JDS 301/GGS 376 Coursepack 2016  
Professor Segol

Thurs, 9/1  
1. Berger, Peter: Cakes for the Queen of Heaven (Course Pack-1)  
2. Hugh Urban, Magia Sexualis, pp. 21-4 (CP2)

Tues, 9/6:  
3. Maslow: Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences. Chs 3, 4, and Appendix A (CP3)

Thurs, 9/8  

Thurs, 9/29:  
5. Boyarin: Carnal Israel, ch 1 (CP5)

Thurs, 10/6  

Tues, 10/11  
7. Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God (CP7)

Thurs, 10/13  
8. Mira Bai, from Songs of the Saints of India (CP8) Read pages 120-9, and 134-40.  
9. June McDaniel, Madness of the Saints, chapter 1, pp 1-25 (CP9)

Tues, 10/18  
10. Stephen Hopkins Extravagant Beholding (CP10)

Thurs, 10/20  
11. Huston-Smith: Do Drugs Have Religious Import? (CP11)  
12. The Good Friday Marsh Experiment (CP12)

Thurs, 10/27  
13. Optional: Entheogens and Religious Experience (CP13)

Tues, 11/1  
14. The Soma (CP14)  
15. Wasson: what was the Soma of the Aryans? pp. 201-13 (CP15)

Tues, 11/8  

Thurs, 11/10  
17. Rouget, chapter 2, Music and Possession, pp. 63-96 (CP17)

Tues, 11/15  
18. Rouget Chapter 3, pp 125-54 (CP18)

**Tues, 11/22: No class, Proposals due by email, 5 pm**

20. Becker: Deep Listeners, ch1 Rethinking Trance, pp. 25-44 (CP20)

**Tues, 11/29**

21. From Deadhead Social Science: Jennifer Hartley: “We Were Given this Dance”

**Tues, 12/6**

22. Rave Culture and Religion, Ch4. 'Connectedness' and the Rave Experience: Rave as New Religious Movement? Tim Olaveson (CP22)

23. Francis Stewart: Religion and Spirituality in Society: Straight Edge punk and religious authenticity (CP23)
Cakes for the Queen of Heaven: 2,500 Years of Religious Ecstasy

by Peter Berger

For several decades sociologist Peter Berger has been one of the most interesting writers on religion and modern society. Perhaps best known for his text on the sociology of religion, The Sacred Canopy, Berger has also shown a keen interest in issues of development and public policy and in the nature of religious belief in the modern world, as evident in A Far Glory: The Question of Faith in an Age of Credulity (1992) and in his most recent book, Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience. For the past 12 years he has been on the faculty of Boston University and director of BU’s Institute for the Study of Economic Culture. This article appeared in the Christian Century, December 25, 1974, pp. 1217-1223. Copyright by The Christian Century Foundation; used by permission. Current articles and subscription information can be found at www.christiancentury.org. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted and Winnie Brock.

"As for you, do not pray for this people, . . . for I do not hear you. Do you not see what they are doing in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the queen of heaven; and they pour out drink offerings to other gods, to provoke me to anger. Is it I whom they provoke? says the Lord. Is it not themselves, to their own confusion? . . . Behold, my anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place, upon man and beast, upon the trees of the field and the fruit of the ground; it will burn and not be quenched" [Jer. 7: 1-20].

Whatever the precise date of this passage from Jeremiah's prophecies -- and, as is usually the case, biblical scholars disagree -- the general historical context is clear: More than a century earlier the northern kingdom of Israel had been almost entirely annihilated by the Assyrians. Since this terrible event the little southern kingdom of Judah had been leading a precarious existence between the great powers in Mesopotamia and Egypt. From the beginning of his public activity, Jeremiah had been warning his compatriots against a great danger, a strong and terrible enemy, that was to come from the north -- the same direction from which the Assyrians had come.

Breaching the Covenant-Contract

It was this enemy that was to be the instrument of divine punishment of the sinful people of Israel. Over a hundred years before, the prophets of the north -- especially Hosea -- had spoken in just these terms about the Assyrians: Yahweh, the God of Israel, worked mysteriously through the forces of history, even through nations that had never heard of him, nations violently hostile to him. Even the Assyrians, a ferocious and merciless nation, could serve as the rod with which Yahweh would strike the people that had become unfaithful to the covenant. Unlike other gods, Yahweh was bound neither to a place nor to a people. His temple could just as well be in one place as in another. His relation to Israel was a contractual one
rather than one of kinship. Yahweh had chosen Israel. He had bound himself to Israel in the covenant, but if Israel broke the terms of that contract, he was then free to repudiate the relationship. Now, once more, Jeremiah proclaimed these old truths about Yahweh, and the proclamation was given added weight by the frightful example of what had happened in the north.

Curiously, the sins denounced in the passage from Jeremiah (sins, that is, that constitute a breach of contract on the part of the people of Israel) are a mixture of social and religious offenses. There are easily recognized violations of social justice -- failures to abide by the law, oppression of the weaker elements in society, the shedding of innocent blood. But these sociological sins are closely linked with the religious ones -- the "going after other gods." This linkage is startling to modern ears. We are, to be sure, accustomed to the moral denunciation of social injustice, be it in religious or secular terms. A New York Times editorial writer would readily find himself at home in Jeremiah's catalogue of social evils. But we are not at all accustomed to seeing such evils linked with the failure to worship properly (in large part, of course, because we have only the haziest notion about worship, proper or improper). The linkage between social ethics and worship was also startling in the context of the ancient Near East -- but not for the reason it startles us today. There was nothing hazy about worship in the ancient Near East: the individual was constantly surrounded by cult and ritual. Nor were the gods a remote or implausible hypothesis; on the contrary, they were tangibly close and real. It was not at all surprising for an Israelite prophet to assume that worship was of great importance. Rather, the unexpected thing was the assertion that the worship of Yahweh was directly and inevitably linked to the treatment of the lower classes of society. Not that this assertion was original to Jeremiah; he was merely reiterating an understanding of the covenant that harked back to very early times in the religious history of Israel.

'Cheap Grace’ in the Temple of Astarte

What, then, was the improper worship that Jeremiah was talking about? Our passage indicates that a rather ecumenical array of gods was involved. The reference to kindling fires (for sacrifice) and pouring libations could, and probably did, refer to any number of divinities. But I think that the most interesting of the lot was that queen of heaven, for whom the women of Jerusalem made cakes (which, by the way, bore her image and were offered to her in a sacrificial cult). Who was she?

She was a very old divinity indeed, even then, and she had borne many names. In Mesopotamia she was known as Ishtar, in Syria-Palestine as Ashtoreth. She reached Egypt as Ashtartu and in southern Arabia she appeared as a male god named Athar. All these names, by the way, have their root in a Semitic verb that denotes irrigation; everywhere she is associated with the waters that give fertility to the land. There are indications of similar goddesses from other parts of the Mediterranean world and from India. The Greeks called her Astarte and identified her with their own Aphrodite.

Astarte (for convenience’ sake, I’ll use the Hellenized version of her name) was a key figure in the cult of sacred sexuality that was central to the religious life of the ancient Semites. Its basic assumptions were quite simple and, it seems, enormously attractive: humanity was part and parcel
of a divine cosmos. The rhythms of nature, particularly the sequences of the seasons and the movements of the stars, were suffused with divine forces. Using later religious terminology, we might say that the rhythms of nature were means of grace or sacraments. These same divine forces were also to be found within human beings, notably in their sexual and agricultural activity (the two were closely linked: the same creative powers gave fertility to the human womb and to the land). The cult of sacred sexuality put one in touch with the divine forces in the cosmos and within oneself. That cult, logically enough, tended everywhere toward the orgiastic. The temples of Astarte had attached to them priestesses or sacred prostitutes (the Hebrew Bible calls them kedeshot, "holy women"; the Greeks called them "hierodules," or "servants of the holy"), who offered sexual relations not for pleasure (though that might have been an occasional fringe benefit) but as a sacrament. (To defend the cult against the charge of sexism, I might add that some of its establishments also had male priests with similar functions.) In addition to its institution of sacred prostitution, the cult had a number of special occasions (harvest festivals and the like) on which normal sexual prohibitions were suspended and, according to the accounts we have, a good time was had by all.

It would be a mistake to attribute the great attraction of the cult of sacred sexuality only to the occasions of sexual release it provided, though this probably played a part. One might observe in this connection that, as human cultures go, that of the ancient Semites was not particularly "repressive" of the sexual impulse; there were plenty of nonsacred prostitutes around, and the temples of Astarte did not have a monopoly in the brothel business. I think, rather, that we can grasp the attraction only if we pay attention to what I have called the sacramental character of sacred sexuality. The human being's fundamental religious quest is to establish contact with divine forces and beings that transcend him. The cult of sacred sexuality provided this contact in a way that was both easy and pleasurable. The gods were as close as one's own genitalia; to establish contact with them, when all was said mythologically and all was done ritually, one only had to do what, after all, one wanted to do anyway. It is hard to think of a more perfect example of what, many centuries later, Christians would call "cheap grace." At the same time, the cult provided ecstasy. In the throes of the orgiastic sacrament, the individual stepped outside his normal self and the humdrum restraints of ordinary life. He became one with the cosmos, with the gods, and ipso facto with his own true nature. He ate the apple and he became divine; what, in the biblical perspective, was the original seduction was also the most archaic experience of "consciousness-expansion."

All divinities have a terrible aspect. But Astarte commonly appeared in a most comfortable form. According to an old Babylonian hymn used in her worship,

> . . . Ishtar is clothed with pleasure and love.  
> She is laden with vitality, charm, and voluptuousness.  
> In lips she is sweet; life is in her mouth.  
> At her appearance rejoicing becomes full. . . .

