depiction of *The Ecstasy of St. Theresa* of Avila, for love is an ideal state of ultimate being. This is why so many people(s) from a variety of faiths experience their God and religion as expressions of absolute love—pure beatitude. But being in love in the romantic sense carries its own exalted feelings of bliss that many people, perhaps the majority, would likely say is what they desire most of all. The notion of having another—of possession and being possessed, of losing one's sense of self and separate boundaries of identity, of incorporation or engulfment, of suspending one's personal needs, of valuing the other more than yourself—all of which are part of giving oneself over to the ideal love object. These are ways spiritual transcendence is experienced by religious votaries when describing the numinous.

When one is in love there is a playful sense of carefreeness, or more precisely, a lack of caring where there are no longer concerns about your immediate personal existence, where you are on the verge of transcending your body as a sense of (or the feeling itself of) suspending your consciousness in that moment. Daily consciousness is reformulated and expanded through the heightened emotional immediacy of realizing what matters most to your valuing soul, where the adored love object becomes divine and most coveted. This is fortified by mutual feelings of reciprocity.

Being in love, or in its initial idealizing stage, "falling" in love, captures a qualitative state of transcendence that is non-volitional nor self-directed, because it just happens to us. Falling in love is something that overcomes you and experientially seizes the very fabric of your being. This seizure is something that suddenly comes over you like a fever, hence compelling you to surrender to its pull or force, where the sense of pleasure and euphoria is excessive. The all-pervading goodness of love produces qualitative degrees of intensity in emotions, such as elation, as well as degrees of valence in *eros*. Sexual passion is always an unconscious goal operative in romantic love even when conscious desire is

subdued, for sexuality is the physical expression of love on this most instinctual level. It is not surprising that people often refer to sex while being in love as a “natural high,” for there is a notion of suspension or dissociation from daily life in these moments of being “lost” in love to the point that one does not want it to end. This also enters the domain of *jouissance*, the realm of excess in pleasure, to the degree that it transgresses the limits of enjoyment, for we unrealistically wish to bask in it forever. But we could not function if we were always in this state, as it signifies an unenforceable limit situation, the boundaries of which are unsustainable and hence open to a destructive surplus bringing inevitable negative consequences, such as seen in how precipitous affairs ruin many good marriages and fracture families disputing over the custody and access of their children.

People who live their lives on the run, going from one person to the next in the pursuit of sexual conquest, undermine the greater sense of value in developing an enduring loving relationship for the transient thrill of immediate gratification. These individuals often struggle with the capacity to form genuine attachments to others, where giving, providing, and nurturing emotional connections is deficient and lacking, which condemn them to cycles of impermanent relationships or a life of loneliness. Here attachment to others is the most important aspect of having a qualitative life, without which spirit suffers. For the classical world, Eros was much more than base sexual desire, but rather the desire for the good, including rational, moral, and social justice that reflected the political nature of the polis. While sex is an erotic and aesthetic enhancement to the spiritual union of souls, the passion for the good reflects virtuous character so prized among the ancients. This is why the praise and pursuit of the good lends extraordinary value to human ideality, and why the lover of wisdom aspires to live and lead an ethical life.

### **Broaching the ethical**

There is a certain ecstasy that comes from intellectual work, but perhaps this is more emotionally accentuated when we feel we have broached the ethical. The self-revelation of our ideal desires can never be fully sheltered from those who we engage in honest discourse, for our authentic call of conscience can hardly remain silent. When we embrace the spiritual as a moral enterprise, we must mollify the tension between the realistic or practical and the ideal through some form of negotiation or conciliatory stance



we often call genuineness or authenticity, namely, the honest self-appraisal we adopt in relation to moral principles and action. This especially applies when we feel compelled to live up to a professed self-ideal.

Philosophers long ago have alerted us to the broad and contradictory array of ethical systems that characterize our moral discourse, valuation practices, and formal axiological categories to the point that one could be easily overwhelmed when determining the right course of moral appraisal. From ancient to modern times, relative, teleological, deontological, and utilitarian perspectives have championed many diverse positions including (but not limited to) ethical absolutism, objectivism, dualism, skepticism, stoicism, egoism, conventionalism, hedonism, consequentialism, nihilism, naturalism, constructivism, pragmatism, intuitionism, eudaimonism, virtue theory, and philosophies of right. There are so many *-isms* that it unavoidably creates a schism in conceptual thought and practice. Although we may perhaps agree that each ethical position promulgates a legitimate kernel of sensibility, it is not so clear that they may have any immediate, discernable degree of spiritual utility.

Each person is thrown into ontic valuation with others that inevitably challenge our own moral proclivities or way of being, including our own self-relation to our evolving ethical consciousness. Regardless of what telic vision we have for our lives, we cannot escape the fact that each of us is continually faced with redefining the personal dimensions of conducting an authentic life, and this necessarily entails a confrontation with the moral parameters that define our self-identity. I am not concerned here with arguing for the existence of ethical properties, which is the position of moral realism, nor do I wish to advance the notion of ethical subjectivism through the negation of objective moral truth.<sup>23</sup> Rather, what becomes important for spiritual inquiry is how subjective moral agency is constituted and engaged.

Regardless of the perennial debate surrounding what constitutes ethical identity, such as one's moral obligations, belief systems, duties, and justified actions, all ethical decisions are filtered through the subjective lens of our own personalities, developmental histories, unconscious conflicts, transference proclivities, and emotional dispositions. It is from this standpoint that

23 In the history of Western and Anglo-American philosophy, "moral realism" is a metaphysical view committed to the objectivity of ethics such as moral facts and properties that exist independent of consciousness (e.g., people's beliefs about right and wrong); while "ethical subjectivism," sometimes equated with "ethical constructivism," is the belief that moral facts and truths are constituted and dependent upon an individual's state of mind.

we must necessarily engage our own internal processes when confronting the ethical. When we engage our moral agency, we have a tendency to suspend other considerations for the primacy of inner experience that speaks to us as an emotional call or summons we feel deep within our interior. Notwithstanding the sober grasp of reason that may inform other reflective capacities, we are often drawn to the emotionality of the ideal that, whether based in illusion or reality, captures us within the affective immediacy of our conscience or moral register, including the impulse to take ethical action. We are always faced with a calculated risk when it comes to self-expression, for every subjective act communicates some form of self-valuation. We feel compelled to speak authentically even if we remain silent, even if we are self-conscious or ambivalent that such authenticity may negate the authenticity of the other. Who has not become conscientious when speaking openly about one's values to others?

Our superego visits us in both passivity and activity, that is, whether we disclose our personal views to others or whether we decide to keep them in abeyance, mindful of their sensitivities despite the fact that our mindfulness may betray our personal moral principles under the rule of not wanting to offend others. In either case, we are under the sway of internal judgments that guide our actions, which in turn lay down "definitive standards for [our] conduct."<sup>24</sup> In this way, ethics obey a *logic of the interior* based on emotional resonance states and affective truths that reverberate within our souls grounded in our primordial identifications with the parental agency or its surrogate within the cultural symbolic, including all related derivatives.<sup>25</sup> Morality no longer remains an external presence: it becomes an internal presence based on internalized negation and absence, that is, the dialectic of prohibition and lack as desire for the

24 See Freud (1933), p. 78.

25 Unlike Klein who views the origins of the superego as sadistic expression, for Freud, the superego (*Überich*) is a developmental achievement based upon the complex divisions and modifications the ego undergoes through maturation, differentiations that originally emanate from the epigenetic transformations of the unconscious. The superego is therefore a superior psychic construction based on ethical identifications with otherness, hence truly an agency that stands over the I (*Ich*) and unconscious impulse. Although Freud's views on the superego went through many theoretical modifications, his insistence on its later development out of primitive mind was due to his conviction that the superego was originally conceived as an identification with a set of value ideals internalized and appropriated from parental authority or its cultural signifier. Here Freud wants to preserve the importance of the psychic function of ideality within the moral register we have come to call conscience.

ideal.<sup>26</sup> Ideality always remains something personal and private, hallowed and clandestine, yet capable of transcending personal subjectivity within a collectively shared identification system. But even when ideality is collectively united, it is never devoid of personal ownership or what we commonly refer to as “mine,” for this is the affective invigoration that defines our unconscious soul, what Hegel refers to as the “law of the heart.”

Ethics is not merely a set of prescribed precepts that inform a procedural code of conduct; it becomes an internalized law—what is both sacrosanct and taboo. Ethics is inner experience—the reverberation of inner truth, even if that truth is transient, dubious, dissolute. When we are attuned to our interior, we seek to express it outwardly in order to make it more real, to validate its presence—to vitalize our immediate self-certainty. This is the call of spirit, the coming into being of pure self-consciousness. Yet it is unacceptable to sequester ethical consciousness to the domain of immaculate thought alone, the dilemma of the “beautiful soul,”<sup>27</sup> where one is split or divided in knowing ideality but unable to actualize it, for we must *act* in order to make it real. When our moral agency is called up, we feel compelled to assert our interior as a matter of principle regardless of the costs, perhaps later justified as a heroic stand for championing our ego ideal. Indeed this compulsion may take the form of a defensive impulse to fulfill our wish to become our ideal ego through the act of self-assertion via negation of others who harbor differing values; hence our ego ideal is validated and our ideal ego advanced in

26 In Hegel’s logic of the dialectic (see Mills, 2002a), negation is an act of every movement of thought by entering into opposition with any object we conceive, for oppositions are conjoined and are mutually implicative in all aspects of thinking and being, including unconscious fantasy. At the moment a certain object in thought is negated, it is also preserved within a new state of consciousness, as it is simultaneously surpassed into a higher plane of synthesis. An internal moral stance derived from identification with and internalization of the Other, is based on a dialectical relation that necessarily requires negation of a particular experience (e.g., a specific value, propositional attitude, etc.) that stands in opposition to its complementary relation, which is incorporated as an implicit yearning of what is absent, hence endowed as an idealized object. Therefore, moral presence within the psyche is conditioned on certain prohibitions as well as coveted value judgments that stand in relation to pursuing an ideal, a doubling effect of the dialectic of desire.

