

From *The Quest for Meaning*, William Cooney

Chapter 1

Introduction:

*The Philosophical Attitude  
and the Gift of Existence*

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*He who has a why can bear with almost any how.*  
—Friedrich Nietzsche

*The only reality [for] an existing individual . . . is the fact that he exists; this reality constitutes his absolute interest.*  
—Søren Kierkegaard

Let us begin our quest with the consideration of a seemingly all too obvious but incredible truth—you and I exist. Let me repeat with emphasis, *you and I exist!* I think it will do us well to consider this truth for a moment. We spend the vast majority of our lives never contemplating this fact. We seem caught up in a world which has deprived us from considering it. Or, what is worse, *we seem constrained to take our existence for granted!*

I cannot think of anything more tragic and unfortunate than that. Our existence is wondrous and miraculous. We are the products of incredible and awesome forces. The various elements in the cosmos have, at some time in the vastly distant past, congealed into stars and from those great nuclear reactors has come life itself. This is no less remarkable whether it is attributable to the hand of God, or of Nature (or perhaps both, as Baruch Spinoza, 1632-1677, would have us believe, since for him God and Nature are one and the same—*Deus sive Natura*). Whether life has come from Divine Intelligence or from fortuitous circumstance does not seem to change the basic truth, i.e., *our existence is miraculous*. It seems that the consideration of our existence demands respect, reverence and thankfulness. What we are called to do, I believe, is to *think* about our existence. And, as Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) points out in his *What is Called Thinking?*, there may be a connection between *thinking* and *thanking*:

*The Old English thencan, to think, and thancian, to thank, are closely related; the Old English noun for thought is thanc or thonc—a thought, a grateful thought, and the expression of such a thought . . . . (WCT, 139)*

This connection seems to find its way into colloquial language. In prayer, for example, we often say we are “giving thanks.” To give thanks in this way is to deeply think (or meditate) about those aspects of our lives which are most precious to us and which give rise (or ought) to thankfulness.

In philosophical terms this attitude of respect, reverence, and thankfulness, is summed up in *wonder*. As Socrates (469-369 B.C.) said, “all philosophy begins in wonder.” And it is specifically *wonder* that is called for rather than simple curiosity. Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973) helps us to see the difference between these two attitudes. Curiosity, he points out, is appropriate from the point of view of a *spectator* who is detached and uninvolved. But we human beings are not merely detached observers of life. We are *involved* in life. We are *within* existence and not at some vantage point outside it. We are *participants* in Being; we are not *homo spectans* but *homo particeps*.

Often, we do not encounter the wonder of our own existence until life seems meaningless to us. This happens when life becomes a mere daily routine. Albert Camus (1913-1960) explains this in his famous *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

*It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm--this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the “why” arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement.*  
(MS, 10)

“Weariness tinged with amazement”—this is the key. The “amazement” refers to the wonder of it all. The “weariness” refers to a level of uncomfotability. Marcel refers to this as a “metaphysical uneasiness,” i.e., a feeling of personal crisis over the meaning of it all.

We have all experienced this question concerning the meaninglessness of our lives. It is important that we *feel* it. At the very least, it forces us to confront the fact of our existence. It wakes us up. More than 2500 years have passed since the Greek Presocratic thinker Heraclitus (c. 500 B.C.) made his famous distinction between those who are “awake” and those who are “asleep.” And at roughly the same time, in India, the Buddha was calling for a level of “wakefulness.” It seems that many of us are still asleep to the fact of our own existence. We too often live, it seems, in an artificial world. This is the world of Camus’ streetcar, followed by four hours in the office, etc. In calling this world artificial, I do not mean to belittle or subtract from the importance of working life. Such a world can become artificial, however, when it forces us to so direct our lives towards the bottom line and the almighty dollar, that we have no time or energy left to *appreciate* our lives. In such a world, and with such an existence (in so far as it can be called an existence), we become prey to the kind of life that Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) warned us of in his great *Walden*:

*I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to confront only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.*  
(SWT, 304)

Should this not be our greatest fear—that we have not ever really lived? So many of us merely occupy a space and time, a frame of existence in a very unreal world. But when we are shaken up by the question of the meaning of it all, we enter into the *real* world of wonder. And when we focus on the meaning of our lives, our true *human journey* begins. Marcel, along with the great Franciscan theologian and saint Bonaventure (1221-1274), argued that we are all *homo viators*—wayfarers and travelers. The human being is an itinerant being. But the journey cannot begin if we are still asleep. We need to wake up! *You and I exist!*

And what do we encounter at the beginning of our journey? Nothing short of life itself. Life, that great gift and responsibility—for “to whom [this] is given, much is required.” Everything, it seems, depends on the beginning. And life is rich enough to provide a marvelous beginning. But what of the responsibility? Wherein does it lie?