The same hymn announces that Astarte "is sought after among the gods." No wonder! The Israelites, men and women both, succumbed to her psychedelic charm again and again. Nothing seemed to diminish her fascination. Toward the end of Jeremiah's ministry, when he lived in
Egypt among the refugees from devastated Judah, once more we find him complaining about the women making cakes for the queen of heaven -- despite the fact that, as God says through the mouth of the prophet, they "have seen all the evil that I brought upon Jerusalem and upon all the cities of Judah" (Jer. 44:2). And, more than half a millennium later, when Paul came to Corinth to preach the gospel, the city was famous for its great temple of Aphrodite, with its battalions of "hierodules" who, we might say, stood in a valid "apostolic succession" to the kedeshot of Jeremiah's time. The temptation of "cheap grace" spans the centuries; we may surmise that the Corinthian Christians were tempted for very much the old reasons.

Voluptuous Ecstasy or Stern Demands

But let me go back once more to ancient Israel: From the earliest layers of the biblical traditions to the most recent ones, the spokesmen of the God of the covenant violently repudiated the cult of sacred sexuality in all its forms. Why? First of all, it was not because these traditions were sexually "repressive," or "uptight," or averse to the satisfaction of "libidinal needs." On the contrary, ancient Israel was fairly relaxed about sexual matters, and until very late in its development it had no ideals of asceticism. The prophets were anything but "Puritans." They were denouncing not sex, but sacred sex. It is as if they said: "Go ahead, have your sexual pleasure -- but don't make a religion out of it." Also, in denouncing Astarte and the other gods of this kind of cult, they did not do so because they doubted the existence of these deities (though perhaps some of them did so doubt). The prophets were anything but adherents of a "modern scientific world view." Even Paul, writing at a much later time when Judaism had indeed become a fully "monotheistic" religion, could say in a quite open way: "For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth -- as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords' -- yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 8:5-6).

The sacred sexuality complex was repudiated by those who spoke for Yahweh because it violated their central understanding of both God and humanity. The basic presupposition of sacred sexuality was the unity of the cosmos with the divine. It was precisely this unity that Yahwism violently rejected. Yahweh was the God who had created the heavens and the earth. As creator, he stood over and against the cosmos. He was not one with it; therefore, there was no way by which contact with him could be established by fusing the self with the inner processes of the cosmos. Put differently, ancient Israel polarized God and world in a hitherto unheard-of manner. By the same token, ancient Israel enormously radicalized the experience of transcendence. All gods are transcendent, in the sense of having their being beyond the borders of ordinary human life. Indeed, in this sense transcendence may be taken as a constitutive characteristic of all human religions. The God of Israel, however, was utterly transcendent. His power, to be sure, extended to every corner of the cosmos, but it confronted the cosmos rather than being immanent within it. Above all, Israel encountered its God as a God of history, through the mighty acts that were the foundation of the covenant.

This understanding of God was not an abstract, philosophical one. It came out of the very core of Israel's religious experience, and it had far-reaching moral implications. The covenant imposed cultic obligations on Israel, and the prophets were by no means anti-cultic (to think so is a very
modern, indeed very Protestant misunderstanding). But these cultic obligations were inextricably linked with moral imperatives. Unlike the cult of sacred sexuality, the cult of Yahweh did not lead to otherworldly ecstasy; rather, it directed people back into the world, where their task was to do God's will in human affairs. Worship here was inevitably linked with the whole gamut of moral concerns in society -- with social justice, with the right relations between nations and classes, with the protection of the weak. Unlike Astarte's, Yahweh's lips were anything but sweet; more often than not, his lips pronounced judgment. Unlike Astarte, Yahweh was not clothed with pleasure and voluptuousness; rather, his garb was righteousness. If Astarte's "grace" was cheap and comfortable, Yahweh's "grace" had to be dearly bought with moral effort and discipline.

Thus the opposition between the two religious possibilities was sharp and irreconcilable. It was either the voluptuous ecstasy of the one, or the stern demands of the other. Yahweh was a jealous God. Most important, the cultic betrayal of the covenant was inevitably linked with its moral betrayal: those who offer cakes to the queen of heaven are the same ones who oppress the weak and who shed the blood of the innocent. Despite the vast gulf of experience that lie between ourselves and Jeremiah's contemporaries, it should not be too difficult to see why: a religion of pleasure is not likely to be conducive to the often far-from-pleasurable efforts required by social concern; there is not much voluptuousness in taking care of widows and orphans.

Transcendence: Contraband Goods?

Inevitably there comes the question, What does all this have to do with us today? What should we care, after all, about who worshiped what in the Near East 2,500 years ago? Surely we have more urgent matters to worry about. Well, maybe. It seems to me, however, that these old stories speak to us in a surprisingly timely way, once we penetrate to their inner content through the enveloping layers of culturally alien materials.

To be sure, our spiritual situation today is very different from Jeremiah's. It is not only that we have behind us over two millennia of Jewish and Christian history, during which not one but several radical transformations of religious experience and consciousness took place. Our own situation is deeply marked by the phenomenon we know as secularization. Put simply, this means that transcendence of any sort has become progressively less real to many people. The gods, which surrounded archaic man on all sides, have receded. The cosmos, once permeated with divine beings and forces, has become empty, cold, a mathematical design. This, of course, is what is meant by the "modern scientific world view." Transcendence has been, shall we say, declared "inoperative" by the major agencies that "officially" define reality -- the universities, the school system, the medical system, the communications media, and to some extent even the courts. Those who may be described as the "official reality-definers" -- loosely speaking, the intellectuals and would-be intellectuals -- are, throughout the Western world at least, overwhelmingly attached to that "modern scientific world view" which proscribes transcendence. In our society, as in others, these agencies together constitute what I like to call a "reality police." The "reality policemen" -- teachers, psychiatrists, commentators and the like -- watch over the cognitive boundaries of the culture. In their perspective, transcendence in any of its historical forms is viewed as contraband goods. A contemporary who hears the voice of Yahweh, I daresay, would be just
as suspect in that perspective as one who experiences the voluptuous ecstasies of Astarte. Such aberrations are promptly excommunicated intellectually (the psychiatrists have at hand a full-blown "syllabus of errors" for this purpose, as do language analysts and other assorted ideologists of the cognitive status quo), and the individual who refuses to recant may have to face "repressive" treatments of various degrees of severity (from losing his job to electroshock).

I strongly suspect that there is something close to an instinct for transcendence in human beings. We can learn something from Freud here: "repressed" drives have a way of coming back, often in grossly distorted and bizarre forms. This is precisely what has been happening as a result of secularization and its agencies of "censorship." Very likely it has been happening all along, though some of the manifestations have been stronger or at least more visible in recent years. The gods are very old and very powerful; they are not easily "repressed." What is more, the "modern scientific world view" that was supposed to replace them has turned out to be a rather boring business for many people. The cosmos as a mathematical design may be inspiring to some physicists; the vision gives metaphysical cold feet to many others. Secularization has both demystified and trivialized reality.

It was G. K. Chesterton, as I recall, who observed that modernity has given ultimate authority to the world view of a slightly sleepy businessman right after lunch. Such a world view is not only unexciting; it also fails to do justice to some of the root experiences of human life -- notably the experiences of mystery and of pain. If one looks at the matter in this way, it is hardly surprising that transcendence has refused to go away quietly and definitively. It continues a vigorous "underground" existence in many places; the gods, as it were, come in plain brown envelopes. In other places it continues to defend itself in institutions that, from the viewpoint of the "official" world view, are obsolete remnants of an earlier age. Sometimes, to the surprise of the ideological establishment, transcendence erupts in unexpected and cataclysmic ways. This is a useful approach to an understanding of what has been happening on the religious scene in the past few years.

Let me bring up Freud once more; "repressed" material will erupt most violently where the "censorship" has been strongest. For this reason, the more colorful eruptions of transcendence have occurred not in the bosom of "reactionary" religious institutions but rather in those places where secularization has been most "repressively" established. In America, this means very largely the college-educated upper-middle class. The new Pentecostalism is spreading among progressive Roman Catholics and Episcopalians -- not among Southern Baptists or Adventists. Black masses are celebrated in affluent suburbs -- not in the areas of the working class. And it is the children of the most orthodox secularists, the offspring of thoroughly enlightened modern homes, who parade through the streets chanting Sanskrit hymns.

The Resurgence of Sacred Sexuality

One aspect of this recent religious upsurge is of immediate relevance: there has also been a resurgence of sacred sexuality. Perhaps nothing in human history ever vanishes completely -- a disturbing or consoling notion, depending on the degree of one's faith in progress, but there it is: Astarte is
alive and well, and if she lives anywhere, I suppose, it is in California.

The new sacred sexuality takes many forms. It appears in heavily secularized garb in various therapeutic cults, most of them offshoots of movements within the psychoanalytic camp -- from Wilhelm Reich to the more sedate branches of the "new sensitivity." In the counterculture it revealed its religious thrust almost everywhere, linked as it was to psychedelic experimentation and an intense interest in the occult. Norman O. Brown has perhaps been the most influential spokesman of this overtly religious celebration of sexuality. Finally, sacred sexuality is directly embodied in subcultural religious movements and sects, most of them of oriental inspiration. But this is only to look at the original "locations" of the phenomenon. By now it has been diffused widely through upper-middle-class culture in this country, most strongly on the west coast but elsewhere as well. To an extent, it has become the ideology of the "sexual revolution."

In view of this variety of forms, it is useful to pay attention to the common core of these phenomena. Perhaps the most illuminating proposition in all of this is the injunction "to get in touch with one's body" (incidentally, a moral injunction, often put forth with considerable sternness). What does this imply? First of all, it implies some superficial beliefs about the place of sexuality in human experience (we might regard these as being in the antechamber of the temple of sacred sexuality proper): the belief that sexuality is a key, perhaps even the key, component of the quality of being human (in this, of course, lies the pervasive heritage of Freud); the belief that modern Western culture, and especially American culture, has unduly suppressed sexuality (this is the anti-Puritan aspect of the proposition), and, that, as a result, not only are we sexually frustrated (and that frustration carries all sorts of physical and psychological pathologies in its wake), but our entire relation to our own bodies as well as the bodies of others has become distorted. We are afraid of the body, we are afraid to let go physically, to oouch one another, to enjoy physical pleasure fully (and not just sexual pleasure in the narrower sense). "To get in touch with one's body" is an imperative of regained health, beyond that of deepened humanity. Sexual liberation is thus linked to liberation in a more basic way; it becomes a method of achieving a freer humanity, individually and perhaps even politically.