27 See Hegel’s (1807) introduction of the beautiful soul as an unhappy consciousness, which is the inherent bifurcation of the psyche that has ethical strivings based in its identification with ideality and the divine, but is also a creature of natural desire that is imperfect and cannot live up to such lofty standards despite its purity in contemplating the ethical. Here we have a divided subject that knows the good but is unable to actualize it in its ideality so it remains ensconced in despair (*PS* § 658).

that instance of self-posit. It is here when our identification with ideality breaches other sensibilities and pragmatic concerns to the point that moral proselytizing can supersede. But what I have in mind here is the subjective need to consult one's own ideal interiority. This is the domain of virtue theory, namely, what is good, what is right, what is best, what makes for desirable character, what the Greeks call human excellence.

A person's life is not adequate unless one engages the question of the moral. This requires us all to undertake an honest moral appraisal of our interior. This is arguably not easy, as I am aware of the untold problems in defining clear ground-rules for when, where, and how to act, not to mention the equivocal epistemological foundation of moral action; but I do nevertheless believe that we have an obligation to ourselves to impart the value of self-insight, and in this way aspire toward eudaimonism, namely, ideality—what the ancients called the good life—contemplative, content, just. Notice here that I say “aspire,” for an ideal may never be fully achieved, only approached. And this always entails the endeavor to lead an ethical life, albeit imperfectly; for the enlightened soul, according to Plato, is the unification of the passions, reason, and morality actualized through leading a good life. But this necessarily produces a certain degree of *pathos*, for suffering is part and parcel of the striving for the good. From this standpoint, the pursuit of ideality becomes an infinite, poignant striving perennially fraught with conflict.

As did the Platonists to the Idealists, I am of the opinion that we can approximate an ideal, but there is always a limit to attaining it by virtue of the fact that ideality is an embodied (abstract) perfection,<sup>28</sup> which I believe cannot be fully achieved. When we admire or strive for an ideal, it is because we identify with and covet it, and this is in all likelihood because we lack it. Hence absence is an important attribute to the labor for ideality because, with qualifications, we would not desire an ideal if we were already in possession of it; and even if we were, we would continue to desire it in order for it to be maintained. When I speak of ideality here, I am generally referring to the greatest valued principles, such as love, wisdom, truth, justice, beauty, empathy, compassion, and other virtues. We can approximate these things, but I believe, as well as others, that we

28 Here I may be similarly guilty of Anselm's conviction that the ideality of God must be actual in reality, hence an embodied instantiation, rather than pure perfection conceived as conceptual thought.

always fall short of attaining them in their most pristine forms, for ideals are ultimately abstract formal concepts. But through particular concrete actions, we can nonetheless attain some form of satisfaction or fulfillment in our approximation or striving toward the ideal. This endeavor for the ideal is a mirror reflection of spirit as ethical being in-and-for-itself.

### **Aesthetic rapture**

If spiritual life is contingent upon the development and refinement of the psyche, which is ultimately about the cultivation of mind, then pursuing an intellectual and moral way of being is part of *spiritus*. But what about the aesthetic dimension to spirit? Is not the mind itself beautiful, if not the most beautiful thing of all, that which creates value and ideality to such a degree that it cannot surpass its own value? This deification of mind is what we typically attribute to God, the source of all divinity. But here divinity rests on the shoulders of human creation, that which we attribute to objects and bestow with ideality by virtue of the fact that we covet them and reproduce artistic representations of what they signify to our interiority as fulfilling ideal standards, even if these representations are imperfect or perceptually ugly.

In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel tells us that “artistic beauty stands *higher* than nature. For the beauty of art is the beauty that is born . . . of the mind.”<sup>29</sup> Here Hegel is underscoring the metaphysical commitment that the life of *Geist* is categorically superior to impersonal nature, namely, that which lacks consciousness, and is therefore more beautiful. Art, and particularly fine art—architecture, sculpture, painting/pictorial representations, music, and poetry—is “divine,” the perceptual appearance of “what is godlike.”<sup>30</sup> Here we may say that artistic beauty signifies the appearance of God,<sup>31</sup> which for Hegel is an expression of the absolute truth of self-consciousness as *Begriff*, the self-reflective movement of knowledge derived from and forged through the unification and culmination of spirit. In other words, what makes art stand over nature in beauty is that it is ultimately about human subjectivity.<sup>32</sup> Beauty “is the sensory

29 Hegel (1835/1842), p. 4.

30 *G.W.F. Hegel's Werke*, XIII, p. 151.

31 Compare to Wicks (1993), p. 349.

32 For Hegel, “what is human constitutes the center and content of true beauty and art” (*G.W.F. Hegel's Werke*, XIV, p. 19).

*appearance* of the idea,<sup>33</sup> namely, that which symbolically encapsulates the highest ideals of humanity. And what makes artistic beauty divine is not that it reveals God's presence, but rather it speaks to ideality generated by the human mind. Art reveals this truth through sensory modes of perception where the ideals and values of human culture are instantiated as concrete realizations in the movement of humanity seeking to express and complete itself. Here ideals as rationally apprehended valuations are embodied in representational forms of artistic expression, and hence reflect the higher achievements of mental life that define a given civilization.

The essence of art is *expressivity* derived from mental creativity grounded in affective sentience and teleologically captured through the displacement of mechanical manipulations of raw material onto sensory form. In other words, art is intentional. Regardless of our subjective predilections, aesthetic acumens, and/or criticisms toward objects of art (with regards to quality, form, medium, content, symbolism, perceptual presentation, visceral reaction, and so on), sensation, percept, and affect often coalesce in any aesthetic judgment. In aesthetic experience we inevitably face the question of whether we find the object or event pleasing to us, and this stimulates unconscious echoes that become projected onto the sensory object of judgment. This is why Hegel (as well as many others before and after him have) placed a high premium on the value of feeling and the stir of emotions solicited by the luring aesthetic object. But this emotionality is conjoined in symbiotic meaning with the sensory experience of encountering a sublime object of ideality, a *felt-meaning* corresponding with the presentation of the subject matter of sensation and the inner timbre it generates in the soul. This is why aesthetics is the locus of satisfaction, where we want to become. The thought of its loss is symbolic of death, tantamount to the loss of meaning and pleasure.

Because art is statements about the psyche, aesthetic experience may be said to exist on a continuum of qualitative states of taste and discernment, from the prosaic to the rapturous; or conversely, the hideous and profane. Regardless of the medium or content, art is the concrete manifestation of inner experience. Kandinsky saw the spiritual in the "internal truth of art," which is reflective of both the individual soul and the

33 G.W.F. Hegel's *Werke*, XIII, p. 151.

collective whole, “the vital impulse of life.”<sup>34</sup> He saw art as the inner need, necessity, or sounding (*innerer Klang*) of humanity seeking an object “realized in feeling,” which is ultimately “free.”<sup>35</sup> Here the notion of freedom becomes the essence of spirituality, for only an unhindered soul can express itself by adapting form to enunciate inner meaning.

In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel proposes an architectonic, structural hierarchy of human aesthetic development beginning with architecture then advancing to sculpture, painting, and music, culminating in poetry. Notwithstanding contemporary criticism of Hegel’s philosophy of aesthetics, without trying to make comparisons in artistic valuation, I have always felt that music is at the summit of aesthetic expression, for it conjoins the primordial domains of desire, prosody, rhythmic pattern, emotionality, form, content, and conceptual elucidation contextualized through sound and lyrical articulation. Whether through the instrumental music of the great composers to the improvisational sound of jazz to vocalization, the inner being of the voice of soul speaks to the infinite, namely, the “spirit realm of sound.”<sup>36</sup> Music unites the immediacy of sensation with emotion harmonized into a formal order, even if amorphous or lacking in symmetry; and when words are incorporated as voice through singing, spirit is released even more, for language binds meaning in affect, sound, and symbol experienced as a deep emotional reverberation that captures the full dimension of the feeling soul. Singing and song directly convey spirit in festivity, sorrow, and celebration as the aliveness (and emotional pain) of psyche, the rapture of soul.

It may be said that all of the fine arts, as well as art culture in general, solicits an emotional engagement with our interior. In doing so, aesthetic experience is spiritual insofar as it is the expression of the sociality of human subjectivity. As an artefact of mental creativity, the art object embodies spirituality for it reflects the complexity and interiority of human experience as inner pulse, that of unconscious feeling. Art is ultimately about the expression of the psyche that emits metaphysical knowledge, which is both perceived and conceived through human self-consciousness, a merger of the sensuous and the conceptual where the configurations of the social, ethical, and spiritual interlace at the highest level of aesthetic value. And here the notion of art itself is reflective

34 Kandinsky (1911), pp. 20, 22.

35 Ibid., pp. 62, 25, 63.

36 E.T.A Hoffman (1814), p. 64.

of a higher valuation as sensuous beauty mirrors an ideal form of humanity.

### **Transcendence and time**

Spiritual experience is imbued with diachronies that punctuate the pervasiveness of lived time. One could have a very immediate sense of temporal presence or a suspended sense of being in the moment that may involve a dissociative or trancelike feeling of timelessness, precisely because you are no longer preoccupied with the present apprehension of temporal events or current concerns that envelop everyday consciousness. The diachronic experience of time is that there is a sensation of interruption with ordinary sequential time: it could be that lived time is experienced as long when it is short, minimal when it is quantitatively enduring, fleeting when it is protracted, or unaccounted for, such as a depersonalized loss of time when one is in a state of psychogenic fugue, meditation, or mystical absorption. Here time is both instituted and constituted in the moment of our living experience as we live it, which may entail a (felt) adjournment of consciousness as withering streams of awareness, or conversely, an attunement and intensity of self-consciousness as heightened self-reflectivity that directs our focus of awareness to a particularized moment of lived experience.