When we cease to take our lives for granted, we are at the beginning stages of what I wish to call *the philosophical attitude*. This attitude begins when we *accept* our existence as a gift. Acceptance is no passive relation. It requires what Marcel calls an “active participation” on our part. The acceptance is necessary, because a gift is not a gift unless it is received. In a very important sense, the reception *creates* the gift. To receive the gift, I must open myself up to the gift. That is to say, *reception is also a giving*. You and I exist. Now we must actively open ourselves up to the reception of the gift. *We must, that is, become gifts ourselves*. And we must be gifts to each other, for it is not simply the case that *you exist and I exist*, but *we exist together*. Marcel helps us all to see that we are not solitary creatures. The ancient Greeks understood this. We are involved in each other’s existence. The human being is a social being. As the great poet John Donne (1572-1631) has said,

*No man is an island, entire of itself, Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend’s or of thine own were. Any man’s death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.*

(DEO, Med. XVII)

## *A Brief Hermeneutics on Related Concepts*

In attempting to understand the human person’s quest for meaning, we must first come to terms with what personhood itself is. Let us begin, therefore, to examine the concept of personhood through a brief hermeneutics of related ideas. *Hermeneutics* involves *interpretation* and exploration into the *original* and *basic meaning* of terms. Within the field of theology, for example, the hermeneutical method is used in an attempt to ascertain the meaning of the scriptures as can be derived from their original form in Hebrew or Greek. This method is used also in philosophy. Some notable thinkers like Heidegger, a famous existentialist thinker, have popularized the hermeneutical approach to *uncovering* the meaning of terms such as *truth*, *becoming*, and *being*. Indeed, Heidegger argues, a hermeneutics on the Greek word for “truth” (*aletheia*) itself, is enlightening. For *aletheia* means to be “uncovered,” i.e., to be revealed. Understood in

this light, hermeneutics is an approach to help uncover the meaning and to reveal the truths buried within concepts. Some very important things can be learned in this way. In the following, we explore some very basic terms related to the human person.\*

## *Person*

This term comes from the Latin *persona*, literally meaning “a mask.” It was derived by the Romans most probably from the Etruscan civilization (one of the civilizations conquered by Rome) and their word *phersu*. For the Romans, in particular, the *persona* was often-times the mask that actors wore on the stage. The *persona*, therefore, refers to the character or part that one portrays in a play.

When we talk about the *human person*, then, how can this original meaning be applied? How does it fit? What does it reveal to us? Is there some sense in which to be a human person is, in effect, to play a part? Do we all, that is, wear the mask? And what is the mask used for? Is it, for example, an attempt to hide something? Is there some part (perhaps the deepest part) about ourselves as human persons that we would rather not reveal openly? May this have something to do with the great dictum of Socrates: “Know Thyself”? For is it not Socrates’ intent for us to throw away the mask and reveal ourselves?

These are evocative questions. The psychologist Carl Jung (1875-1961) explored these and related issues in his famous study into the *persona*. For him, the *persona* refers to an archetype that all humans share. In general, an archetype is a vestigial thought-pattern common to all humans. It is a universal part of the human make-up. For Jung, then, it is an essential part of what it means to be human. The human person is the one who hides; the one who wears the mask. And it is Jung along with his great teacher Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), who provides us with at least one most likely reason why we are the creature who wears the mask. I refer here to their famous investigations into the *Unconscious*, that great “hidden” part of who we are. The notion of the unconscious was not invented by Freud. It has its roots directly in such thinkers as Nietzsche, the father of atheistic existentialism. Freud greatly admired him, having once said that “Nietzsche had a more penetrating knowledge of himself than any other man who ever lived or was likely to live.” And Jung, for his part, traces the notion of the unconscious to such philosophers as Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Forerunners of the notion can be found, in fact, in the ancient Greek philosophers as well, and even farther back in the great religions and mythologies of the world. But Freud and Jung have greatly improved our understanding of the unconscious. For they provide the very likely reason for its existence. For the most part, it is the storage area for that information about ourselves that we would rather not reveal. Reveal, that is, not only to others, but even to ourselves: this takes us back to Socrates’ evocation—“Know Thyself.” The unconscious, that is, is a warehouse for truths that we have repressed because they are often too ugly for us to face up to. The mechanisms of repression and resistance, as outlined by Freud, are greatly at work here. It is much easier to wear the mask—to hide from those truths which surprise, embarrass, or even frighten us. The unconscious is that which the mask covers. And the unconscious is often controlled and characterized by “negative forces.” This is what