This much we could call "secularized Astartism." It is not the end of the story. The core proposition is expanded today by many into a fully religious view of the world -- if you will, into Astartism desecularized. Once more, "to get in touch with one's body" is to establish contact with the fundamental rhythms of the cosmos. The "new sensitivity" toward the body is linked with "expanded consciousness" -- expanding, that is, toward the divine. The status quo is defined as an alienation between ourselves and the life-giving forces of nature; the projected salvation consists in overcoming that alienation and returning to the divine forces that are immanent in nature.

Some of the writings of the ecology movement have expressed this viewpoint eloquently, but it can also be found elsewhere (and, needless to say, it can be found in the writings of "with-it" Christian theologians). It is interesting, by the way, that the blame for this alleged alienation is very commonly put on biblical religion and on the Judaeo-Christian tradition as a whole -- an insight with which it is impossible to disagree. In this form of
the proposition, we are once again in the realm of authentic sacred sexuality. The liberation of the body is once more linked to the ecstasies in which the divine womb of the cosmos is re-entered. The wheel has come full circle.

If you think that I’m now working up toward a prophetic denunciation of the new sacred sexuality, I must disappoint you. I’m no Jeremiah, the last thing in the world I want to be is a prophet, and there are worse things in our time than Astarte Rediviva. Also, let me say emphatically that I hold no brief for Puritanism or for sexual "repression." I’m quite tolerant of even the excesses of the "sexual revolution" (my main objection to it is that it is antierotic, but that is another topic), and I suspect that on balance it has done more good than harm. There is one thing, however, that I have in common with the Israelite prophetic tradition in this area: it is not sexuality, but sacred sexuality, which bothers me in religious terms. In an age in which we are so much at the mercy of the "repressive triviality" of the secularists, I incline toward an irenic attitude with regard to all, or nearly all, reaffirmations of transcendence: I would much prefer to live in a temple of Astarte than in a global Skinner Box, and I’ll take the poetry of William Blake over the dreary platitudes of positivist philosophers any day.

The Vital Link Between Worship and Morality

Nevertheless, I cannot finally leave it at that -- and no one can who has any stake in that vision of the human condition that comes down to us from ancient Israel. For both religious and ethical reasons, I cannot leave it there, and, in quite traditional fashion, I see once again the linkage between cult and ethics. Religionously, I believe that Jeremiah was right in his faith in the utterly transcendent God who created heaven and earth, who moves history, and who bids us do his work in the world. We may cherish all the wonders of creation -- as our passage has it, "man and beast . . . the trees of the field and the fruit of the ground." All these are good, indeed they are sweet (as the lips of love are sweet), but they are not God, who stands over them in infinite majesty and who at times, as in our passage, stands over them in judgment. To say this is not to indulge in narrow intolerance. But one must be true to one’s own experience: that means saying No as well as Yes. Now as then, it is not possible to worship both the God who created the world and a world itself perceived as divine.

But for ethical reasons also I cannot leave it with an attitude of total tolerance. There is still a vital connection between what we worship and what our morality is. Now as then, the world is full of injustice and misery. The God of the covenant demands of us that we work in this world, that we strive to combat injustice and to alleviate misery. A religion of pleasure, no matter what the intentions of its advocates, can only inhibit the efforts that are required by this moral demand. And, if I’m to be honest, at this point of my reflections my tolerance wears very thin indeed: in a world of mass murder and mass starvation, of unprecedented terror, odious tyrannies, and the threat of nuclear holocausts -- in such a world there is something obscene about an order of priorities that starts off with bigger and better orgasms.

Let me conclude with what I regard as the root insight of Jeremiah’s perspective: the transcendence of God and the worldly mission of humanity are not in contradiction. On the contrary, the worship of the God
who is utterly beyond the world is deeply, inextricably linked with the most passionate engagement in the moral struggles of this world. Nor is the refusal to worship the creation instead of the Creator a denial of the good things of life. On the contrary, it is precisely in the celebration of the world as creation, and not in its worship as something divine, that we taste its hauntingly vulnerable sweetness.

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Magia Sexualis

Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism

HUGH B. URBAN

University of California Press

BERKELEY \ LOS ANGELES \ LONDON
The whole power of Magic is founded on Eros. The way Magic works is to bring things together through their inherent similarity. 

_Marsilio Ficino, De Amore_

Love is one of the great instruments of magical power, but it is categorically forbidden to the Magus, at least as an invocation or passion. Woe to the Samson of Kabbalah if he permits himself to be put asleep by Delilah! . . . Sexual love is ever an illusion, for it is the result of an imaginary mirage. 

_Eliphas Lévi, Transcendental Magic_

Sex, magic, and secrecy have long been intimately associated in the Western imagination. Since at least the first centuries of the Christian church, sexual licentiousness was often believed to go hand in hand with experimentation in occult arts and secret rituals. Conversely, heretical religious groups were typically accused of the most perverse sexual activities. One of the most common charges leveled against the Gnostics by the early church fathers was that of hedonism and sexual abandon in the course of their obscene rites, and this accusation of sexual license and obscene ritual would recur throughout the later Middle Ages in the church’s war against various other heresies, from the Cathars in the thirteenth century to the Knights Templar in the fourteenth century to the witch trials in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. As Robert Lerner observes, “heretics of all stripes were simply assumed to be immoralists.”¹ Repeatedly and with remarkable consistency, a narrative emerged that linked sexual intercourse with dangerous power, and in turn linked sexual transgression with occult ritual and obscene inversion of religious practice. Even the most renowned exponents of magic, such as the nineteenth-century occultist Eliphas Lévi, quoted above, warned of the awesome power and terrible danger bound up with sexual intercourse. As David Frankfurter observes,
the fear of this unholy union of sexual license and black magic is one of the
most persistent fantasies in the Western imagination over the last two thou-
sand years.\textsuperscript{2}

But how much of this association of sexuality with magic has any real
historical basis, and how much is pure fiction or simply Western society’s
own “fantasies of the world turned upside down”?\textsuperscript{3} Was there ever any wide-
spread practice of sexual magic prior to the nineteenth century, or is the very
concept of sexual magic simply a modern attempt to enact a recurring fan-
tasy that has tantalized the Western imagination for two millennia?

The association of sex and magic is by no means a new idea in the mod-
ern comparative study of religion. Early anthropologists and historians of
religions from Sir James George Frazer to Mircea Eliade compiled masses
of data about various fertility cults across the globe that were believed to
link sexual license and orgiastic behavior with fertility rites and agricultural
ceremonies. Thus, Eliade sees the orgy as a basic and widespread form of
“magico-religious” ritual aimed both to enhance the fertility of crops and
to restore humankind to the primordial, unformed chaos from which all life
proceeds: “The orgy sets flowing the sacred energy of life.”\textsuperscript{4}

[R]itual orgies . . . are attested among populations as different as the Kurds,
the Tibetans, the Eskimos, the Malgaches, the Ngadju Dyaks, and the Aus-
tralians. The incentives are manifold, but generally such ritual orgies are
carried out in order to avert a cosmic or social crisis . . . or in order to lend
magico-religious support . . . by releasing and heightening the dormant
powers of sexuality. . . . [I]ndiscriminate and excessive sexual intercourse
plunges the collectivity into the fabulous epoch of the beginnings.\textsuperscript{5}

Other historians, such as Narendranath Bhattacharyya, have even argued
that there is an archaic patriarchal substratum beneath all the religions of
India, the Middle East, and most of the ancient world which is rooted in a
form of sexual magic. Above all, Bhattacharyya suggests, the ancient god-
ess cults of Cybele, Isis, Ashtarte, and the Indian mother goddesses are
rooted in “primitive sex rites based on the magical association of natural
and human fertility.”\textsuperscript{6}

Not surprisingly, contemporary popular authors have taken this argu-
ment still further, by arguing that sex magic is in fact one of the oldest, most
universal of all forms of human spirituality. “Sex magic is as old as man-
kind,” writes popular sex magician Don Webb.\textsuperscript{7} Another neo-Tantric guru,
Nik Douglas, argues that sex magic and Tantra can be traced back to the Pa-
leolithic era, when spiritual sex emerged as the original “Mother of Spir-
tual Belief” for all later civilization. “It was during the Paleolithic era of the
Ice Age that the foundations of magic and mysticism were established, with
sex as the cornerstone. In this era, sex was undoubtedly a spiritual mystery." This idea is really the starting point for Dan Brown’s novel The Da Vinci Code, which imagines an ancient tradition of matriarchy, goddess-worship, and sexual ritual at the basis of early Christianity itself, which was later pushed underground by the Catholic Church.

While there is not a great deal of evidence to discredit these theories of a widespread archaic substratum of goddess worship and sexual magic, there is not much to support them either. Indeed, we ought to be extremely suspicious of all such sweeping, largely ahistorical claims, which typically tell us far more about the personal, social, and political agendas of the scholars who make them than they do about other cultures or actual historical events.9 What we must do instead, I think, is look critically at the data we have available to us today and interrogate both the more fantastic and the more credible narratives surrounding magic and sexuality, taking both seriously as key components in the modern imagining of magia sexualis.

