

SOUL AND SHADOW

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The decisive question for man is:
Is he related to something infinite or not?
Carl G. Jung¹

The so-called death of God, after which everything is supposedly permitted, has not worked out so well for human societies. Without a relation to the infinite, human beings will tend to lose their bearings. Few have the intellectual and moral resources to construct their own philosophy. The vast majority, cast adrift in a universe without intrinsic meaning, will experience a spiritual vertigo that is the source of countless social ills.² If we desire genuine well-being, both individual and social, we must find some way to renew our connection with the infinite. To put it another way, we need to recover our souls.

Existential necessity aside, such a renewal is also required for purely pragmatic reasons. Unchecked by moral imperatives derived from a relation to the infinite, the wolf of appetite runs free, with consequences that are more and more devastating to ourselves and the Earth:

Then every thing includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into appetite;
And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last eat up himself.³

Worse yet, when people lack intrinsic morality, it will be imposed from without:

¹ *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Vintage, 1989, 325

² William Ophuls, *Requiem for Modern Politics*, Westview, 1997, 191-199

³ William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, I, 3

Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains on their own appetites. . . . Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fitters.⁴

Ergo, if we do not wish to be devoured or to wear fetters, we must renew our connection with the infinite.

How we moderns lost our souls is a long story, but the essence is easily stated. Since the Enlightenment, we have used rational means to pursue rational ends to the end of an ever more rationalized society. But human beings are not purely rational. To the contrary, says Costica Bratagan:

The human is a knot of contradictions and opposing drives: reason and unreason; wisdom and recklessness; faithlessness and mysticism; logic and imagination. We feed on exact science as much as we do on myths, on fictions and fabulations. We can die for others or let them perish in the cold; we can create extraordinary things only to enjoy their utter destruction; human society can be paradise and hell at one and the same time.⁵

Another way to state the point is to say that the human psyche has a shadow containing whatever is not overtly manifested by persona or personality. In particular, the shadow contains what is denied, repressed, or even merely unacknowledged by ego. The shadow is intrinsic to the human psyche and cannot be ignored, escaped, dominated, or eliminated. (Indeed, any attempt to do so leads to the return of the repressed in exact proportion to the force of repression.) When we remain unaware of the shadow's contents, it can become the unconscious driver of our behavior or cause chronic neurotic misery. What is worse, it can erupt and temporarily take over ego with potentially disastrous consequences. But the shadow is not a mere reservoir of disowned darkness. To the contrary, it is also a vital source of energy and creativity, without which we are only half a human. Imagine Shakespeare without the shadow.

⁴ Edmund Burke, "Letter to a Member of the National Assembly," 1791

⁵ "Our Delight in Destruction," The New York Times, March 27, 2017

Thus the way to psychic balance and health is for ego to achieve a reconciliation with shadow by embracing all of the psyche's oppositions and contradictions—good and bad, love and hate, rational and irrational, the whole of what makes us human.

What is true of the individual is also true of societies. The shadow side of our increasingly rational and rationalized culture is a growing irrationality that has no constructive outlet and is therefore likely to take perverse or dangerous forms, both socially and politically. The problem with a purely material and rational society is captured by two well-known Biblical sayings: "Man shall not live by bread alone,"⁶ and "Where there is no vision, the people perish."⁷ In the end, it seems nearly impossible for human beings to exist comfortably and sanely without a guiding myth, without a connection to something larger than their petty selves, without a story that gives meaning to existence in general and to individual existence in particular.⁸

This older understanding of the critical importance of myth—a supposed chimera banished by the Enlightenment—has been reinforced by modern neuroscience and psychology, which have rendered the phrase *rational being* an oxymoron. The human mind is a trickster that operates behind the scenes to produce an illusion of reality and rationality. And our ideas are not really our own. We do not construct meaning or opinion, we receive them from the collective—that is, from outside ourselves in the form of myths, religions, or philosophies at the higher spiritual level and scientific findings, political doctrines, or internet memes at the more mundane level.⁹

Thus, although Jung was no friend of organized religion, he sided with Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor in thinking that for some time to come "the vast majority needs authority, guidance, law" in a concrete institutional form:¹⁰

⁶ Matthew 4:4, KJV

⁷ Proverbs 29:18, KJV

⁸ This paragraph and the preceding one are an abbreviation of the argument I have made at greater length in chap. 6 of *Requiem for Modern Politics*, cited above, and chap. 4 of *Plato's Revenge*, MIT, 2011

⁹ For a brief elaboration, see Philip Fernbach and Steven Sloman, "Why We Believe Obvious Untruths," New York Times, March 3, 2017

¹⁰ Carl G. Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, trans. Gerhard Adler and R. F. C. Hull, Princeton, 1972, 239