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\*All definitions utilized are from *Webster's New International Dictionary* and *Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*.

Plato (428-348 B.C.) called the “*Appetite*” (in several places in the *Republic*, he refers to it as the “beast”—that part of our souls which seeks immediate and complete satisfaction of desire). Freud called it the “*Id*” (the irrational, amoral motivation towards the pleasure principle). Nietzsche refers to it as the “*Dionysus*” in us all (the chaotic and frenzied life-force or stream of life in human nature). And Jung calls it the “*Shadow*” (the most primitive and animalistic feature of our personality).

This may not be the only clue, however. Hiddenness may not always be a sign of unwillingness to reveal ourselves. This is only, perhaps, the negative cause. Jung and Freud have given us one of the reasons which seems to explain why we hide. But there may be a more positive reason. And Jung, more so than Freud, seems to have been aware that the unconscious contained some healthy, positive and good contents as well. The unconscious is, perhaps, only part of the story. For it is not only the *human* person who hides. I refer here to what medieval Western (Jewish/Christian/Moslem) theologians referred to as the *Deus Absconditas*—The Hidden God. There is a sense, that is, of hiddenness in the *Ultimate Person*—God. This has been recognized by non-Western theologies as well. Hinduism uses the term *Maya* (Illusion), to talk (in so far as we *can* talk) about God—the Hidden Brahman-Atman. And what can explain this hiddenness? Surely, it cannot have the same kind of explanation. For can God be afraid to reveal the Godself? Are there truths about God’s self that God is unwilling to admit to? Could God also benefit from Socrates’ maxim? Does God have an unconscious side?

We seem to need a positive rather than a negative cause here. Might it not more simply be explained by the fact, also understood by Western and Eastern theologies alike, that the reason God is a *Deus Absconditas*, is because God is the *Infinite* Person while we who seek to know God, we human persons, are *finite* creatures? God is not fully knowable, then, not because God has something to hide—God does not wear the mask—but because of the Infinity of God’s Being. The lesser cannot fully know the Greater. We who live in the realm of finity cannot comprehend Infinity. The imperfect cannot capture the Perfect.

But might there not be an analogue in the hiddenness of the *human* person as well? May there not be similar infinities in us as well? Could it be that the depth of our souls is also impenetrable? Like God, (to the extent that we are made in God’s image—*Imago Dei*) that is, may our being also be overflowing and too full to be contained and too gigantic to be totally revealed?

## *Human, Man, Woman*

When we search after the roots to be interpreted here, we find a cluster of notions. First, there is the Latin *homo*, from which a word like *homage* is derived. This is interesting. Is the human being that being which deserves homage or reverential regard? We may get a clue when we look at the roots of *man*, from the Latin *manus*=hand, but it may also be more akin to the ancient Sanskrit word *manu*, referring to a creature of special powers, special, that is, in comparison with the lower animal species. The *atman*, the Hindu reference to the soul itself, may also be connected here. The power of the human soul, especially concerning the higher intellectual abilities that *man* possesses, seems to be the justification for *homage*. The linguistic connections are not clear, but it is also interesting to note the Melanesian/Polynesian *mana*, which signifies the powerful forces of nature such as those embodied in the human being.

Yet *homo* is also linked to the Latin *humus*, from which the word *humble* is derived. This seems to reveal another side of who we are. On the one hand—with *homage*—we have in some sense a “superior” form of existence, on the other—with *humble*—we have a lowly form. In fact, *humus* literally refers to the earth, the soil (one should not fail to notice as well, that *manure* is a derivative of *man*). This seems to be a recognition of our source, i.e., the human creature has arisen out of the earth itself. This has obvious connections to both religion and science. I refer here to the “from dust to dust” notion found in the ancient scriptures of Judaism and Christianity (as well as to the ancient myths of Native American religion which also have the human species arising out of the earth itself), and to the theory of evolution.