In this chapter, I will examine both the imaginary and the historical roots of sexual magic in the West. As Norman Cohn has argued, there does seem to be a recurring fantasy of black magic and illicit sexuality that runs throughout much of Western history, from the early Christian church to the time of the witch hunts. This is the story of what Cohn calls “Europe’s inner demons,” or the projection of Christian Europe’s own violent drives and desires onto marginalized groups such as heretics and witches. The resulting fantasy of sex and black magic is thus a kind of “return of the repressed,” the return of Christianity’s own denial of the body, nature, and sexuality in a monstrously distorted form.10 As Charles Zika has recently suggested, however, these fantasies of magic and transgression were never simply a matter of repressive denial. Rather, they were also ways for medieval Europeans to explore, give expression to, and even enjoy transgressive desires: “repression is also about exploring the pleasures of desire, of seduction, of the body: the history of discipline is also a history of excess.”11

To borrow a phrase from Michael Taussig, we might say that this narrative is a form of mimesis, or a projection of deep-seated fantasies and desires onto certain social or political “others.” As Taussig suggests, mimesis is particularly at work during struggles for power between dominant and oppressed groups—for example, between colonial authorities and native peoples, between whites and blacks, or between the Nazis and Jews: “Racism is the parade ground, where the civilized rehearse this love-hate relation with their repressed sensuousity, with the nose of the Jew, their ‘instinct for avarice,’ the blackness of the negro, their alleged sexuality.”12 Yet
ironically, even as they condemn marginal groups as savage or irrational, the dominant factions often mimic that same savagery in their oppression of those groups: “The magic of mimesis lies in the transformation wrought on reality by rendering its image. . . . [S]uch mimesis occurs by a mirroring of otherness that reflects back the barbarity of their own social relations, but as imputed to the savagery they yearn to colonize.” Very often, this mimetic projection centers specifically around sex—the intense sexual power, at once frightening and tantalizing, so frequently attributed to primitives and other races. It is precisely this sort of mimetic projection of sexual immorality and dangerous power that we see repeated throughout Western religious history. In the persecutions of the Gnostics, the Cathars, and the witches, we see many of the same repressed sexual fantasies and desires projected through the “magic of mimesis” onto a series of marginalized others.

Yet at the same time, this association between sex and magic was not entirely a projection or displaced fantasy. Rather, I will argue, there is a deep current running through Western esotericism that does connect the powers of sex and magic and would so form the foundation for modern sexual magic. From ancient Greek love magic, through early Gnosticism and Hermeticism, to Jewish Kabbalah and Renaissance magic, there is a very old esoteric tradition that has linked the mysteries of sexual love with those of magical ritual. The modern practice of sex magic that emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I will argue, is in large part a complex fusion of these imaginary and historical traditions, weaving together both the fantasies of transgressive sexual rites and the actual practice of erotic magic in the Western esoteric tradition.

FANTASIES OF THE WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN:
SEXUAL LICENSE AND RELIGIOUS PERVERSION IN THE WESTERN IMAGINATION

The famous gesture of Adam covering his genitals with a fig leaf is, according to Augustine, not due to the simple fact that Adam was ashamed of their presence, but to the fact that his sexual organs were moving by themselves without his consent. Sex in creation is the image of man revolted against God. . . . His uncontrolled sex is exactly the same as what he himself has been toward God—a rebel.

MICHEL FOUCAULT
Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences
Abraham H. Maslow

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Editorial Introduction

The world has seen increased communication among political and economic philosophies, among the social sciences, among religions, among the physical sciences, and among people in general. Although there are individual differences in the cultural and material developments of the nations of the world, there has been a growing movement toward the establishment of a world philosophy in the social and physical sciences.

Concurrently with this growth of international communication and the unity it has brought about in the sciences, and the lesser amount of agreement it has engendered among political and social theorists, there has been a rising sentiment in favor of increased communication among, if not unity of, the religions of the world. Protestant groups have abandoned, or are abandoning, their strict sectarian views. The Ecumenical Council has brought changes that, although so far largely procedural, give promise of increased world cooperation between the Roman Catholic Church and other faiths. And efforts have been and are being made to reconcile the views of the great religious leaders of all major religions—Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu—religions that, in the past, have been regarded by their followers as having been founded upon the direct revelation of a supreme being to a chosen earthly prophet.

Traditionally, religion has been of the spirit; science, of the body; and there has been a wide philosophic gulf between the knowledge of body and the knowledge of spirit. The natural sciences and religion have generally been considered as natural and eternal opponents.

William James, through his psychology, especially his Varieties of Religious Experience, and John Dewey, in his A Common Faith, have strongly influenced the views of Dr. Maslow in this, the thirty-fifth volume in the "Kappa Delta Pi Lecture Series." Dissenting from the followers of those prophets who claimed direct revelation from God, and
I think I may go so far as to say that if we were to make a list of the key words which have hitherto been considered to be the property of organized religion and which were considered to be entirely outside the jurisdiction of "science" of the older sort, we would find that each and all of these words today are acquiring a perfectly naturalistic meaning, i.e., they are within the jurisdiction of scientific investigation. (See Appendix A.)

Let me try to say it in still another way. One could say that the nineteenth-century atheist had burnt down the house instead of remodeling it. He had thrown out the religious questions with the religious answers, because he had to reject the religious answers. That is, he turned his back on the whole religious enterprise because organized religion presented him with a set of answers which he could not intellectually accept—which rested on no evidence which a self-respecting scientist could swallow. But what the more sophisticated scientist is now in the process of learning is that though he must disagree with most of the answers to the religious questions which have been given by organized religion, it is increasingly clear that the religious questions themselves—and religious quests, the religious yearnings, the religious needs themselves—are perfectly respectable scientifically, that they are rooted deep in human nature, that they can be studied, described, examined in a scientific way, and that the churches were trying to answer perfectly sound human questions. Though the answers were not acceptable, the questions themselves were and are perfectly acceptable, and perfectly legitimate.

As a matter of fact, contemporary existential and humanistic psychologists would probably consider a person sick or abnormal in an existential way if he were not concerned with these "religious" questions.

Chapter III
The "Core-Religious," or "Transcendent," Experience

The very beginning, the intrinsic core, the essence, the universal nucleus of every known high religion (unless Confucianism is also called a religion) has been the private, lonely, personal illumination, revelation, or ecstasy of some acutely sensitive prophet or seer. The high religions call themselves revealed religions and each of them tends to rest its validity, its function, and its right to exist on the codification and the communication of this original mystic experience or revelation from the lonely prophet to the mass of human beings in general.

But it has recently begun to appear that these "revelations" or mystical illuminations can be subsumed under the head of the "peak-experiences"[1] or "ecstasies" or "transcendent" experiences which are now being eagerly investigated by many psychologists. That is to say, it is very likely, indeed almost certain, that these older reports, phrased in terms of supernatural revelation, were, in fact, perfectly natural, human peak-experiences of the kind that can easily be examined today, which, however, were phrased in terms of whatever conceptual, cultural, and linguistic framework the particular seer had available in his time (Laski).

In a word, we can study today what happened in the past and was then explainable in supernatural terms only. By so doing, we are enabled to examine religion in all its facets and in all its meanings in a way that makes it a part of science rather than something outside and exclusive of it.

Also this kind of study leads us to another very plausible hypothesis: to the extent that all mystical or peak-experiences are the same in their essence and have always been the same, all religions are the same in their essence and always have been the same. They should, therefore, come to agree in principle on teaching that which is common to all of them, i.e., whatever it is that peak-experiences teach in common (whatever is different about these illuminations can fairly be taken to be localisms both in time and space, and are, therefore, peripheral, expendable, not essential). This something common, this something which is left over after we peel away all the localisms, all the accidents of particular languages or particular philosophies, all the ethnocentric phrasings, all those elements which are not common, we may call the "core-religious experience" or the "transcendent experience."

To understand this better, we must differentiate the prophets in general from the organizers or legalists in general as (abstracted) types. (I admit that the use of pure, extreme types which do not really exist can come close to the edge of caricature; nevertheless, I think it will help all of us in thinking through the problem we are here concerned with.)[2] The characteristic prophet is a lonely man who has discovered his truth
about the world, the cosmos, ethics, God, and his own identity from within, from his own personal experiences, from what he would consider to be a revelation. Usually, perhaps always, the prophets of the high religions have had these experiences when they were alone.

Characteristically the abstraction-type of the legalist-ecclesiastic is the conserving organization man, an officer and arm of the organization, who is loyal to the structure of the organization which has been built up on the basis of the prophet's original revelation in order to make the revelation available to the masses. From everything we know about organizations, we may very well expect that people will become loyal to it, as well as to the original prophet and to his vision, or at least they will become loyal to the organization's version of the prophet's vision. I may go so far as to say that characteristically (and I mean not only the religious organizations but also parallel organizations like the Communist Party or like revolutionary groups) these organizations can be seen as a kind of punch card or IBM version of an original revelation or mystical experience or peak-experience to make it suitable for group use and for administrative convenience.

It will be helpful here to talk about a pilot investigation, still in its beginnings, of the people I have called non-peakers. In my first investigations, in collaboration with Gene Nameche, I used this word because I thought some people had peak experiences and others did not. But as I gathered information, and as I became more skillful in asking questions, I found that a higher and higher percentage of my subjects began to report peak-experiences. (See Appendix F on rhapsodic communication.) I finally fell into the habit of expecting everyone to have peak-experiences and of being rather surprised if I ran across somebody who could report none at all. Because of this experience, I finally began to use the word "non-peaker" to describe, not the person who is unable to have peak-experiences, but rather the person who is afraid of them, who suppresses them, who denies them, who turns away from them, or who "forgets" them. My preliminary investigations of the reasons for these negative reactions to peak-experiences have led me to some (unconfirmed) impressions about why certain kinds of people renounce their peak-experiences.