While pondering the infinite, Husserl discovered the double continuity of time-consciousness that apprehends the presence of the past and the future in the immediate present moment of awareness as an intentional act of relating to meant objects.<sup>37</sup> Husserl theorized that the origin of subjective experience sprang from an originating or generative center in which all appearances arise, and that each moment is its own center responsible for engendering time. In *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, Husserl referred to this center as “a point of actuality, primal source-point” in which time generates itself, “that from which springs the ‘now’.”<sup>38</sup> Each present moment is held together by its simultaneous relation to the past and the future as a doubly continuous instant preserved in dialectical continuity. The double continuity of new presence,

37 See Husserl (1964). For a nice overview, Cecile Tougas (2013) provides a succinct elaboration of Husserl’s notion of subjectivity and the double intentionality of time-consciousness (see pp. 50–65).

38 Husserl (1964), § 36, p. 100.



of the bipolar reiteration of itself in every fresh moment of experience, ensures that the continuously new presence of the “now” becomes the ground of all appearances. Our subjectivity of time always corresponds to a “new now” whether one is reflecting on the past, the present, or an imagined or anticipated future state that has not actually occurred.

Our attunement to presence involves a lived sense of “passing” and “enduring” within our moment-to-moment awareness of meant objects, which is both an act of “transcendence” and “immanence.” For Husserl, the ego or consciousness is a transcendental structure that generates forms of subjectivity in and through time where there is no formal division of subject from object. Here subject and object, self and world are conjoined as a whole or superordinate totality only separated by moments, hence abnegating the vicious bifurcation between nature and mind. It is in the bracketed act of *epoché* (ἐποχή) or reduction that reveals the world as a correlate of consciousness, which is performed by the pre-reflective transcendental ego. So when Husserl speaks of time as instantaneously transcendent and immanent, he is also speaking of the psyche in general. That which is given to consciousness is as much a transcendent objectivity as it is subjectively constituted. The feeling or thought of something beyond us or in abundance of us that is temporally present to our immediate lived experience is a form of transcendence, as is the notion of anticipating the coming to presence or innateness of that experience arising in us. Such transcendental immanence, so to speak, is often infused through spiritual or mystical unities as a radically subjective act of meaningful lived qualia.

Time is a succession of phases experienced through our river of consciousness, a patterned fluidity of perishing awareness that contains the coming into being and passing away into nothing of its previous series of moments, what we may call phenomenal diachronies of difference and change within a transmuting process of persistence. There are beginnings and endings, openings and closings, both ephemeral yet permanent. Time is pure flow and unrest, at once continuous yet spontaneous and fleeting, for as soon as you try to pin it down, it is already gone. Each moment is merely a transitory conduit to a new movement or mode of experience within an interconnected chain of moments containing past, present, and future (not to mention their gradations of closest to farthest, undiscernible to palpable, in their sequence) all standing in dynamic relation to one another. Yet there is a universality to time that is ontologically invariant as sheer process.

Time is not merely a theoretical abstraction, for we feel its presence, its coming and going, that which is momentarily here then gone, only to be cyclically present as a dialectic of passing-over into a ceasing-to-be only to enter into a new movement of becoming that is retained through enduring experience encountered as transient intervals of length and intensity. At the same time we may view time as an incorporeal condition, an immateriality of pure event, namely, experience itself. Yet experience is a temporal embodiment. On the one hand time is not an entity, literally no-thing, and in this sense immaterial; yet on the other it exists as actuality governed by natural laws of patterned continuity, duration, perishing, and succession as a flux of appearing modes of becoming. Time is always coming, going, and is *here*, hence developing, transitioning, succumbing, and expiring yet never fully ceasing, as it is born anew as an eternal presence and recurrence within an ordered series of temporal modalities and periods.

Paradoxically, we may even say there is no such thing as pure time independent of mind, as it is merely a formal concept; rather time is constituted through embodied space, hence its appearance is always enmattered yet nowhere to be seen. To be more specific, because mind is embodied activity, temporal experience is only possible through cognition. And here the notion of time takes on its own phenomenological encounters. Time is neither static nor fixed, nor is it a tangible thing that can be appropriated, for it is invisible and indivisible yet it transpires in a series of spacings each of us inhabit in our mental and material worlds; and this is why it is more appropriate to think of our experiential relation to spacetime as a fused event. Here the essence of time is process.

Our relationship to presence and absence, finitude and eternity, flux and permanence, all presuppose our intimate dynamic relation to what I call *temporal mediacy*.<sup>39</sup> Here time draws on the (a) *archaic primacy* of our past as the amalgamation of our historicities, ontological preconditions, and developmental trajectories, the (b) *immediational presence* of the phenomenology of our present (concrete and qualitatively) lived experience as mediated immediacy, and (c) the *projective teleology* of the imagined future as a valued ideal, goal, or purposive aim. These three simultaneous facets of temporal mediacy are operative at any given moment in psychic tandem where the past and future convene on the

39 See my explication of temporal mediacy in *Origins*, pp. 54–56.

present, or immediate, subjective experience. The presentational encounters of past, present, and future we confront as immediacy become our metaphysical relation to time, albeit phenomenologically realized in the here-and-now.

The phenomena of awareness involves our immediate immersion in what we presently desire, feel, perceive, think, remember, emote, cognize, or otherwise experience as an internal temporal relation to intentional objects in reality or fantasy mediated by unconscious agency. And just as Freud reminds us that the unconscious is timeless,<sup>40</sup> the nature of consciousness as such is its epigenetic instantiation and dialectical contrary that fractures its primordial cosmic eternity by introducing temporal enactments in and through qualitative experience, namely, that which we live. Here the intervening notion of self-reflective or introspective awareness introduces a self-consciousness most of us want to retreat from in psychological denial or despair. Our lived relation to time commands us to respond to an encroaching spiritual emergency we often wish to postpone—the fact that we are going to *die*, which is the end of time as we know it. Ever try to buy time? The awareness of our transience—the momentary nature of our existence, versus those who live in disavowal, repression, or a dissociative state of denial over our inexorable demise, brings a certain existential pressure to experience life while it is *still here*, an urgency that we cannot afford to myopically ignore.

Awareness of the evanescent nature of life and experience breaks down this denial of death, for you become more attuned to the fleeting nature of your personal existence and what this psychologically signifies through such attuned awareness. When we start living life from this existential standpoint of attunement toward our impending death, we often hear the call of what is most important. When we acclimatize ourselves to this mode of embracing the triteness of momentary existence, this facilitates a transition to a new state of consciousness where everyday concerns become insignificant in the grand scheme of things. The trivialities of personal esoteric matters become less important when confronting the omnipotent face of our imminent death, where extraneous worries of daily life become irrelevant, vain, or pointless. In this regard, the spiritual path is an exercise in arcane freedom as the pursuit and liberation from the chains of daily life oriented toward attaining something more

40 See Freud (1933), Vol. 22, p. 74.

meaningful. This is what we may rightfully call transcendence, whether this is experienced as the communion or unity of consciousness with nature, the felt mystical loss of self in otherness as a merged totality, the joy of relationality with other human beings, ethical self-consciousness, aesthetic sublimity, or any other numinous events available to human experience. Whether we attain such a lofty prize is immaterial, for it is the search that matters. When you give yourself over to the emotional moment as a psychic act of surrender, which is no different than true dispositions of religious faith, you suspend the sense of concern about other judgments and clinch the experience itself as a fusion of self with cosmos, or in more mystical-metaphysical language, as one absolute reality that lacks divisibility. Here time-consciousness is phenomenologically bracketed in this experiential mode of transcendence even if it merely corresponds to our mental life.

### The sublime

In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant offers his immortal views on aesthetics. For a judgment to be properly aesthetic, such as when we find something to be beautiful, we often estimate beauty based on four movements of reflection that make up an aesthetic judgment of taste. That which is deemed to be beautiful is: (1) felt with disinterested pleasure; (2) is generalized to be a universal object of delight to others; (3) perceived as a form of finality without a specific purpose; and (4) that it pleases the subject necessarily and without the aid of conceptual explanation.

Kant's first emphasis on an aesthetic judgment is that it feels pleasurable to the person, but in a personally indifferent manner devoid of self-interest. This way an object is arbitrated to be aesthetically pleasing independent of the subject's personal dispositions toward the object. Here we find something beautiful because of the way it affects us emotionally and subjectively, but not because we are invested in experiencing it that way; rather it *happens* to us and informs how aesthetic representations are reflected in our "feeling of life" (*Lebensgefühl*).<sup>41</sup> This is a psychological observation on how feelings operate in our general scheme of mental functioning, whereby perceptibility of an object is related to one's

41 *Critique of Judgment*, (§I, 5:204).

inner affectivity, yet is simultaneously mediated by imagination and cognitive understanding in formulating an aesthetic judgment.

Next, the experience of the aesthetic object is universalized, namely, it is thought to apply to other's appraisals of its formal properties and is not merely determined to be beautiful based on subjective caprice or esoteric relativized experience in content and taste. Kant alludes to an objective element in our experience of the aesthetic—a universal criterion, one that is adjudged based on its form and necessity, namely it exists in-itself and arouses a pleasing affective reaction independent of the object. Here a confluence of the (a) life of feeling as an inner sense, (b) the intervening domain of imagination in apprehending the perceptible object, and (c) rational understanding find a harmonization in the experience of the beautiful.<sup>42</sup> As discussed before, a prime example of aesthetic experience is our encounter with nature, but here Kant elucidates a specific form of aesthetic circumstance he defines as the sublime.