Collective identities are crutches for the lame, shields for the timid, beds for the lazy, nurseries for the irresponsible; but they are equally shelters for the poor and weak, a home port for the shipwrecked, the bosom of a family for orphans, a land of promise for disillusioned vagrants and weary pilgrims, a herd and a safe fold for lost sheep, and a mother providing nourishment and growth. It is therefore wrong to regard this intermediary stage as a trap; on the contrary, for a long time to come it will represent the only possible form of existence for the individual.¹¹

A rational society will naturally reject this prescription and continue seeking solutions to its problems by rational means. But the gap between infinite human desires and finite biological resources is at root a moral problem—How and where shall we place a controlling power on human will and appetite?—not something that can be bridged by merely technical or material measures. Hence the solution must be spiritual or religious lest it be nakedly political.

Many will balk at this bald statement, believing along with the Enlightenment philosophes that religion has no place in the political realm. But in fact we do have a guiding myth of eternal progress through technological prowess and a tacit religion in the form of a secular ideology tantamount to a religion—namely, an absolute faith in the efficacy of instrumental rationality. The problem is that this “faith” lacks a moral core—in other words, anything that would moderate human self-seeking or the insatiable quest for more wealth and power. Its credo is that humankind must use rational means to become the master and possessor of nature and then use that power to achieve personal and national wealth. The overly rationalized and morally unrestrained world in which we find ourselves was created by this quasi-religion and cannot be reformed with more of the same, only by metanoia. That is, by a conversion to a radically different metaphysical stance that restores humanity’s relation to the infinite and provides guidance and practical support for living well on the Earth without devouring it.

That such a profound change of collective consciousness will not occur anytime soon should be obvious. History suggests that it takes a prolonged period of more or less intense suffering before people let go of an old paradigm and embrace a new one. To put it another way, soul change happens only after we have received a profound shock or reached the end of our tether—that is, during a crisis in which the old verities and rules no longer apply but the new ones are not yet in place. Such an interim between two ages is likely to be dominated by the

¹¹ *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Vintage, 1989, 342-343. Jung was perhaps remiss in not mentioning that collective identities can also be hotbeds of fanaticism.

human shadow—to be a time of troubles in which distrust, denial, anger, polarization, tribalism, violence, and a host other evils flourish.¹² This suffering is a necessary crucible for the forging of a new era, for the making of a new collective soul.

It would not be useful to speculate on the form that a future religiosity might take, but I will venture an opinion on what form it will *not* take. First, my own utopian vision—“a more experienced and wiser savage” living in a “Bali with electronics”¹³—is just that: a utopia. However useful as a thought experiment, any attempt to rationally construct a better future disregards the messy way in which history has been made in the past and will almost certainly be made in the future.¹⁴ Second, I doubt that the new spiritual dispensation will take the form of any extant major faith. None of them truly respond to our current predicament and all of them are rooted in a tribal identity harking back to a remote past or fatally encrusted by tradition. In other words, I would expect something new—indeed, radically new—to emerge from the crucible, even if it incorporates elements of the old.

It may be that Hegel was not entirely wrong in seeing human history as a story of progress—not toward a merely rational reason, but rather toward a greater and more expansive awareness, a consciousness in which Pascal’s “reasons of the heart” predominate and act as a container for instrumental rationality. To put it another way, I believe that social and spiritual evolution may in the long run recapitulate biological evolution, which seems to have greater consciousness as its telos. Thus I would expect (or hope) that a future religion would transcend tribalism and take a more cosmic stance, expounding a universalist teaching that offers abundant spiritual succor and moral support without having recourse to the Grand Inquisitor’s miracle, mystery, and authority. An inkling of such a teaching is perhaps to be found in the *Upanishads* or the *Tao Te Ching*.

All this is to take a very long view, but living *sub specie aeternitatis* is exactly what is needed now. Crises tend to rob us of everything except ego’s immediate fears and needs and to create a climate of desperation. That is why the shadow flourishes during a time of troubles.

¹² Like the catastrophic 14th century I alluded to in a previous essay, “The Certainty of Failure”

¹³ *Plato’s Revenge*, chap. 7

¹⁴ That being said, once the messy transition is over any future civilization will necessarily exhibit certain characteristics—to wit, a smaller and more dispersed population, using far less energy per capita, living close to the land in small communities, and practicing mixed farming and artisanal manufacturing. As suggested in a previous essay, “The Shape of a Future Civilization,” such a civilization will resemble pre-industrial societies socially, economically, and politically.

Only the long view will save us. For twenty years a Japanese Zen master tirelessly taught retreats, ordained priests, and established centers, not only in the U. S. but also in other parts of the world. Yet when asked how Buddhism was faring in the West, he replied, "Ask me in 500 years."