Any person whose character structure (or Weltanschauung, or way of life) forces him to try to be extremely or completely rational or "materialistic" or mechanistic tends to become a non-peaker. That is, such a view of life tends to make the person regard his peak-and transcendent experiences as a kind of insanity, a complete loss of control, a sense of being overwhelmed by irrational emotions, etc. The person who is afraid of going insane and who is, therefore, desperately hanging on to stability, control, reality, etc., seems to be frightened by peak-experiences and tends to fight them off. For the compulsive-obsessive person, who organizes his life around the denying and the controlling of emotion, the fear of being overwhelmed by an emotion (which is interpreted as a loss of control) is enough for him to mobilize all his stamping-out and defensive activities against the peak-experience. I have one instance of a very convinced Marxian who denied—that is, who turned away from—a legitimate peak-experience, finally classifying it as some kind of peculiar but unimportant thing that had happened but that had best be forgotten because this experience conflicted with her whole materialistic mechanistic philosophy of life. I have found a few non-peakers who were ultra-scientific, that is, who espoused the nineteenth-century conception of science as an unemotional or anti-emotional activity which was ruled entirely by logic and rationality and who thought anything which was not logical and rational had no respectable place in life. (I suspect also that extremely "practical," i.e., exclusively means-oriented, people will turn out to be non-peakers, since such experiences earn no money, bake no bread, and chop no wood. So also for extremely other-directed people, who scarcely know what is going on inside themselves. Perhaps also people who are reduced to the concrete a la Goldstein, etc. etc.) Finally, I should add that, in some cases, I could not come to any explanation for non-peaking.

If you will permit me to use this developing but not yet validated vocabulary, I may then say simply that the relationship between the prophet and the ecclesiastic, between the lonely mystic and the (perfectly extreme) religious-organization man may often be a relationship between peaker and non-peaker. Much theology, much verbal religion through history and throughout the world, can be considered to be the more or less vain efforts to put into communicable words and formulae, and into symbolic rituals and ceremonies, the original mystical experience of
the original prophets. In a word, organized religion can be thought of as an effort to communicate peak-experiences to non-peakers, to teach them, to apply them, etc. Often, to make it more difficult, this job falls into the hands of non-peakers. On the whole we now would expect that this would be a vain effort, at least so far as much of mankind is concerned. The peak-experiences and their experiential reality ordinarily are not transmittable to non-peakers, at least not by words alone, and certainly not by non-peakers. What happens to many people, especially the ignorant, the uneducated, the naive, is that they simply concretize all of the symbols, all of the words, all of the statues, all of the ceremonies, and by a process of functional autonomy make them, rather than the original revelation, into the sacred things and sacred activities. That is to say, this is simply a form of the idolatry (or fetishism) which has been the curse of every large religion. In idolatry the essential original meaning gets so lost in concretizations that these finally become hostile to the original mystical experiences, to mystics, and to prophets in general, that is, to the very people that we might call from our present point of view the truly religious people. Most religions have wound up denying and being antagonistic to the very ground upon which they were originally based.

If you look closely at the internal history of most of the world religions, you will find that each one very soon tends to divide into a left-wing and a right-wing, that is, into the peakers, the mystics, the transenders, or the privately religious people, on the one hand, and, on the other, into those who concretize the religious symbols and metaphors, who worship little pieces of wood rather than what the objects stand for, those who take verbal formulas literally, forgetting the original meaning of these words, and, perhaps most important, those who take the organization, the church, as primary and as more important than the prophet and his original revelations. These men, like many organization men who tend to rise to the top in any complex bureaucracy, tend to be non-peakers rather than peakers. Dostoevski’s famous Grand Inquisitor passage, in his Brothers Karamazov, says this in a classical way.

This cleavage between the mystics and the legalists, if I may call them that, remains at best a kind of mutual tolerance, but it has happened in some churches that the rulers of the organization actually made a heresy out of the mystic experiences and persecuted the mystics themselves. This may be an old story in the history of religion, but I must point out that it is also an old story in other fields. For instance, we can certainly say today that professional philosophers tend to divide themselves into the same kind of characterologically based left-wing and right-wing. Most official, orthodox philosophers today are the equivalent of legalists who reject the problems and the data of transcendence as “meaningless.” That is, they are positivists, atomists, analysts, concerned with means rather than with ends. They sharpen tools rather than discover truths. These people contrast sharply with another group of contemporary philosophers, the existentialists and the phenomenologists. These are the people who tend to fall back on experiencing as the primary datum from which everything starts.

A similar split can be detected in psychology, in anthropology, and, I am quite sure, in other fields as well, perhaps in all human enterprises. I often suspect that we are dealing here with a profoundly characterological or constitutional difference in people which may persist far into the future, a human difference which may be universal and may continue to be so. The job then will be to get these two kinds of people to understand each other, to get along well with each other, even to love each other. This problem is paralleled by the relations between men and women who are so different from each other and yet who have to live with each other and even to love each other. (I must admit that it would be almost impossible to achieve this with poets and literary critics, composers and music critics, etc.)

To summarize, it looks quite probable that the peak-experience may be the model of the religious revelation or the religious illumination or conversion which has played so great a role in the history of religions. But, because peak-experiences are in the natural world and because we can research with them and investigate them, and because our knowledge of such experiences is growing and may be confidently expected to grow in the future, we may now fairly hope to understand more about the big revelations, conversions, and illuminations upon which the high religions were founded.

(Not only this, but I may add a new possibility for scientific investigation of
transcendence. In the last few years it has become quite clear that certain drugs called "psychedelic," especially LSD and psilocybin, give us some possibility of control in this realm of peak-experiences. It looks as if these drugs often produce peak-experiences in the right people under the right circumstances, so that perhaps we needn't wait for them to occur by good fortune. Perhaps we can actually produce a private personal peak-experience under observation and whenever we wish under religious or non-religious circumstances. We may then be able to study in its moment of birth the experience of illumination or revelation. Even more important, it may be that these drugs, and perhaps also hypnosis, could be used to produce a peak-experience, with core-religious revelation, in non-peakers, thus bridging the chasm between these two separated halves of mankind.

To approach this whole discussion from another angle, in effect what I have been saying is that the evidence from the peak-experiences permits us to talk about the essential, the intrinsic, the basic, the most fundamental religious or transcendent experience as a totally private and personal one which can hardly be shared (except with other "peakers"). As a consequence, all the paraphernalia of organized religion—buildings and specialized personnel, rituals, dogmas, ceremonies, and the like—are to the "peaker" secondary, peripheral, and of doubtful value in relation to the intrinsic and essential religious or transcendent experience. Perhaps they may even be very harmful in various ways. From the point of view of the peak-experiencer, each person has his own private religion, which he develops out of his own private revelations which are revealed to him his own private myths and symbols, rituals and ceremonies, which may be of the profoundest meaning to him personally and yet completely idiosyncratic, i.e., of no meaning to anyone else. But to say it even more simply, each "peaker" discovers, develops, and retains his own religion (87).

In addition, what seems to be emerging from this new source of data is that this essential core-religious experience may be embedded either in a theistic, supernatural context or in a non-theistic context. This private religious experience is shared by all the great world religions including the atheistic ones like Buddhism, Taoism, Humanism, or Confucianism. As a matter of fact, I can go so far as to say that this intrinsic core-experience is a meeting ground not only, let us say, for Christians and Jews and Mohammedans but also for priests and atheists, for communists and anti-communists, for conservatives and liberals, for artists and scientists, for men and for women, and for different constitutional types, that is to say, for athletes and for poets, for thinkers and for doers. I say this because our findings indicate that all or almost all people have or can have peak-experiences. Both men and women have peak-experiences, and all kinds of constitutional types have peak-experiences, but, although the content of the peak-experiences is approximately as I have described for all human beings (see Appendix A), the situation or the trigger which sets off peak-experience, for instance in males and females, can be quite different. These experiences can come from different sources, but their content may be considered to be very similar. To sum it up, from this point of view, the two religions of mankind tend to be the peakers and the non-peakers, that is to say, those who have private, personal, transcendent, core-religious experiences easily and often and who accept them and make use of them, and, on the other hand, those who have never had them or who repress or suppress them and who, therefore, cannot make use of them for their personal therapy, personal growth, or personal fulfillment.

Footnotes:
1. If we were to go further with our analysis we should find that succeeding upon the discovery of the generality of all peak-experiences there are also "specific" factors in each of the peak-experiences which differentiate them from each other to some extent. This relationship of specific to general is as figure to ground. It is something like that described by Spearman for "g" and "s" factors in intelligence.
2. I do not discuss these "s" factors here because the "g" factor is far more important for the problem at hand and at this stage in its development. (back)

Chapter IV
Organizational Dangers to Transcendental Experiences
It has sometimes seemed to me as I interviewed "nonthetic religious people" that they had more religious (or transcendent) experiences than conventionally religious people. (This is, so far, only an impression but it would obviously be a worthwhile research project.) Partly this may have been because they were more often "serious" about values, ethics, life-philosophy, because they have had to struggle away from conventional beliefs and have had to create a system of faith for themselves individually. Various other determinants of this paradox also suggested themselves at various times, but I'll pass these by at this time.

The reason I now bring up this impression (which may or may not be validated, may or may not be simply a sampling error, etc.) is that it brought me to the realization that for most people a conventional religion, while strongly religionizing one part of life, thereby also strongly "dereligionizes" the rest of life. The experiences of the holy, the sacred, the divine, of awe, of creatureliness, of surrender, of mystery, of piety, thanksgiving, gratitude, self-dedication, if they happen at all, tend to be confined to a single day of the week, to happen under one roof only of one kind of structure only, under certain triggering circumstances only, to rest heavily on the presence of certain traditional, powerful, but intrinsically irrelevant stimuli, e.g., organ music, incense, chanting of a particular kind, certain regalia, and other arbitrary triggers. Being religious, or rather feeling religious, under these ecclesiastical auspices seems to absolve many (most?) people from the necessity or desire to feel these experiences at any other time.

"Religionizing" only one part of life secularizes the rest of it.

This is in contrast with my impression that "serious" people of all kinds tend to be able to "religionize" any part of life, any day of the week, in any place, and under all sorts of circumstances, i.e., to be aware of Tillich's "dimension of depth." Of course, it would not occur to the more "serious" people who are non-theists to put the label "religious experiences" on what they were feeling, or to use such words as "holy," "pious," "sacred," or the like. By my usage, however, they are often having "core-religious experiences" or transcendent experiences when they report having peak-experiences. In this sense, a sensitive, creative working artist I know who calls himself an agnostic could be said to be having many "religious experiences," and I am sure that he would agree with me if I asked him about it.