In Book II: Analytic of the Sublime (§§ 23–29), Kant lays out his thesis that sublimity is not a feature of nature, but rather a projection of the psyche. While objects of nature may be judged to be beautiful and hence produce positive feelings of pleasure, natural objects in themselves are not sublime; rather sublimity is a determinate power conferred onto objects by the faculties of mind. Kant makes the point that the totality of nature, the vastness, the unboundedness that characterizes its might and vital force, evokes outpourings of emotion filtered through imagination in the face of its almighty power. Rather than aesthetic beauty, the sublime is an *idea* mediated through the supersensible transcendence of reason that gives rise to a form of “negative pleasure” based on the “seriousness” of the situation, more like “admiration and respect” for nature’s omnipotence. In Kant’s words:

For what is sublime, in the proper meaning of the term, cannot be contained in any sensible form but concerns only ideas of reason. . . . Thus the vast ocean heaved up by storms cannot be called sublime. The sight of it is horrible; and one must have already filled one’s mind with all sorts of ideas if such an intuition is to attune it to a feeling that is itself sublime, inasmuch as the mind is induced to

42 Ibid., see (§15, 5:228).

abandon sensibility and occupy itself with ideas containing a higher purposiveness.<sup>43</sup>

This higher purposefulness is the exaltation of the psyche in its creative encounter with making meaning of its visceral apprehension of the empirical event so “that we can feel a purposiveness within ourselves entirely independent of nature.” And for Kant, this negative pleasure arises in the face of the dynamism of the natural world where chaos, enormity, devastation, and tumult govern our experience of sublimity, something which intrinsically produces a “mental agitation” in our judgments of natural wonder.

When Kant focuses on the dynamically sublime, he highlights the psychological disposition of *fear* that is aroused in the presence of the might or superiority of nature in its dominion and intensity over our ineffectual opposition to its powers. In what is generally considered Kant’s most memorable passage in the whole third *Critique*, he encapsulates the sublime:

Bold, overhanging, and, as it were, threatening rocks, thunderclouds piled up the vault of heaven, borne along with flashes and peals, volcanoes in all their violence of destruction, hurricanes leaving desolation in their track, the boundless ocean rising with rebellious force, the high waterfall of some mighty river, and the like, make our power of resistance of trifling moment in comparison with their might. But, provided our own position is secure, their aspect is all the more attractive for its fearfulness; and we readily call these objects sublime, because they raise the forces of the soul above the heights of vulgar commonplace, and discover within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature.<sup>44</sup>

What is nicely emphasized in this passage is the raw emotional impact stirred by the pure impersonality of the brute force of nature. The overwhelming immensity and engulfing presence of Gaia’s powers, which has no intentionality to it whatsoever, stimulates our own unconscious upheaval. The mind’s subliminal reaction is not to cower in terror, but to

43 Ibid., (§23, 5:246).

44 Ibid., (§28, 5:261).

transmute this immediate fearful situation via reversal as reaction formation, the transference or inversion of energy. In short, there is an annexation of power. Fear is converted into enchantment and sublation over nature once one determines that a certain level of security or safety has been achieved. This is a very special qualification, as it is only on the condition that one's personal being or bodily integrity is not imperiled, or at least proportionally protected from mortal harm, that one can have a feeling of transcendence over the hazardous situation.

The feeling of sublimity involves at least three positions or movements: (1) fear; (2) mobilization of courage; and (3) the transcendental act of mind. We are scared yet marvel of nature's physical independence as might, a blind unintentionality yet teleologically constituted as disorder within organic order. When we feel secure in our relation to the tenuousness and commotion around us, there ensues a felt-resistance to vulnerability, a bravado which further involves a self-relation as an appeal or will to courage to rise above the throes of our emotions. Notice how Kant underscores the fascination we may have with courting danger, which makes it all the "more attractive for its fearfulness." There is an immediate unconscious seduction we are drawn to (or pulled toward) in our subdued apprehension of naturalized unbridled power, simultaneously experienced as an awful appreciation for the tempestuousness we encounter. This is when sublimity is affectively perceived as an aesthetic experience conceived in our cognitive relation to nature. Here the sublime is the felt-experience (as illusion) of conquering a piece of unconquerable nature. We may see this sentiment mirrored in the Romantic conception of imagination captured marvelously by the German artist Caspar David Friedrich in his 1818 painting, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, a depiction of a man in trench coat and cane standing on a rocky precipice with his back to the viewer overlooking a mountain range enveloped in a volatile ocean of fog crashing all around him. There is an aura of invincibility to the image, of self-reflective man gazing out over the heavens in precarious harmony with the lability of nature.

In his analysis of the sublime, what Kant truly offers us is a psychological theory of our inner world mediated through unconscious dynamics.<sup>45</sup> More specifically, the experience of the sublime is the sole product

45 Walter Davis (2001) provides an original critique of Kant's notion of the sublime as it is applied to the psychoanalytic exposition of our traumatized relation to our inner nature we must vanquish through reversal and externalized displacement of our psychic contents onto an object we must then deracinate, the terrorized other within.

of *fantasy* as the projection of our grandiose self-states of ideality, power, and mastery over feral nature, particularly the nature within. Here it may be said that the phenomena of sublimity evokes archaic, preverbal and prereflective unconscious schemata that stand in relation to primordial fantasies of omnipotence, idealization, and perfection, including narcissistic configurations of our self-in-relation to unconscious objects.<sup>46</sup> For Kant, this internal relation as our tenacity to resist the overwhelming engulfment of nature's magnitude and ferocity is an act of valor, yet one that imaginarily suspends the reality principle in favor of an idealized self-relation to self-value. Here the essence of the sublime is the contemplation and enactment of inner courage. In other words, this mental or intentional stance matters more to the subject's sense of self (e.g., one's ego or self-esteem) than it does to heed the parameters of objective reality that warn us of impending danger. In Kant's words, we find "in our mind a superiority over nature" as our ability to judge ourselves independently of this otherness through virtue of being human—with dignity capable of summoning inner fortitude, and to *feel* our own sublimity as *mind itself* apprehending its otherness, namely, the external world.<sup>47</sup> But this externality is merely a stimulus for our own introspection we are forced to confront. What becomes sublime is not only our inner experience of transcendence over nature through the fantasy of supremacy, but through our "mental attunement" or self-consciousness of our "superiority to nature within us,"<sup>48</sup> that is, the ideal subject of our subjectivity—the felt-mastery over our otherness and alienated shapes of being. Hence our inner trembling borne of irrationality and discord is counteracted (or perhaps merely neutralized) through the act of generating rational meaning. And for Kant, this ultimately is an ethical self-relation to our interior as a valuing moral agency.

The sublime is a confrontation with our interior in the face of potential danger, the danger within, namely, the demand placed upon us to make a choice—to act, which summons the courage to be. It is an imagined

46 George Hagman (2005, pp. 26–27) argues that this is why we give aesthetic experience such supreme value, because it embodies the ideality we once felt (or wished we felt) in relation to our parents in infancy. Although he avoids reductive explanations, the potential difficulty with this assessment is that it assumes that all aesthetic experience is the recapitulation of an earlier developmental period (in reality or fantasy) in history, and hence runs the risk of attributing *all* aesthetic experience to the charge of committing a genetic fallacy.

47 *Critique of Judgment*, (§28, 5: 261–262).

48 *Ibid.*, (§28, 5: 263–264).



relation but very real. In the face of turbulent nature, the soul is moved to confront its otherness in its absoluteness, and with this comes an appeal to take a stand over the inner vulnerability that often remains concealed when danger is absent. This appeal is an emotive elaboration that connects the subjectivity of the concealed self to a supreme inner value that is evoked during such felt-experiences with environmental phenomena, namely, the bravery of moral self-consciousness—what the self wants to express as its *essence*. This experience, which is both ambiguous and paradoxical, transports the psyche into the realm of ideality, namely the transcendental acts of higher consciousness that seize upon this opportunity to assert its independence over its primal (inferior) nature. Here the vitalizing principle of soul speaks out even if it remains ensconced in the mind, for the impulse to embrace this dialectical otherness (simultaneously, the other within) is itself an act of bravery.

Kant's analytic of the sublime also celebrates the notion that the beautiful is that you have *survived*, that you have transcended the raw menace of nature (including culture as human nature) as we are exposed to its presence. In this way, his treatise on aesthetics is really conveying our most intimate emotional relationship to life and death. The sublime is that feeling—"I am alive! I am not dead!" Here the sublime is the common sentiment that one has lived through something really scary, hence eluding trauma, itself an ecstatic traumatic, and this is what is sublime. Beauty becomes this particular triumphant experience that raises psyche or spirit above the slovenly complacency to life, bellowing—"I want more. We all want more." What is beautiful is when the dark part of soul loses out to an affirmative brightness that breaks over the celestial skies like Friedrich's mountain man standing over a newly discovered, experiential land.

When Kant intimates that the sublime is beyond the sensible through the supersensible triumph of reason,<sup>49</sup> he also broaches a noumenal reality of transcendence that takes pleasure in contemplating its self-aesthetic achievement. Here we must emphasize that the life of feeling is the catalyst behind the power of the mind to grasp itself in its sublimity as a moral agent that stands over brute impersonal nature actualized through rational thought. The satisfaction obtained in the feeling of mind vanquishing its sensuous world is a felt-relation to value, for as we

49 Ibid., see (§26, 5: 255).

contemplate pure sublimity itself, it is at once an affective-aesthetic attribution that is psychologically grounded in a moral disposition that stands in relation to what is deemed to be good. And here we may venture to say that the sublime entails a majestic terror unconsciously encountered yet triggered by the forces of nature and the ensuing spiritual resonances it generates within our feeling soul, what is often referred to as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, namely, that which we are attracted to yet afraid of, the subject matter of the numinous.

## Numen

Although *numen* historically refers to a divinity principle derived from Roman cult philosophy, which Cicero emphasized as an active power, living force, or presence underlying events in the world,<sup>50</sup> as well as Virgil who used the plural when he referred to prayer to the gods (*magna numina precari*),<sup>51</sup> it was German theologian Rudolf Otto who popularized the term in 1917 in his book, *Das Heilige*, which was later translated as *The Idea of the Holy*. Otto articulates many elements of the *sensus numinosus* that comprises a hybrid composition of spiritual experience at once encompassing fear, affective intensity, urgency, and sublimity that results in an appreciation of the sacred.

