

Part IV

Skeptic: Tell me this: if what you say is true, if, underneath it all, the selfish animal we call “man” possesses a soul that is essentially and inherently good, why have all attempts to uncover it failed so dismally? Christianity, Islam, Communism, Humanism---so many religions and ideologies all appeal to just such a “higher ego.” And yet, here we are, in 1999, back at square one with our good old, tried and true, egoistic ego...

Believer: But does not the very existence of all these “isms” indicate that, by his very nature, man is forever seeking to transcend his material-bound self? If there is nothing more to man than the urge for animal gratification, why have millions of people accepted--to a greater or lesser degree--the moral demands of these creeds? Does this itself not indicate that there is something more deeply ingrained in human soul than the desire for life's temporal pleasures? Obviously, in his heart of hearts, man longs for a freedom and transcendence that cannot be satisfied by mere “freedom” from restriction; he is convinced that there is a higher purpose to life, and is driven to learn it and to apply himself to its realization.

Skeptic: And yet, they failed! Of the hundreds of millions “devotees” to all these faiths and causes, only a tiny fraction are truly faithful to them. The overwhelming majority is self-deluding hypocrites: they take from the ideology what they need to satisfy their spiritual pretensions and their moral vanity, and then basically do what they please (taking care, of course, not to undermine their position in the community of the faithful). And more often than not, these great moral codes have achieved the very opposite of what they professed to teach. Instead of taming man's animal drives, they served as the tools for exploitation and oppression. Instead of universal brotherhood, they brought war and devastation...

Believer: First of all, the various religions and ideologies that man has come up with are, at best, only poor approximations of the true inner drives of the human soul. They call upon man to surrender his personal desires not to their own quintessential will but to some philosopher's or ascetic's subjective vision of perfection. And man, as everyone knows, does not like being told what to do. A certain part of him is indeed drawn to the higher plane of being that the ideology promises, but his selfish self rebels. Even in the best of cases, life is a struggle between the animal nature of man and his higher instincts; when all one has to strive for is a distorted picture of his soul's true priorities, the struggle is immeasurably more difficult.

Skeptic: And second of all?

Believer: Secondly, they did succeed---to the extent that they do concur with the essence of man and of creation. Communism, despite its flaws and corruptions, has had a profound effect on our sense of social justice. Christianity, despite the horrendous atrocities it perpetrated and justified, played a major role in introducing, to a largely pagan world, the concepts (though much adulterated) of a one, omnipotent and non- corporeal G-d and of a messianic end-goal to existence. The same could be said of many of the world's religions and social movements: although the product of man's finite and error-prone mind, these subjective formulations of life's purpose also contain something of the Creator's vision of reality. Therein lays the secret of their power to motivate so many people to sacrifice so much for their sake.

Skeptic: In other words, it's like the story with graduate student and his advisor...

Believer: I didn't hear that one.

Skeptic: After many months of hard work, the student tremulously submits a draft of his thesis to his advising professor. The young man spends a sleepless night and is waiting at the door of his mentor's office the next morning. “So, what do you say?” he asks. “Well,” begins the professor, “your work is both good and original...” “Yeah...” prompts the student eagerly. “But the part that's original is no good, and the part that's good isn't original...”

Believer: That's good. I'll certainly use that sometime...

Skeptic: Sure. You've got it all figured out. There is only one G-d-given truth, which (lucky you!) happens to be the very religion that you were born into. As for all other beliefs and moral systems, well, everything good about them is plagiarized from your authentic truth, while everything bad about them is where they ruined it when they began thinking for themselves...