In any case, once this paradox is thought through, it ceases to be a paradox and becomes, instead, quite obvious. If "heaven" is always available, ready to step into (70), and if the "unitive consciousness" (with its B-cognition, its perception of the realm of Being and the sacred and eternal) is always a possibility for any serious and thoughtful person, being to some extent under his own control (54), then having such "core-religious" or transcendental experiences is also to some extent under our own control, even apart from peak-experiences. (Having enough peak-experiences during which B-cognition takes place can lead to the probability of B-cognizing without peak-experiences.) I have also been able, by lecturing and by writing, to teach B-cognition and unitive consciousness, to some students at least. In principle, it is possible, through adequate understanding, to transform means-activities into end-activities, to "ontologize" (66); to see voluntarily under the aspect of eternity, to see the sacred and symbolic in and through the individual here-and-now instance.

What prevents this from happening? In general, all and any of the forces that diminish us, pathologize us, or that make us regress, e.g., ignorance, pain, illness, fear, "forgetting," dissociation, reduction to the concrete, neurotizing, etc. That is, not having core-religious experiences may be a "lower," lesser state, a state in which we are not "fully functioning," not at our best, not fully human, not sufficiently integrated. When we are well and healthy and adequately fulfilling the concept "human being," then experiences of transcendence should in principle be commonplace.

Perhaps now what appeared to me first as a paradox can be seen as a matter of fact, not at all surprising. I had noticed something that had never before occurred to me, namely that orthodox religion can easily mean desacralizing much of life. It can lead to dichotomizing life into the transcendent and the secular-profane and can, therefore, compartmentalize and separate them temporally, spatially, conceptually, and experientially. This is in clear contradiction to the actualities of the peak-experiences. It even contradicts the traditionally religious versions of mystic experience, not to mention the
experiences of satori, of Nirvana, and other Eastern versions of peak-and mystic experiences. All of these agree that the sacred and profane, the religious and secular, are not separated from each other. Apparently it is one danger of the legalistic and organizational versions of religion that they may tend to suppress naturalistic peak-, transcendent, mystical, or other core-religious experiences and to make them less likely to occur, i.e., the degree of religious organization may correlate negatively with the frequency of "religious" experiences.[1] Conventional religions may even be used as defenses against and resistances to the shaking experiences of transcendence.

There may also be another such inverse relationship—between organizationism and religious transcendent experiencing—at least for some people. (For however many this may be, it is a possible danger for all.) If we contrast the vivid, poignant, shaking, peak-experience type of religious or transcendent experience, which I have been describing, with the thoughtless, habitual, reflex-like, absent-minded, automatic responses which are dubbed "religious" by many people (only because they occur in familiar circumstances semantically labeled "religious"), then we are faced with a universal, "existential" problem. Familiarization and repetitiveness produce a lowering of the intensity and richness of consciousness, even though it also produces preference, security, comfort, etc. (55). Familiarization, in a word, makes it unnecessary to attend, to think, to feel, to live fully, to experience richly. This is true not only in the realm of religion but also in the realms of music, art, architecture, patriotism, even in nature itself.

If organized religion has any ultimate effects at all, it is through its power to shake the individual in his deepest insides. Words can be repeated mindlessly and without touching the intrapersonal depths, no matter how true or beautiful their meaning, so also for symbolic actions of any kind, e.g., saluting the flag, or for any ceremonies, rituals, or myths. They can be extremely important in their effects upon the person and, through him, upon the world. But this is true only if he experiences them, truly lives them. Only then do they have meaning and effect.

This is probably another reason why transcendent experiences seem to occur more frequently in people who have rejected their inherited religion and who have then created one for themselves (whether they call it that or not). Or, to be more cautious, this is what seems to occur in my sample, i.e., mostly college people. It is a problem not only for conservative religious organizations but also for liberal religious organizations, indeed for any organization of any kind.

And it will be just as true for educators when they will finally be forced to try to teach spirituality and transcendence. Education for patriotism in this country has been terribly disappointing to most profoundly patriotic Americans, so much so that just these people are apt to be called un-American. Rituals, ceremonies, words, formulae may touch some, but they do not touch many unless their meanings have been deeply understood and experienced. Clearly the aim of education in this realm must be phrased in terms of inner, subjective experiences in each individual. Unless these experiences are known to have occurred, value-education cannot be said to have succeeded in reaching its true goal.[2]

Footnotes
1. I have just run across similar statements in Jung's autobiography (35). "The arch sin of faith, it seemed to me, was that it forestalled experience... and confirmed my conviction that in religious matters only experience counted" (p.92). "I am of course aware that theologians are in a more difficult situation than others. On the one hand they are closer to religion, but on the other hand they are more bound by church and dogma" (p. 94). (I hope that we are all aware that it is easier to be "Pure" outside an organization, whether religious, Political, economic, or, for that matter scientific. And yet we cannot do without organizations. Perhaps one day we shall invent organizations that do not "freeze").

2. The whole of Chapter 1. "Religion Versus the Religious," (and especially the last two paragraphs) in John Dewey's A Common Faith are relevant to the theme of this chapter. As a matter of fact, the whole of Dewey's book should be read by anyone interested in my theses.

Chapter V
Hope, Skepticism, and Man's Higher Nature

The point of view that is rapidly developing now—that the highest spiritual values appear to have naturalistic sanctions
turn out to be an overstatement, and yet there is something here that we must all accept. We reject the notion of distant value-goals in education under the penalty of falling into the great danger of defining education as mere technological training without relation to the good life, to ethics, to morals, or for that matter to anything else. Any philosophy that permits facts to become amoral, totally separated from values, makes possible in theory at least the Nazi physician "experimenting" in the concentration camps, or the spectacle of captured German engineers working devotedly for whichever side happened to capture them.

Education must be seen as at least partially an effort to produce the good human being, to foster the good life and the good society. Renouncing this is like renouncing the reality and the desirability of morals and ethics. Furthermore, "An education which leaves untouched the entire region of transcendental thought is an education which has nothing important to say about the meaning of human life."—Manas (July 17, 1983).

Footnote
1. Baumer (6) speaks of such people who can "be recognized precisely by the fact that the fundamental questions are no longer mentioned at all by these true secularists" (p. 234).

Appendix A
Religious Aspects of Peak-Experiences

Practically everything that happens in the peak-experiences, naturalistic though they are, could be listed under the headings of religious happenings, or indeed have been in the past considered to be only religious experiences.

1. For instance, it is quite characteristic in peak-experiences that the whole universe is perceived as an integrated and unified whole. This is not as simple a happening as one might imagine from the bare words themselves. To have a clear perception (rather than a purely abstract and verbal philosophical acceptance) that the universe is all of a piece and that one has his place in it—one is a part of it, one belongs in it—can be so profound and shaking an experience that it can change the person's character and his Weltanschauung forever after. In my own experience I have two subjects who, because of such an experience, were totally, immediately, and permanently cured of (in one case) chronic anxiety neurosis and (in the other case) of strong obsessional thoughts of suicide.

This, of course, is a basic meaning of religious faith for many people. People who might otherwise lose their "faith" will hang onto it because it gives a meaningfulness to the universe, a unity, a single philosophical explanation which makes it all hang together. Many orthodoxy religious people would be so frightened by giving up the notion that the universe has integration, unity, and, therefore, meaningfulness (which is given to it by the fact that it was all created by God or ruled by God or is God) that the only alternative for them would be to see the universe as a totally unintegrated chaos.

2. In the cognition that comes in peak-experiences, characteristically the percept is exclusively and fully attended to. That is, there is tremendous concentration of a kind which does not normally occur. There is the truest and most total kind of visual perceiving or listening or feeling. Part of what this involves is a peculiar change which can best be described as non-evaluating, non-comparing, or non-judging cognition. That is to say, figure and ground are less sharply differentiated. Important and unimportant are also less sharply differentiated, i.e., there is a tendency for things to become equally important rather than to be ranged in a hierarchy from very important to quite unimportant. For instance, the mother examining in loving ecstasy her new-born infant may be enthralled by every single part of him, one part as much as another one, one little toenail as much as another little toenail, and be struck into a kind of religious awe in this way. This same kind of total, non-comparing acceptance of everything, as if everything were equally important, holds also for the perception of people. Thus it comes about that in peak experience cognition a person is most easily seen per se, in himself, by himself, uniquely and idiosyncratically as if he were the sole member of his class. Of course, this is a very common aspect not only of religious experience but of most theologies as well, i.e., the person is unique, the person is sacred, one person in principle is worth as much as any other person, everyone is a child of God, etc.

3. The cognition of being (B-cognition) that occurs in peak-experiences tends to
perceive external objects, the world, and individual people as more detached from human concerns. Normally we perceive everything as relevant to human concerns and more particularly to our own private selfish concerns. In the peak-experiences, we become more detached, more objective, and are more able to perceive the world as if it were independent not only of the perceiver but even of human beings in general. The perceiver can more readily look upon nature as if it were there in itself and for itself, not simply as if it were a human playground put there for human purposes. He can more easily refrain from projecting human purposes upon it. In a word, he can see it in its own Being (as an end in itself) rather than as something to be used or something to be afraid of or something to wish for or to be reacted to in some other personal, human, self-centered way. That is to say, B-cognition, because it makes human irrelevance more possible, enables us thereby to see more truly the nature of the object in itself. This is a little like talking about god like perception, superhuman perception. The peak-experience seems to lift us to greater than normal heights so that we can see and perceive in a higher than usual way. We become larger, greater, stronger, bigger, taller people and tend to perceive accordingly.

4. To say this in a different way, perception in the peak-experiences can be relatively ego-transcending, self-forgetful, egless, unselfish. It can come closer to being unmotivated, impersonal, desireless, detached, not needing or wishing. Which is to say, that it becomes more object-centered than ego-centered. The perceptual experience can be more organized around the object itself as a centering point rather than being based upon the selfish ego. This means in turn that objects and people are more readily perceived as having independent reality of their own.