Numinous experience involves a *mysterium tremendum*, which is the fear and trembling associated with one's encounter with the mysterious. Here there is an element of anxiety and danger associated to it, one that produces a heightened sense of awareness and emotional exigency. On one hand, there is a sensation of awe, yet on the other there is the apprehension of "awefulness" based on a qualitative state of feeling a mighty "overpoweringness" that envelops the psyche, which leads to an intensity in energies that produces an emotional immediacy. This further generates a feeling of *fascinans*, which is a potent attraction or fascination that compels the subject toward the numinous object. This *mysterium* further engenders a qualitative inner experience that is personalized, whereby the subject stands in relation to and communion with a *wholly other*. These nuanced elements of spiritual experience are imbued with an exalted sense of valuation that may be attributed to a

50 M. Tullius Cicero, *De Divinatione*, 1, 120.

51 P. Vergilius Maro, *Aeneis*, 3, 634.

variety of beliefs in divination and the holy, or as aesthetic experience expressed indirectly and in art.

Otto's portrayal of the numinous not only weds human emotion to a category of valuation, hence a moral enterprise, but also a category of the beautiful as a harmonious symmetry to spiritual experience. What he articulates as holy or sacred is not simply that which is "completely good" as an absolute moral attribute of supreme value, but rather that which has an "overplus of meaning."<sup>52</sup> Here he suggests that *numen* is beyond goodness, for it is a higher instantiation of spirit; but we are justified, I believe, in saying that there is a parallel process that works to integrate both a moral and aesthetic unity, which is a catalyst for this surplus of meaning to occur. Although Otto qualifies the numinous as something non-rational, this does not mean to imply it is irrational, nor can we conclude that it is not subject to logical analysis. In fact, the blending of sense and feeling with the good and the beautiful, which generates a plethora of meaning, not only makes the numinous a rational phenomenon, it becomes an axiological ideal.

As both a category of valuation and a psychological state of mind, Otto attempts to describe a form of spiritual intuition that must be evoked or awakened from within each individual through their own natural path of understanding, for numinous consciousness defies strict definition and may be more properly described as ineffable. Here we may conclude that this attitude toward the numinous is mystical. Although this sensibility is roused from within, he insists there is a *numen praesens* that is *felt* as objectively real and outside the self despite the fact that we cannot grant it independence from consciousness, a point James makes when he refers to a numinous object that has a "sense" of reality and a "feeling of objective presence" that is given as a datum of consciousness.<sup>53</sup>

The *tremendum* element of the numinous is unique to most descriptions of transcendence because of the negative emotions it entails. This is distinct from the positive affect attributed to the feeling sensations of sublimity, joy, or ecstasy, however Otto warns us not to equate this dread or trembling with the ordinary emotion of fear, for it is a "quite specific kind of emotional response, wholly distinct from that of being afraid" albeit analogous to it.<sup>54</sup> This is partly due to our "creature feeling" in

52 *The Idea of the Holy*, p. 5.

53 *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 58.

54 *The Idea of the Holy*, p. 13.

relation to an all-powerful *majestas* that leaves us exposed in our insignificance and humility. The ideogram *mysterium tremendum* therefore captures the awful majesty of this induced emotional state.

The form of the mysterious, in addition to evoking the feeling of a *tremenda majestas*, also produces a seductive facet of attraction or fascination with the numinous object. We may say this is the point of the Hegelian *Aufhebung* where fear is surpassed yet subsumed into a new higher order within the positive polarity.

As with Kant, James, and Dewey, the emotional quality of the lived experience confers a particular form of valuation that Otto identifies as numinous, what traditionally has been relegated to the sphere of religion. Today we may opt for the term “spiritual” as a neutral way of expressing our experience of transcendental consciousness devoid of religious doctrine, although, as stated earlier, we may rightfully conclude that numinous experience lies at the heart of any form of religiosity and essentially shares the same set of emotive and valuational properties belonging to secular spiritual sensibility. Although Otto wishes to make the numinous an a priori category of the holy that is an “inborn capacity to receive and understand” spirit, what is akin to a *sensus divinitatis*, we may part company with his analysis here. When I speak of the numinous, I am referring to a sensation of consciousness that is wholly independent of any association to a divinity principle or supernatural presence sustaining these spiritual events. Rather I am speaking of the exaltation of human emotion as a refined awareness and expansion of consciousness that yolks together what the experiential subject deems to be innately good or of unequivocal value with the self-certain truth and revered beauty of its occurrence, which results in an esoteric and deeply personalized meaning that cannot be generalized to others precisely because this private experience is totally relativized. Here we are not concerned with an extant ontological (divine) object that exists independent of mind, rather we are only concerned with the metaphysics of experience.

To illustrate this point, I wish to draw on my own personal experience of the numinous that has stuck with me ever since it occurred. I was traveling on a plane through turbulent weather (which persisted for almost the entire last leg of the flight) to visit my closest friend in the United States, when, suddenly, the plane began to dive. There was a silent pandemonium that enveloped the passengers, then, in rapid contagion, people began to scream as our cortisol levels skyrocketed. As I

recall the immeasurable anxiety and trepidation that gripped us all, there was an emotional rush and imperceptible certainty that death was impending, when all of a sudden a sequential profusion of images flashed before the theater of my mind as if they were emanating from an old-time film projector, except they were in color. What initially appeared to me in sublime vision was my wife's face, followed by the faces of my children in order of their birth, each smiling at me with love and in full acceptance. This instantly produced a majestic sense of calm over me as the pilot commandeered the plane back to safety. The joy induced by recollecting this event still makes me weep to this day.

I would describe this event as an example of the *mysterium tremendum* due to its limit situation and the emotional meaning it generated. Here I am not making an ontological leap of faith or attributing a metaphysical realism to this numinous state of bliss, only that the phenomenology of my ordeal had an elevating consequence on my consciousness. In retrospect, the surplus meaning Otto highlights is likely due to the fact that it was so unique in my life, where a feeling of survival had triumphed over my mortal fear of death, that it could not escape such a glorious classification bestowed by elation. If we were to rationally study such occurrences in people under controlled scientific environments, we would likely conclude that these spiritual events are purely psychological. But that is precisely my point—all human experience is essentially mental. Every embodied psychic event (including all physiological and neural activity) is mediated by mind. It does not matter if *spiritus* objectively originates from within our minds rather than a divine supernatural realm, for what truly matters is the extraordinary nature of the lived affective experience itself that takes hold of a person and awakens another realm of suprasensibility. In this example, we may see how my cherished values and relational attachment to my family unconsciously materialized in this point of crisis, which was colored by aesthetic and valuational properties that neutralized my panic and elevated my fright to a state of spiritual transcendence. In this encounter with finitude, the core of what is most important to me disclosed itself as unconditional love symbolized through the unconscious representation of imagoes. It does not matter one bit what overdetermined factors were at play, only that the experience was meaningful to me. Here we must concede that spirituality is radically subjective and relative, our own private fumbling toward ecstasy.

In contrast, I wish to juxtapose this *mysterium tremendum* experience to the *fascinans*, or what we may call the ordinary numinous when we are attuned to such things. Once again I was traveling by plane to visit my closest friend, this time a night flight to Europe. After a restless night's sleep from Toronto, as the daybreak beamed through the window of the Boeing 787, half-alert I noticed the shape of the wing of the jet, which looked very organic and angular with a thinly tapered end, as though it was designed to resemble the wing of a bird gliding over the earth. Then I observed the top of the world as we soared above the clouds below, which looked like an ocean of white cotton balls with a thin layer of smoky mist undulating over the top, making its way across to my right side only to disappear, followed by a steady flow of pockets of rippling vapor spread thin like layers of smoke—all white. This was in contrast to a vast backdrop of sky, a bit overcast but bright, when I then noticed that the cotton ball clouds had morphed into a rolling tundra that resembled an arctic landscape with mountains and jagged spikes of ice and snow, such as a scene out of prehistory before humans had inhabited the planet.

I came to perceive this as a *fascinans*, an ordinary moment—the immediacy of nature, but one that fascinated me more than it usually does. Yet this realization was in the wake of how this great feat of human invention powering above the heavens was in itself wondrous, as if nature was momentarily transcended, mimicking the wings of a bird wavering at its tip, but without turbulence, hovering over the chunky snowy landscape below shortly before our descent into Warsaw. There was nothing personal about the winter arctic sky-scene, just an appreciation of the impersonal act of its sheer being, a being ever present, yet hidden from the human eye looking up from earth to sky. Kant would refer to this as an aesthetic judgment of universal beauty, yet one mixed with the sublimity of transcending nature where an indifferent attitude of pleasure arises in the awareness of apprehending the givenness of nature itself.

Another hybrid example of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* is when I visited Auschwitz and Birkenau in Poland, the Nazi death factories that housed and systematically murdered over 1.5 million people during 1940–1945. It was December 19 in a rural community outside of Kraków. I was anticipating an abreaction, both dreading yet wanting it at the same time, when I felt a clinical detachment come over me instantly

as I stepped into the first compound.<sup>55</sup> It was cold, but there was no snow. I was numb inside—no, I take that back, rather an absence of feeling best describes it, but I didn't know it then. I was frozen but it felt like nothingness. In retrospect, I believe I had rushed through the whole tour, simply wanting to escape. A free-floating trance permeated my visit throughout the entire day, like I was recovering from a hangover. I was unaware of any of this at the time. I can only conclude that my defenses had arranged this so that the details would not overwhelm me.

I've been prone to dissociate since childhood. One of my first formal photographs as a toddler dressed in Sunday's best depicts a sepia tone studio portrait with my mouth wide open staring off into space with an empty gaze like a goldfish in a bowl. It may have been the desperate faces on the walls in Block Six riddled with trauma, the vacant stares looking into the photographer's camera during official processing after they debarked from the trains, having been stripped of their clothes and belongings, separated from family members, and, if they were in the wrong line, deceived into taking showers to refresh from the long excursion they endured cooped up in cattle cars like animals for days. Many were dead upon arrival. By 1943, most of the Jewish children of Auschwitz, after being numbered and photographed, were immediately sent to the Birkenau sector of the camp where four large brick buildings shrouded the gas chambers and crematoria. This was the extermination center for European Jewry, blown up by German soldiers trying to cover-up evidence when the Russians liberated the camp toward the end of the war.