We seem to arrive at an interesting *duality* (our high and low form). We shall encounter other dualities shortly. These dualities are among the many interesting features that hermeneutics can reveal to us. But before we move on, a small word of caution appears called for. For when we look at the roots of the word *woman*, for example, we see that it is derived from the Old English or Anglo-Saxon *man* + *wif* (wife). A woman, then, is a wife of a man. This seems a rather sexist kind of definition. The cultures which gave forth such a word were certainly male-dominated societies and this is revealed in their language as well as in their law, politics and religion (indeed, everywhere). This example indicates that original root meanings sometimes reveal more than just simple truths. They also make plain the various prejudices of a culture, and we must keep on our guard concerning these.

### *Soul, Spirit, Psyche*

The word *soul*, derived from the Middle English original word *soule*, is traced to the Germanic/Icelandic languages with words like *seele* and *sala*. The precise origin and meanings have been lost. A more direct connection is found in the way *soul* is defined. It refers to the *spiritual* element found within the human being. And so we turn to the word for spirit, which is the Latin *spiritus*, literally “breath.” The spirit, then, is the *breath of life*. This, again, has connections to religious ideas. Here we need only remember that God breathed life into the nostrils of Adam (from the Hebrew *Adamah*, meaning soil or earth; thus some theologians infer that “Adam” refers not simply to one distinct individual, but to the human species as a whole; i.e., the earthly creature made in the image of God). The Hebrew *nepesh* (meaning soul), seems also to carry this notion of the Divine breath of life. The Sanskrit, likewise, uses *babhasti*—“he blows,” to speak of the soul. The Greek *psyche*, too, reflects this meaning, from *psychein*—“to breath, blow or cool.” *Psyche* is, of course, the basis of our word “psychology”—the study of the mind (as in the contemporary science), or more widely, the investigations of the soul (we refer to Aristotle’s study of the soul, for example, as his “psychology”). *Psyche* is also represented in Greek Mythology, as the personification of soul—a beautiful maiden endowed with the wings of a butterfly, meant to symbolize immortality. The *psyche*, then, is that immortal and divine spark within us all: all *human* beings, that is. The Greeks also recognized lower forms of *psyche* in non-human (sub-human) life forms. Both Plato and Aristotle refer to the *rational psyche* (belonging to the human being), the *animal psyche* (belonging to lower animals), and the *vegetative psyche* (belonging to the plant kingdom). Like the Latin word *anima* (soul), which refers to the vital principle—in short, life itself, *psyche* refers in general to the very breath of life itself, and that the human being possesses a specific (no doubt, divine) type of *psyche*.

## *Self, Individual*

The term “self” stems from the Anglo-Saxon *self*, *seolf*, *sylf*, and refers to having a single nature or character. It points to the quality of being unmixed and selfsame. It denotes also the quality of being undivided—as hinted at in the word “individual.” The “individual,” from the Latin *individuus* (meaning not divisible), along with “self,” calls to mind a sense of the self or individual as a person in their unique, separate and distinct state. This is what we mean when we say of someone, for example, that they are (or are not) being their “true selves.” It was this state of being a self that Socrates’ great dictum (Know thyself) seems to call us towards. A person who is a self, in this sense, is a person who stands out from the crowd—s/he is a true individual, not merely a member of the herd. This is clearly what Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), the father of Religious Existentialism, had in mind when he called for each person to become an existing individual, taking personal responsibility for their own beliefs and actions, rather than “hiding” in the crowd.

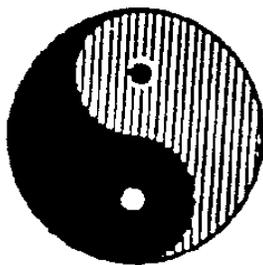
## *Reflections on the Human Person as Duality*

Among the many things we learn from our short hermeneutics, is the *duality* that is often inherent within the basic descriptive terms we use to talk about the human person. There is the duality of the homage/humble, as discussed above. There also seems to be a duality of high and low when we consider that the human person is seen to have some share in the divine *psyche* or *anima* (and therefore has a “high” feature), but also, the human shares an earthly form—from *humus*—(and therefore a “low” feature). We are, in a sense, paradoxical creatures. We have both god-like and animal-like characteristics. This odd quality of the human being is examined in such notions as Thomas Aquinas’ (1225-1274) great “Chain of Being.” For St. Thomas, the human being occupies the highest realm of material creation—we are at the summit of earthly existence. But humans are also spiritual creatures. We occupy the bottom ranks, however, within that world. According to Aquinas, in fact, it is precisely *because* we occupy the lowest regions of spirit, that we need a physical body which can enable our lowly spirits to do their work.