5. The peak-experience is felt as a self-validating, self-justifying moment which carries its own intrinsic value with it. It is felt to be a highly valuable—even uniquely valuable—experience, so-great an experience sometimes that even to attempt to justify it takes away from its dignity and worth. As a matter of fact, so many people find this so great and high an experience that it justifies not only itself but even living itself. Peak-experiences can make life worthwhile by their occasional occurrence.

They give meaning to life itself. They prove it to be worthwhile. To say this in a negative way, I would guess that peak-experiences help to prevent suicide.

6. Recognizing these experiences as end-experiences rather than as means-experiences makes another point. For one thing, it proves to the experiencer that there are ends in the world, that there are things or objects or experiences to yearn for which are worthwhile in themselves. This in itself is a refutation of the proposition that life and living is meaningless. In other words, peak-experiences are one part of the operational definition of the statement that "life is worthwhile" or "life is meaningful."

7. In the peak-experience there is a very characteristic disorientation in time and space, or even the lack of consciousness of time and space. Phrased positively, this is like experiencing universality and eternity. Certainly we have here, in a very operational sense, a real and scientific meaning of "under the aspect of eternity." This kind of timelessness and spacelessness contrasts very sharply with normal experience. The person in the peak-experiences may feel a day passing as if it were minutes or also a minute so intensely lived that it might feel like a day or a year or an eternity even. He may also lose his consciousness of being located in a particular place.

8. The world seen in the peak-experiences is seen only as beautiful, good, desirable, worthwhile, etc. and is never experienced as evil or undesirable. The world is accepted. People will say that then they understand it. Most important of all for comparison with religious thinking is that somehow they become reconciled to evil. Evil itself is accepted and understood and seen in its proper place in the whole, as belonging there, as unavoidable, as necessary, and, therefore, as proper. Of course, the way in which I (and Laski also) gathered peak-experiences was by asking for reports of ecstasies and raptures, of the most blissful and perfect moments of life. Then, of course, life would look beautiful. And then all the foregoing might seem like discovering something that had been put in a priori. But observe that what I am talking about is the perception of evil, of pain, of disease, of death. In the peak-experiences, not
only is the world seen as acceptable and beautiful, but, and this is what I am stressing, the bad things about life are accepted more totally than they are at other times. It is as if the peak-experience reconciled people to the presence of evil in the world.

9. Of course, this is another way of becoming "godlike." The gods who can contemplate and encompass the whole of being and who, therefore, understand it must see it as good, just, inevitable, and must see "evil" as a product of limited or selfish vision and understanding. If we could be god-like in this sense, then we, too, out of universal understanding would never blame or condemn or be disappointed or shocked. Our only possible emotions would be pity, charity, kindness, perhaps sadness or amusement. But this is precisely the way in which self-actualizing people do at times react to the world, and in which all of us react in our peak-experiences.

10. Perhaps my most important finding was the discovery of what I am calling B-values or the intrinsic values of Being. (See Appendix G.) When I asked the question, "How does the world look different in peak-experiences?", the hundreds of answers that I got could be boiled down to a quintessential list of characteristics which, though they overlap very much with one another can still be considered as separate for the sake of research. What is important for us in this context is that this list of the described characteristics of the world as it is perceived in our most perspicuous moments is about the same as what people through the ages have called eternal verities, or the spiritual values, or the highest values, or the religious values. What this says is that facts and values are not totally different from each other; under certain circumstances, they fuse. Most religions have either explicitly or by implication affirmed some relationship or even an overlapping or fusion between facts and values. For instance, people not only existed but they were also sacred. The world was not only merely existent but it was also sacred (54).

11. B-cognition in the peak-experience is much more passive and receptive, much more humble, than normal perception. It is much more ready to listen and much more able to hear.

12. In the peak-experience, such emotions as wonder, awe, reverence, humility, surrender, and even worship before the greatness of the experience are often reported. This may go so far as to involve thoughts of death in a peculiar way. Peak-experiences can be so wonderful that they can parallel the experience of dying, that is of an eager and happy dying. It is a kind of reconciliation and acceptance of death. Scientists have never considered as a scientific problem the question of the "good death"; but here in these experiences we discover a parallel to what has been considered to be the religious attitude toward death, i.e., humility or dignity before it, willingness to accept it, possibly even a happiness with it.

13. In peak-experiences, the dichotomies, polarities, and conflicts of life tend to be transcended or resolved. That is to say, there tends to be a moving toward the perception of unity and integration in the world. The person himself tends to move toward fusion, integration, and unity and away from splitting, conflicts, and oppositions.

14. In the peak-experiences, there tends to be a loss, even though transient, of fear, anxiety, inhibition, of defense and control, of perplexity, confusion, conflict, of delay and restraint. The profound fear of disintegration, of insanity, of death, all tend to disappear for the moment. Perhaps this amounts to saying that fear disappears.

15. Peak-experiences sometimes have immediate effects or aftereffects upon the person. Sometimes their after-effects are so profound and so great as to remind us of the profound religious conversions which forever after changed the person. Lesser effects could be called therapeutic. These can range from very great to minimal or even no effects at all. This is an easy concept for religious people to accept, accustomed as they are to thinking in terms of conversions, of great illuminations, of great moments of insight, etc.

16. I have likened the peak-experience in a metaphor to a visit to a personally defined heaven from which the person then returns to earth. This is like giving a naturalistic meaning to the concept of heaven. Of course, it is quite different from the conception of heaven as a place some where into which one physically
steps after life on this earth is over. The conception of heaven that emerges from the peak-experiences is one which exists all the time all around us, always available to step into for a little while at least.

17. In peak experiences, there is a tendency to move more closely to a perfect identity, or uniqueness, or to the idiosyncrasy of the person or to his real self, to have become more a real person.

18. The person feels himself more than at other times to be responsible, active, the creative center of his own activities and of his own perceptions, more self-determined, more a free agent, with more "free will" than at other times.

19. But it has also been discovered that precisely those persons who have the clearest and strongest identity are exactly the ones who are most able to transcend the ego or the self and to become selfless, who are at least relatively selfless and relatively egoless.

20. The peak-experienter becomes more loving and more accepting, and so he becomes more spontaneous and honest and innocent.

21. He becomes less an object, less a thing, less a thing of the world living under the laws of the physical world, and he becomes more a psyche, more a person, more subject to the psychological laws, especially the laws of what people have called the "higher life."

22. Because he becomes more unmotivated, that is to say, closer to non-striving, non-needing, non-wishing, he asks less for himself in such moments. He is less selfish. (We must remember that the gods have been considered generally to have no needs or wants, no deficiencies, no lacks, and to be gratified in all things. In this sense, the unmotivated human being becomes more god-like.)

23. People during and after peak-experiences characteristically feel lucky, fortunate, graced. A common reaction is "I don't deserve this." A common consequence is a feeling of gratitude, in religious persons, to their God, in others, to fate or to nature or to just good fortune. It is interesting in the present context that this can go over into worship, giving thanks, adoring, giving praise, oblation, and other reactions which fit very easily into orthodox religious frameworks. In that context we are accustomed to this sort of thing—that is, to the feeling of gratitude or all-embracing love for everybody and for everything, leading to an impulse to do something good for the world, an eagerness to repay, even a sense of obligation and dedication.

24. The dichotomy or polarity between humility and pride tends to be resolved in the peak-experiences and also in self-actualizing persons. Such people resolve the dichotomy between pride and humility by fusing them into a single complex superordinate unity, that is by being proud (in a certain sense) and also humble (in a certain sense). Pride (fused with humility) is not hubris nor is it paranoia; humility (fused with pride) is not masochism.

25. What has been called the "unitive consciousness" is often given in peak-experiences, i.e., a sense of the sacred glimpsed in and through the particular instance of the momentary, the secular, the worldly.

Appendix B
The Third Psychology

The following description of the "Third Psychology" is taken from the Preface of my book Toward a Psychology of Being. [1]

A word about contemporary intellectual currents in psychology may help to locate this book in its proper place. The two comprehensive theories of human nature most influencing psychology until recently have been the Freudian and the experimentalistic-positivist-behavioristic. All other theories were less comprehensive and their adherents formed many splinter groups. In the last few years, however, these various groups have rapidly been coalescing into a third, increasingly comprehensive theory of human nature, into what might be called a "Third Force." This group includes the Adlerians, Rankians, and Jungians, as well as the neo-Freudians (or neo-Adlerians) and the post-Freudians (psychoanalytic ego-psychologists as well as writers like Marcuse, Wheelis, Erikson, Marmor, Szasz, N. Brown, H. Lynd, and Schachtel, who are taking over from the Talmudic psychoanalysts). In addition, the influence of
FLOW: The Psychology of Optimal Experience


More than anything else, men and women seek happiness.
Aristotle

Each year hundreds of books are published with advice on how to stay trim, how to grow rich, or how to develop self-confidence. While these self-help books may help a reader in the short term, they are likely to be unsatisfying, for they do little to enhance the quality of the experience. But what really does make people glad to be alive. What are the inner experiences that make life worthwhile?

The author has been studying for over 20 years the states of optimal experience--those times when people report feelings of concentration and deep enjoyment. These investigations have revealed that what makes experience genuinely satisfying is a state of consciousness called flow--a state of concentration so focused that it amounts to absolute absorption in an activity. Everyone experiences flow from time to time and will recognize its characteristics: people typically feel strong, alert, in effortless control, unselfconscious, and at the peak of their abilities. Both a sense of time and emotional problems seem to disappear, and there is an exhilarating feeling of transcendence. Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience describes how this pleasurable state can be controlled, and not just left to chance, by setting ourselves challenges--tasks that are neither too difficult nor too simple for our abilities. With such goals, we learn to order the information that enters consciousness and thereby improve the quality of our lives.

It is by being fully involved with every detail of our lives, good and bad, that we find happiness, not by trying to look for it directly.