When my wife and I married, we bought a painting from an art dealer who had survived the Holocaust. He had been shuffled around to five different concentration camps, eventually liberated from Mauthausen, which specialized in extinction through labor aimed at snuffing out the intelligentsia. He showed us his number crudely tattooed in indigo on his inside right wrist. He had glazed-over eyes, with the face of a mole. He described how he was pulled from underneath a pile of bodies where the allied soldiers found him alive on his thirty-seventh birthday. He took

55 The infamous gateway to the camp bearing the legend *Arbeit Macht Frei*—"work makes (you) free," was the beginning of their death march once the railroad cars had arrived. The original sign now lies safely in storage at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum due to a thief from Sweden (abetted by two Poles) who had removed it in the middle of the night a few years ago, after which it was returned to authorities.

that as a good omen. Dr. Kuchinsky was his name. He had two PhD's, one in music and one in fine art. He tuned camp commandant Rudolph Höss' piano while in Auschwitz. We learned he died of pneumonia. Ironically, he was attacked by a dog while on a walk, went into hospital, and never came out. He was 98.

The headshots of victims plastered on the walls at Auschwitz were most uncanny. I didn't want to look at their faces, they would become real that way—no longer things if I made eye contact. One of them looked like a chicken with a long twisted neck and a protruding Adam's apple. I wanted to laugh inside—it looked like a cartoon. My defenses kicked in and my antiseptic composure returned. Here I was only a spectator; *I didn't know em' from a load of coal*. But while meandering through another room, the image of a little girl with pleading desolate eyes, holding a stuffy, burned a hole in my consciousness. She looked petrified, like a stone. It could have been one of my daughters. They were the first to be slain. They could not work, consumed precious food, and demanded attention. I will never forget that calcified look. It still cuts.

Almost mechanically, my emotional detachment masqueraded as intellectual disinterest. There was something perverse about attempting to rationalize it, that is, find a reason for why it happened. The barracks, the bureaucratic buildings, the confinement cells, toilets, torture rooms, the reconstructed execution wall, the barbed wire fences, and square wooden signs on posts with the words "Halt!/Stoj!" emblazoned with skull and crossbones just feet before the railroad tracks with large formidable walls and machine-gun towers in the backdrop, sealing off the whole compound. The display rooms of empty gas canisters of Zyklon B, eye glasses, human hair, and personal possessions including shoes, suitcases, clothes, kitchen utensils, children's toys, and prosthetics of all types filled the floors to the ceiling, all encased in glass. Women and children were separated from the men, and, in order not to induce panic, told they would be reunited once they were recorded and cleaned up, only to be used as slave labor, warehoused, tortured, hung, shot, garroted, gassed, killed by lethal injection, slowly starved to death, or whipped like dogs.<sup>56</sup> Gold fillings and teeth were extracted, hair was sent to German textile plants to produce blankets, medical and sterilization experiments were

56 A certain sick, sadistic competition between soldiers developed in which the whipping to death of prisoners became blood sport.



conducted by SS doctors; and after corpses were cremated, their ashes were used for fertilizer, or flesh was turned into soap.

Abruptly this place started to morph into a scene from *Hogan's Heroes*, a Hollywood prisoner-of-war set, but it was no sitcom. Then the rubberneck Czech or Pole or Roma or German homosexual whose fossilized face was on the wall (labeled in striped uniform) popped into my mind, like a mug shot gallery, stretched out along both sides to the end of the whole corridor, a photo exhibition of dead people. I suddenly had no desire to see the other camp, but then thought, *I have come all this way*. It is here when I began to realize that I was protecting myself, dissociating from the metaphysics of evil.

As I first came upon Birkenau by car, when I set eyes on it from a distance, I was instantaneously struck by its imposing, disturbing presence. It is a monolith of murder. The ominous 25 feet high "Gate of Death" that demarcates the main entrance and guardhouse, where the freight tracks greeted transports of deportees railed in day and night to be gassed in this massive 425-acre slaughter house, was a horrific visual. The compound was a city with hundreds of barracks. Each dwelling was a sty. They housed over 150,000 people at a time and as many as 20,000 a day were incinerated, their ashes thrown into nearby ponds and fields. The whole experience was as surreal as a slasher film: white frost covered the soil despite the midafternoon sun shining on the creepy grounds littered with buildings in ruin and decay, many having been blown up. Most eerily was the intermittent sound of dogs barking in the distant rural countryside, echoes the prisoners would have heard all night.

Birkenau was the calculated achievement of the psychopathic mind; it was built as a death yard through toil by those who were forced to construct their own burial sites, the largest mass extermination facility in all of human history. Standing on this land, in the flesh, one's reason is embattled by an obscene refusal to believe this was possible, a grotesque reality the mind is not prepared to encounter. *Who could do this to other human beings?* Here, the German psyche is destined to bear the crucible of judgment, and shame, for eternity.

Walking these massive grounds in a Polish December during religious holiday season added another layer of complexity and irreality to this day. It was bitterly cold, so I moved briskly with purpose, as my arthritis was acting up. I wanted to see the site of the gas chambers. The Nazis used *Sonderkommandos*, which were special work units composed almost

entirely of Jewish prisoners, to dispose of corpses after being gassed by taking them to the industrial furnaces. Remarkably, their journals and notebooks were discovered under the courtyards and in graves of bones near the first and second crematoria. The ovens were designed by Topf & Sons, a high efficiency customized incinerator equipment manufacturer. Engineers were dispatched to Auschwitz to determine the best immolation method. Their conclusion: one well-fed body, an emaciated corpse, and a child produced the best burning load.

There, standing at this site, I abruptly felt a weird sense of draw, more like a seizure that came over me. I wanted to embrace something, feverishly. I had no idea what I truly wanted, I just felt compelled to internalize this place—to make it part of me, dissociating all along. I needed a symbol to help me metabolize this, to memorialize the innocent dead and unforgivable atrocity that marred the world forever. It was a found object I coveted. My inner self wanted it—the suffering and emotional anguish was every much mine as it was theirs. I was impelled to incorporate this concrete experience into my being, and I instinctively grabbed what I felt my unconscious craved as a natural expression of my internal process. There at my feet, under wet frost, was a porous rock from the ruins of the second gas chambers and crematorium. I picked it up. It was now mine, a part of me—we, us.

Prisoners were forced to roll bodies into trenches, stack them neatly, and sprinkle them with lime. Dissenters would be executed on the spot if they did not instantly obey commands. Dehumanized waste had become an industrial problem. Packing victims into vans and piping carbon monoxide exhaust into sealed compartments on their two-mile journey to gravesites where they were dumped like topsoil at terminus was so horrifying that even Eichmann was distracted from carrying out his assignment of timing how long it took to murder his helpless prey. The terror began at the railroad platforms upon departure.

I felt the urge to walk down the entire railway track leading back to the main gate of the camp where masses were shipped in as many as 50 cattle cars at a time to the unloading area, a hellish place of tears and endings. Their fate was determined by the way they answered an officer's question. Because there was no snow, with open gravel exposed, I noticed a shard of wood from a railroad tie. *A splinter, another piece of nature.* It felt right in my hand. But the next find was remarkable. Further down, astonishingly, I noticed a fragment of terracotta pottery lying

stealthily in the rocks. *Could it be unnoticed after all this time?* As I picked it up, I felt a pressing energy to it. This was a real connection for me, not merely impersonal nature. It was a human fragment, like the fractured lives departing the trains, broken, thrown away.

Inscribed on Christ's cross were the Latin initials I.N.R.I., signifying "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" (*Jesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum*). Crucifixion was an instrument of torture designed to prolong physical torment in a slow and excruciating fashion. After the body is unnaturally contorted and nailed to wood through the forearms and heels, gravity will cause the muscles to cramp and spasm; and in the course of a few hours infiltrate the diaphragm and lungs, hence leading to an agonizing demise accompanied by seizures and terminal asphyxiation or heart failure. The loss of one's bowels was an inevitable consequence of such a gruesome, and public, form of execution.

As I made my way back to the entrance of the camp, I walked into the first wooden building beside the death gate. It was a communal latrine with symmetrical rows of open holes extending the entire length. Here thousands of captives who only had 40 seconds at a time to urinate or defecate were herded in regimented crowds, which happened only twice a day. There, a chip off the cement floor was staring at me, sullied—the human stain.

The mind has an inherent need to symbolize experience it cannot put into words. These found objects summoned me, hence spoke for me, which are now resting peacefully on my mesa, along with other spiritual objects, commemorating what I had dissociated but unintentionally absorbed. It may seem absurd—even profane to describe this experience as spiritual, but it was nonetheless numinous, something I am profoundly grateful for, as it has expanded my soul.

What we find is not out there, it is in ourselves; something sacred, something hiding, yet always present. In looking back at what I was not able to take in or fully comprehend at the time, these acts of gathering were unconscious endorsements of my need to assimilate something greater into my psyche, namely, a world *pathos* I had been staving off that day, a felt meaning of shared suffering with the *anima mundi*—our psychic scar. But my sojourn at Auschwitz also had deep personal significance for me. My wife is Jewish, and by tradition, so are my children, while I am a godless gentile. Perhaps here I incorporated more than just abstract humanity. Yes, I think so; they are me. But as I left Birkenau in

a daze with some remnants in my pocket, God was nowhere to be found. And all I can see is that petrified little girl holding her doll.

### Individuation and the pursuit of wholeness

Secular humanism, as I advocate for here, is a pilgrimage based on the quest for value inquiry and human fulfillment. As a secular life philosophy, *Weltanschauung*, or comprehensive worldview, humanism is a way of being that seeks to expand our social parameters and conception of truth, justice, morality, and human satisfaction through critical investigation and rational analysis devoid of ideologies. It is arguably the existential tradition that gave philosophical fortification to this movement as an alternative to faith.<sup>57</sup> Its message is clear: We are ultimately responsible to choose our own lifepath in commune (*communis*) with others and create personal meaning within our developmental process of self-making and self-liberation. Although life is meaningful on its own terms, it may offer the masses scant relief when they fundamentally wish for something that naturally will not occur. The truth of our *pathos* is that we are condemned to live *this moment* and only experience *this world*. We have to accept the fact that this *only* existence is our provenance and fate. Nothing lies beyond the natural world. And there is certainly no personal or conscious afterlife. Consciousness and personal identity perish along with the physical death of the body.<sup>58</sup> The inevitability of embracing our own lives honestly and courageously is all we can hope for and expect, even if we find life's tribulations and our own desires cause us suffering. We must simply accept our givenness, itself a *numinosum*.