There is also the duality of the hidden/unhidden features of our personality as we have briefly seen. We shall come back to this theme again and again. It seems to me that the arts, literature and film reveal both the masks that we wear and, at their best, what is under the mask. The arts, therefore, get at the truth in a literal way, i.e., recalling Heidegger’s hermeneutics on “truth” (*aletheia*)=to become uncovered or revealed.

But there are other dualities hinted at by our short treatment. There is the dark side of our personalities (Plato’s “appetite,” Freud’s “id,” Nietzsche’s “dionysus,” etc.), which implies a bright side (indeed, the same thinkers had names for this too—Plato’s “reason,” Freud’s “ego,” and Nietzsche’s “apollo”). This contrast reveals both negative and positive forces working within us and warring with each other. The notion of opposing forces has been recognized by many ancient cultures in their native religions and philosophies. The Presocratic philosophers (6th c. B.C.) pointed to it. But it is

perhaps best portrayed in the great symbol from Taoism—China’s oldest native religion. I am referring to the great *Yin and Yang* as illustrated here.



This symbol explores the deeply hidden relationship with the universe (both the macro-universe, or the cosmos itself, and the micro-universe that each human being comprises). Long before physics was to come to terms with this truth, Taoism was teaching that reality is somehow the holding together of positive (yang) and negative (yin) forces. In an exploration of the yin and yang, we also come to learn a very important truth, i.e., the necessity of each side. For the yin is not “negative” in the sense of being bad or evil. Nor is the yang “positive” in the reverse sense. *What is bad or evil is the disharmony of the two. Goodness=harmony, balance, equilibrium.* This great truth was recognized, as we shall see, by thinkers from Aristotle (the Doctrine of the Golden Mean), to Nietzsche and Jung. Other religions of the world, too, have recognized it, as in the great teachings in India of the Buddha (the Middle Path) and Confucius (the Doctrine of the Mean), his contemporary in China.

This notion is deeply explored, as well, in Hinduism’s triadic understanding of God as *Brahma*—the Creator, *Shiva*—the Destroyer, and *Vishnu*—the Preserver. The role of Shiva is most familiar in portrayals of the great cosmic dance as pictured below.



In the great cosmic dance, Shiva, the many-handed god, holds both a drum which beats the sound of creation, and fire, which signals the coming destruction. But it is important that we see that Shiva’s destructive role is *not* interpreted as evil. For in destroying the world, Shiva makes a new one possible, born out of the ashes of the old. The cosmos must, in the tradition of Hinduism, go through successive reincarnations. It is interesting to note that many contemporary astrophysicists, Carl Sagan, for

example, believe that Hinduism has hit upon a most likely cosmological theory. In his *Cosmos*, he explains this in the following way:

*The Hindu religion is the only one of the world's great faiths dedicated to the idea that the Cosmos itself undergoes an immense, indeed an infinite, number of deaths and rebirths. . . . These profound and lovely images are, I like to imagine, a kind of premonition of modern astronomical ideas. Very likely, the universe has been expanding since the Big Bang, but it is by no means clear that it will continue to expand forever. [It may] partake of a very Indian succession of cycles, expansion followed by contraction, universe after universe. If we live in such an oscillating universe, then the Big Bang is not the creation of the Cosmos, but merely the end of the previous cycle, the destruction of the last incarnation of the Cosmos.*  
(C, 258-259)

Sagan's words indicate, among other things, something which is often overlooked, i.e., science and religion are not always at odds. Sometimes the two achieve the same truths.

It seems that in each one of us there exists the *yin and yang; shiva and vishnu*. The microcosm appears to mirror the macrocosm. Each of us is a universe, though not, as we have said, self-contained and isolated (remember Marcel and Donne). The human universe is a shared experience. This is why we must explore it together—*You and I exist*.

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