How do we lead a spiritual life in the face of unfathomable mystery?

57 In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre (1946) tells us:

Atheistic existentialism, of which I am a representative, declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality. . . . Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism (pp. 28–29).

58 Although one can make a reasonable case that our death is incorporated back into nature or the cosmos, and that we become transposed through the process of decomposition and resultant new growth in the ecosystem—"dust to dust," so they say (Genesis 3:19), or that one's personality is memorialized and hence lives on in the lives of our families, friends, and everyone we have influenced, or through our deeds, writings, and legacy, this should not be equated with personal immortality.

We have to accept the immanence of non-existence, the encroaching certainty that everything must eventually end, especially our short sojourn through life. Death becomes our transition into nothingness, what Becker invites us to live heroically. Dissociation of these non-negotiables as a form of illogic does not take away these pressing matters, as surely as the denial of death cannot sustain its grip over the psyche. How do we contend with the grave disappointment that we have no immaterial soul, that we will not live forever in another perfect world? The vacuous “sterile utopianism”<sup>59</sup> of religious ideology cannot be sustained in today’s world. This does not inherently import a cynical nihilism, only a stoical acceptance of reality as we find it. It is not satisfying to accept blunt reality imposed on us like the weather, for we want to disavow these unpleasant truths and displace them through some mental scheme we apply to aid in our understanding and cope with the anxiety of the moment, so we establish a convenient theory of a supreme being because we desperately want to believe in it. The mechanisms of dissociation also allow us the luxury of not being mentally overwhelmed by our utter lack of control or say over the matter. But we all have to face, in contemporary slang, “The Big Bummer.” Heidegger’s most fundamental insight is what he took at face value, namely, the givenness of the universe we are thrown into, one where there are certain non-negotiables that no one can barter with, redefine through logic, or will into existence simply because our minds wish for it to be so. Religion as a defense against the realization of our looming annihilation by the impersonality of death attempts to neutralize the big bummer that lies at the end of the road on our transient jaunt through life. The dreary fact of finitude, stone-faced and impassive as it is, brings no cosiness, for it simply is what it is: we all end up on a gurney.

It takes courage to live. Life demands a risk, which requires us to take a stand. Theologian Paul Tillich defines courage as “the self-affirmation of being in spite of the fact of non-being.”<sup>60</sup> This obliges us to adopt a self-confirming and life-affirming stance in relation to our being toward death, what Heidegger avows “stands before us—something impending.”<sup>61</sup> But unlike Tillich, who believes that such courage is to be rooted and conditioned on God’s being, the existential humanist embraces

59 Ernest Becker (1973), p. 268.

60 *The Courage to Be*, p. 152.

61 *Being and Time*, p. 294.

the acceptance of finitude and is *inspired by it*, for our being toward death is a catalyst for enjoying life in the present. The self-affirmation of being is continually grounded in relation to our looming non-being as a meaningful trajectory of experience generated and regenerated in each moment. This requires us to courageously seize upon our facticity as being in relation to our impermanence and take hold of and mold the way we wish to structure our lives in the face of our assured finitude.

It takes courage to live life in the face of being when death is merely a blink away. The question becomes, as Tillich asks, How does one acquire this courage to be? His solution is theistic faith. May I suggest an alternative? It is to be found in and grounded in the form of lived valuation or the lifeworld we make for ourselves. This requires us adopting and fashioning a unique sensibility of value we imbue in all important aspects of our being in the world. Rather than faith, which is a plea for postponing natural inevitability, the humanist's sober acceptance that there is no beyond is itself a courage to be.

Because many people (I would say most) live in distress of having to take personal responsibility to create or construct meaning in their lives, to which only we are held accountable, it becomes so much easier for them to focus on personal felt entitlement and/or blaming others or society for not fulfilling their so-called needs, as if the aloof universe owes them something; or on absence and loss, even lost meaning, rather than on what can be gained or generated by the subjective agent standing in relation to the marvel of presence. This belongs to the wonder of being, not as faith, not as a transcendent divine infinity, but as *fascinans*. The wonder that Being even *is* is itself a glorious wonder.

People who are in psychic need of spirituality or long for a spiritual component to their lives without God can no longer afford to dismiss, dissociate, put off, or ignore how one is supposed to live and should live. This is not merely an abstract philosophical exercise, but rather it is a spiritual *quest-ion* that no human who lives an authentic existence can truly avoid, as the psyche is in pursuit of transcendence even if every illusion is denounced and the natural facts of being are accepted by solemn reason. The fact that humans seek transcendence speaks to a fundamental psychological need that is ontologically grounded and phenomenologically necessitated. The pining itself is about the quality of lived experience, the subjective longing to satiate the lack. Therefore the need for transcendence speaks to human desire in search of a soul.

The one variable that unites all these areas of the spiritual—namely, the oceanic feeling, the love of nature, happiness, friendship, being in love, the ethical, the aesthetic, sublimity, unitive ecstasies, and the numinous—is a subjective emotional radiance or felt-connection to the valued and valuing object, whether that be to a human ideal, a person, an object of nature, or an artistic production, because desire, value, and beauty of the ideal resonates within the unconscious soul and informs the epigenesis of mind.

In our psychological refinement as human beings, there is an inner conflict we *must* go through in order to come to terms with mortality, the question of transcendence, and acquiescence to our natural state of affairs without the deception of an afterlife. We may refer to this as the surrender to Being, a giving over of oneself to the naked thereness of the world itself, from the universal to the particular. And this surrender naturally entails a submission to wonder. The spiritual question involves an inner gnawing that is uniquely subjective and peculiar to each individual for it cannot be handed over as ready-made principles of knowledge or prescribed behavior. Knowledge is not the same as inner felt-experience or compulsion, nor do prescribed actions retain the same value as authentic choice, novelty, the discovery of being, and the self-creation of meaning. There is no step-by-step method to follow. Spirituality is generated by each agent in distinct forms fashioned by the values they adopt and aspire to cultivate. Yet the quest for spirituality ultimately culminates in a union with the emotional, moral, and aesthetic communions to what humanity ultimately symbolizes—the idealization of value.

We cannot avoid mortality, our depressing fate, for the “black foe” stands behind the curtain. With this realization comes an inner wake-up call, the existential awareness initiated by anxiety needed to help each of us become and fulfill our possibilities. C.G. Jung referred to this as an individuation process, a self-defined path or creative practice of our own becoming, that is, the personal struggle for wholeness. But what does this mean? At the very least, it assumes a self-defining mission of enriching one’s own self-identity and expressing one’s personality in authentic ways. This urge or call toward self-definition is accompanied by the inner need for generating meaning (both personal and shared) as a humanizing experiment in becoming a liberated person who has exercised their freedom and actualized to the best of their ability a potential for living a satisfying life. This primal human theme equally applies today as it did in

antiquity, but perhaps it is best captured by the resurgence in the centrality and implementation of the will recapitulated by the romantic, idealist, and existential movements. Why is this timeless striving so important to our human psychologies across epochs and cultures? Because we all want to be free and happy.

The life-affirming path of the human will in search of meaning and self-realization is a perennial theme that defines the problem of human existence where we struggle to be unpretentious and overcome anxiety, despair, isolation, and meaninglessness. The notion of a person's self-selected individuation process is more of an esoteric journey or aim geared toward fostering one's possibilities rather than achieving an ultimate destination,<sup>62</sup> and this necessarily entails becoming more self-aware through introspection and the direct analysis of one's own psyche and the cultural milieu we inhabit in order to militate against the disharmony, fragmentation, estrangement, self-alienation, and narrow-focus in which modern society lives. This means that we must create the existential fabric of our lives for ourselves by generating qualitative experiences and nurturing opportunities for fulfillment as the process of our own becoming. Here our optimistic relation to becoming is essential in order to surmount the stasis and disillusionment with the psychopathology of everyday life that largely saturates sterilized society enveloped in ignorance, consumerism, hedonism, narcissism, apathy, political corruption, military warfare, and a generalized lack of empathy and compassion for our fellow man.

The process of individuation demands work and inward exploration, as well as experimentation by crafting purposeful experiences, not to mention putting yourself into situations that bring about desired or meaningful results, even if they occasionally garner negative consequences. It is both a solitary activity and at once a communal one, for we all seek to establish a personal identity that is unique from others, which differentiates the individual from the mass as the self-assertion of one's personhood, but at the same time stands in relation to a collective set of values, norms, expectations, and needs for acceptance, validation, and understanding underlying the social motivation for mutual recognition. Here there is a dialectical vacillation between self and other, the individual and

62 J.J. Clarke (1992) offers a nice overview of Jung's individuation process and its embrace of existentialism (especially see pp. 155–156).



the collective, that requires synthetic mediation while simultaneously preserving the notion of difference. This requires us to adopt a dual perspective toward life that is simultaneously oriented toward both self and other within a unifying principle of universality or holism.

Let us first begin with differentiating our self-defining processes and the psychological need for singularity, separateness, and uniqueness. The psychic impulse for difference and distinctiveness is a natural one based on an individual's want for self-expression, competition, value inquiry, and the peculiarity of describing and encountering life. This is a fundamental narcissistic relation to the experience and rediscovery of the self. This is not inherently pathological, for it simply underscores the existentiell preoccupation we have with our own interior. Individuation is a process of self-determination. On the one hand, it is absolutely idiosyncratic and eccentric to the personality of the individual, while on the other it is a universal feature inherent to human nature. The only difference is that only *you* can live your life and give it value, and that is what makes it so special. This is likely why historically the proto-transcendental reference to spirit is both the symbolic personification of an individual's soul and a collective identification with a universal phenomenon as the embodiment of humanity as a whole. As an existential plea for individuation, this means accepting the obligatory necessity of taking responsibility for our lives and making autonomous choices rather than blaming or placing accountability onto others for what is incumbent upon ourselves to accept and accomplish. In its essence, this is our ontic encounter with freedom. We ultimately make our own beds where we lie.

The notion of individuation can be summarized as the human creed for perfecting one's full potential. As Jung puts it, "Personality is the supreme realization of the innate idiosyncrasy of a living being. It is an act of high courage flung in the face of life, the absolute affirmation of all that constitutes the individual."<sup>63</sup> This could have been Tillich speaking. From antiquity through to psychoanalysis, there is an incessant exigency placed upon us all for increased self-awareness and attentiveness to the vicissitudes of the psyche. From the Delphic decree "Know thyself" to Kierkegaard's attack on Christendom, Schopenhauer's suffering will, Camus' absurd universe, and Nietzsche's *Übermensch* who affirms life

63 *Collected Works*, Vol. 17, p. 284.

in the face of a meaningless world, Jung is in good company among the existentialists.

On the metaphysical side of our existential ponderings, we ultimately stand in relation to the seduction and promise of something greater, a unifying or integrative function we may rightfully call transcendental, yet one that is not transcendent—meaning it does not exist beyond or independent of mind. And if it does, as it is argued, something that we cannot epistemologically ascertain, it would merely be an impersonal aspect of the natural givenness of objects. Yet this transcendental thrust is a powerful faculty of mind, which, I suggest, is ultimately the mechanism behind unitive processes that wed spiritual experience to ideas and objects. This psychic organization consists of a generic or formal tendency to synthesize objects of experience into logical orderings, categories, causal sequences, patterns, and meaningful wholes as an agentic event. Theologians and religious scholars often confuse or conflate this psychic function with mysticism or claim this is proof of God's ontology, when we may have a cogently rational or logical account for cognizing these phenomena grounded in naturalized frameworks. Although mystical encounters with the divine may be said to participate of unitive experiences that spring from the natural a priori transcendental faculties of mind that are postulated to account for unconscious acts of apperception, incorporation, inclusion, synthetic judgment, and unification that pre-reflectively transpire outside of conscious awareness,<sup>64</sup> we do not need to extrapolate that this formal cognitive proclivity toward information processing supports theological realism nor conclude that unitive thinking is inherently mystical. The mind's ability to integrate, bind, or attempt to form unities of the variances of experience may be viewed as an organic psychological act of making meaning of the world devoid of any supernatural principles whatsoever. Yet the concerning need for wholeness speaks to our being-in-relation-to-lack.

We have an equiprimordial relation to otherness that dialectically informs who we are, that is, the internalization of the Other—the social, linguistic, and cultural ontology in which we are physically and symbolically situated. Our subjective engagement with our own interior is at once an interpersonal relation to others within a greater cosmic rubric of onto-

64 Cf. Kant's (1781/1787) notion of the "transcendental unity of apperception" (A 107) and Husserl's (2001) "passive synthesis."

logical inclusion our minds are drawn to consider. Here lies the magic of metaphysics, that of speculative philosophy and abductive logic, namely, the desire to find a rational place where everything logically fits into its own scheme within a supraordinate process. We have called this penchant many things, from the One to the Absolute, the Transcendent, Cosmos, Being, and God, when we are actually illuminating an experiential feeling of the *need for connection* to a whole. For Jung, wholeness as individuation is a remedy for our psychological malaise where spirituality is deemed a necessary panacea. This is why he placed such great emphasis on the pursuit of the numinous. In his words, “A man who has never experienced that has missed something important.”<sup>65</sup>

To become a fully functional and individuated self is to acquire a liberated psyche, and this can only be attained through self-knowledge. This requires us to develop an intimate relationship with our own mind and all the various aspects of who we are and what we experience internally. This means being habitually self-observant, introspective, truthful about our inner thoughts, feelings, and fantasies, and attuned to the microdynamics of our interior. This further requires us to suspend our resistances about inner experiences we are sensitive or defensive about and develop a self-reflective function or capacity for self-analysis where our perceptive ego allows for an honest appraisal of our inclinations, will, and personality. In this respect, individuation may be analogous to a form of self-psychotherapy as a voyage of insight, acceptance, and healing.

Because the mind is dialectically constituted, hence populated by multiplicities of dualities and opposing desires that stand in relation to one another, it becomes the task of a liberated mind to integrate these opposites within a meaningful rubric. This capacity for integrating oppositions or complementarities within oneself Jung called the “transcendent function.”<sup>66</sup> We may view this psychic pulse as a requisite avenue toward achieving wholeness. Having to embrace myriad aspects of oneself as discrete units of experience held together by a unifying thread of psychic interrelatedness is no small feat, for inner experience is alive and coalesces into quasi-autonomous self-states that demand a sustained existence of their own; yet they stand in juxtaposition to unitive pressures that seek to integrate all internality into a meaningful totality.

65 *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, p. 356.

66 Jung (1916) concludes his essay by saying: “It is a way of attaining liberation by one’s own efforts and of finding the courage to be oneself” (*Collected Works*, Vol. 8, p. 91).

As transmutational process (never an achieved finality), we may say that individuation involves a certain exertion toward self-emancipation from the more inauthentic, unsavory, and monotonous dimensions of life despite the fact that we can never fully transcend our fermenting *pathos*. Instead we aim for a more self-actualized existence bathed in enjoyment, fulfillment, and wisdom with the perspicacious awareness that such ideality can never be attained, only approximated. Here we must choose our own unique lifepath or individual way where each person must follow their own organic or natural calling, the life within. This requires a honed acumen for listening to one's inner voice that is oriented toward the better aspects of our nature, such as our ethical side in touch with valuation as humanity's chief preoccupation. In the end it is the pursuit that counts.

Whether unconsciously orchestrated or consciously chosen, the quest for holism becomes much more of a pressing need as you get older and more cognizant of your impinging mortality. Our being toward death is perhaps the most intimate of all experiential encounters, for only "I" can live my own death. There is no stand-in to take my place, no anonymous other. We must live it alone. Despite the fact that mortality is a universal occurrence for all sentient beings, no one else can die for me. This is what makes it completely solitary, inimitable, and exclusive. In the hovering moments of finality, we are all a one-man show. I want to live my own life as fullest as I can, and that means in innermost closeness and sobriety to my own death. No one wants termination, the end of all experience, that is why embracing our impending transience adds more value to the moment and helps us prepare for death. In the end, I want to be able to say, "I had a good life, and I made the most of it the best way I could."

It takes guts to be in full recognition of one's mortality, as it makes us nervous (hence takes nerve) to think we are going to end. That is why most people do not think about their looming death until it visits them in old age, illness, or tragedy. The full realization: "I am going to die"—that is courage, a necessary existential risk we are forced to lean into. This is why savoring the moment and living in the present ceases to be a cliché, for the TV set will be turned off for good very soon. What this recognition compels us to do is to become more attuned and tolerant of the mundanity of the moment, as well as electrifying the urgency of enjoying your experiences now. Enjoying experience right now should be a telic priority if not a fundamental life goal.

No words can placate, intellectualize, or rationalize away our private encounter with death, for life hangs by a hair (*de pilo pendet*). Despite the impersonality of death and our brute rational acceptance of the implausibility of finitude, logos cannot prevent the inevitable. Although there is an inherent teleology to both life and death, death becomes our final aim and destiny. In the somber words of Quintilian, everything that is born passes away (*deficit omne quod nascitur*). I personally see no overarching purpose or disambiguation we can assign to death, other than the meanings we generate for ourselves. Just like our birth and our miraculous, astronomical thrownness into a life-supporting universe, it merely happens. Even if we grant death the final cause of existence, understanding does not take away from the human angst it generates. Here death should be respected as an incentive to live life while you can, and this means to maximize the cultivation and incorporation of experience. In our being toward passing, namely, the here-and-now presence of our felt-relation to a future ending, comes the realization that our time here on earth is precious, for death is the end of becoming.

If the aim of all life is death,<sup>67</sup> then we are all preparing for rest, a tensionless state where we no longer feel anxiety and suffer, the culmination and fulfillment of life. God was invented to extinguish our suffering. Here there is no difference: death is the terminus of pain. In other words, death is eternal peace, the end to all negativity and conflict, the cessation of our *pathos*. So how do we prepare for death? By being aware of it, leaning into its immanence, seizing the array of choices we are condemned to face, and making peace with the limited time we have left, such as the activities we wish to take up when we have the chance, and the legacy we wish to leave behind in this flicker of light that traverses the historical progression of the cosmos, which will soon vanish into nothingness. This is why generating and embracing the utmost of experience is all we can strive for.

The spiritual quest does not require a supernatural intelligence to give purpose and qualitative value to life, for this is incumbent on us. Even though we are all headed for a pine box, this does not mean that we cannot find intrinsic worth and meaning in living our lives for the present, not for a fantasized future. Despite that the thrust of our being toward

67 Recall that Freud (1920) made the death drive (*Todestrieb*) the centrality of the psyche and the impetus behind the variegations of life (see p. 38). Compare to Horace: death is the final goal of things (*mors ultima linea rerum est*).

death is imposed on us without consultation, we can faithfully choose to live our lives creatively and authentically, as the pursuit of meaning and value, which naturally privileges our relationality to others, for nothing else really matters. The call of finitude is a constant reminder that we are obligated to actualize our possibilities, because we only have one chance at life. This makes every decision we make a priority, and we have no one else to blame for our choices but ourselves.

To be honest with ourselves and others, free of blind ignorance or self-deception; to open ourselves up to the affective interiority of our beings; to experience genuine emotion and spontaneity; to love, work, and play; to tolerate ambiguity through the courage to be; to have compassion and empathy for others' suffering, as well as our own; to contemplate the numinous and follow a moral path; and be committed to becoming a decent human being—What else can we reasonably ask for? We are the authors of our own lives, to be lived and relived. Despite our passions, fallibility, and finite natures, we have no other recourse than to accept our thrownness with humility. We call this humanism—The I that is We, and the We that is I.