J.S. Mill

Happiness does not depend on outside events, but rather on how we interpret them. Happiness, in fact, is a condition that must be
prepared for, cultivated, and defended privately by each person. People who learn to control inner experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives, which is as close as any of us can come to being happy. Therefore, happiness depends on inner harmony. The individuals who have inner harmony lead vigorous lives, are open to a variety of experiences, keep on learning until the day they die, and have strong ties and commitments to other people and to the environment in which they live. They enjoy whatever they do, even if tedious or difficult; they are hardly ever bored, and they can take in stride anything that comes their way.

Optimal experience, where we feel a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment that is long cherished, does not come through passive, receptive, relaxing times. The best moments usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Such experiences are not necessarily pleasant at the time they occur. Yet, in the long-run, optimal experiences add up to a sense of mastery, or perhaps, better, a sense of participation in determining the content of life. Because optimal experience depends on the ability to control what happens in consciousness moment by moment, each person has to achieve it on the basis of his own individual efforts and creativity. This happens when psychic energy—or attention—is invested in realistic goals, and when skills match the opportunities for action. The pursuit of a goal brings order in awareness because a person must concentrate attention on the task at hand and momentarily forget everything else.

A person can make himself happy, or miserable, regardless of what is actually happening "outside", just by changing the contents of consciousness. We all know individuals who can transform hopeless situations into challenges to be overcome, just through the force of their personalities. This ability to persevere despite obstacles and setbacks is the quality people most admire in others, and justly so; it is probably the most important trait not only for succeeding in life, but for enjoying it as well. These periods of struggling to overcome challenges are what people find to be the most enjoyable times of their lives.

The author interviewed people from USA, Korea, Japan, Thailand, Australia, various European cultures and a Navajo reservation and from his data, he has been able to describe what makes an experience enjoyable and optimal for people. The first finding of
the study was how similarly very different activities were described when they were going especially well. The way a long-distance swimmer felt when crossing the English channel was almost identical to the way a chess player felt during a tournament or a musician composing a new quartet. The second finding was that, regardless of culture, stage of modernization, social class, age, or gender, the respondents described enjoyment in very much the same way.

The studies have suggested that the phenomenology of enjoyment has eight major components. When people reflect on how it feels when their experience is most positive, they mention at least one, and often all, of the following:

1. We confront tasks we have a chance of completing;
2. We must be able to concentrate on what we are doing;
3. The task has clear goals;
4. The task provides immediate feedback;
5. One acts with deep, but effortless involvement, that removes from awareness the worries and frustrations of everyday life;
6. One exercises a sense of control over their actions;
7. Concern for the self disappears, yet, paradoxically the sense of self emerges stronger after the flow experience is over; and
8. The sense of duration of time is altered.

The combination of all these elements causes a sense of deep enjoyment that is so rewarding people feel that expending a great deal of energy is worthwhile simply to be able to feel it.

A Challenging Activity that Requires Skills

Optimal experiences are reported to occur within sequences of activities that are goal-directed and bounded by rules--activities that require the investment of psychic energy (attention) and that could not be done without skills. Please note that activities do not need to be physical and skills also need not be physical skills. For instance, the most frequently mentioned enjoyable activity the world over was reading, followed closely by being with other people. For those who do not have the right skills, an activity is not challenging; it is simply meaningless. Challenges of competition were found to be stimulating and enjoyable. But when beating the opponent takes precedence in the mind over performing as well as possible, enjoyment tends to disappear. Competition is enjoyable only when it is a means to perfect one's skills; when it becomes an end in itself, it ceases to be fun.
The Merging of Action and Awareness
One of the most universal and distinctive features of optimal experience is the people become so involved in what they are doing that the activity becomes spontaneous, almost automatic; they stop being aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing. It often requires strenuous physical exertion, or highly disciplined mental activity to enter a continuous flow.

Clear Goals and Feedback
Unless a person learns to set goals and to recognize and gauge feedback in their activities, she will not enjoy them. For activities that are creative or open-ended in nature, a person must develop a strong sense of what she intends to do or negotiate goals and rules during the activity. These goals and rules provide benchmarks for feedback. The kind of feedback we work toward is in, and of itself, often unimportant. What makes feedback valuable is the symbolic message it contains: that I have succeeded in my goal.

Concentration on the Task at Hand
One of the most frequently mentioned dimensions of the flow experience is that, while it lasts, one is able to forget all the unpleasant aspects of life. The task requires such concentration that only a very select range of information can be allowed into awareness.

The Paradox of Control
The flow experience is typically described as involving a sense of control—or more precisely, as lacking the sense of worry about losing control that is typical in many situations of normal life. What people enjoy is not the sense of being in control, but the sense of exercising control in difficult situations. However, when a person becomes dependent on the ability to control an enjoyable activity then he loses the ultimate control: the freedom to determine the content of consciousness. While experiences are capable of improving the quality of existence by creating order in the mind, they can also become addictive, at which point the self becomes captive of a certain kind of order, and is then unwilling to cope with the ambiguities of life.

The Loss of Self-Consciousness
When in a flow experience, what slips below the threshold of awareness is the concept of self, the information we use to represent to ourselves who we are. And being able to forget
temporarily who we are seems to be very enjoyable. When not preoccupied with our selves, we actually have a chance to expand the concept of who we are. Loss of self-consciousness can lead to self-transcendence, to a feeling that the boundaries of our being have been pushed forward.

The Transformation of Time
One of the most common descriptions of optimal experience is that time no longer seems to pass the way it ordinarily does. Generally, after the experience we do not know where the time went; however, during the actual experience, time seems to stand still.

The key element of an optimal experience is that it is an end in itself. It is an autotelic experience. The term "autotelic" derives from two Greek words, "auto" meaning self, and "telos" meaning goal. It refers to a self-contained activity, one that is done not with the expectation of some future benefit, but simply because the doing itself is the reward. Teaching children in order to turn them into good citizens is not autotelic, whereas teaching them because one enjoys interacting with children is. Most enjoyable activities are not natural; they demand an effort that initially one is reluctant to make. But once the interaction starts to provide feedback to the person's skills, it usually begins to be intrinsically rewarding.

Flow in the family context has five characteristics:
- **Clarity**: children know what parents expect from them;
- **Centering**: children know that their parents are interested in what they are doing in the present;
- **Choice**: children feel that they have a variety of possibilities from which to choose;
- **Commitment**: trust that allows the child to feel comfortable enough to set aside the shield of defenses and become unself-consciously involved; and
- **Challenge**: providing increasingly complex opportunities for action.

These same elements are necessary to creating flow and meaning in one's work life and in one's relationships with others.

Creating meaning involves bringing order to the contents of the mind by integrating one's actions into a unified flow experience. People who find their lives meaningful usually have a goal that is challenging enough to take up all their energies, a goal that can
give significance to their lives. This is called achieving purpose. However, it is not enough to find a purpose, one must also carry through and meet its challenges. This is called resolution. When an important goal is pursued with resolution, and all one's varied activities fit together into a unified flow experience, the result is harmony. Purpose, resolution, and harmony unify life and give it meaning.
THE BODY IN FLOW

“A MAN POSSesses nothing certainly save a brief loan of his own body,” wrote J. B. Cabell, “yet the body of man is capable of much curious pleasure.” When we are unhappy, depressed, or bored we have an easy remedy at hand: to use the body for all it is worth. Most people nowadays are aware of the importance of health and physical fitness. But the almost unlimited potential for enjoyment that the body offers often remains unexploited. Few learn to move with the grace of an acrobat, see with the fresh eye of an artist, feel the joy of an athlete who breaks his own record, taste with the subtlety of a connoisseur, or love with a skill that lifts sex into a form of art. Because these opportunities are easily within reach, the easiest step toward improving the quality of life consists in simply learning to control the body and its senses.

Scientists occasionally amuse themselves by trying to figure out how much a human body might be worth. Chemists have painstakingly added up the market value of skin, flesh, bone, hair, and the various minerals and trace elements contained in it, and have come up with the paltry sum of a few dollars. Other scientists have taken into account the sophisticated information processing and learning capacity of the mind-body system and have come to a very different conclusion: they calculate that to build such a sensitive machine would require an enormous sum, on the order of hundreds of millions of dollars.

Neither of these methods of assessing the body makes much sense. Its worth does not derive from chemical ingredients, or from the neural wiring that makes information processing possible. What gives it a preciousness beyond reckoning is the fact that without it there would be no experiences, and therefore no record of life as we know it. Trying to attach a market value to the body and its processes is the same as attempting to put a price tag on life. By what scale can we establish its worth?

Everything the body can do is potentially enjoyable. Yet many people ignore this capacity, and use their physical equipment as little as possible, leaving its ability to provide flow unexploited. When left undeveloped, the senses give us chaotic information: an untrained body moves in random and clumsy ways, an insensitive eye presents ugly or uninteresting sights, the unmusical ear mainly hears jarring noises, the coarse palate knows only insipid tastes. If the functions of the body are left to atrophy, the quality of life becomes merely adequate, and for some even dismal. But if one takes control of what the body can do, and learns to impose order on physical sensations, entropy yields to a sense of enjoyable harmony in consciousness.

The human body is capable of hundreds of separate functions—seeing, hearing, touching, running, swimming, throwing, catching, climbing up mountains and climbing down caves, to name only a few—and to each of these there correspond flow experiences. In every culture, enjoyable activities have been invented to suit the potentialities of the body. When a normal physical function, like running, is performed in a socially designed, goal-directed setting with rules that offer challenges and require skills, it turns into a flow activity. Whether jogging alone, racing the clock, running against competition, or—like the Tarahumara Indians of Mexico, who race hundreds of miles in the mountains during certain festivals—adding an elaborate ritual dimension to the activity, the simple act of moving the body across space becomes a source of complex feedback that provides optimal experience and adds strength to the self. Each sensory organ, each motor function can be harnessed to the production of flow.

Before exploring further how physical activity contributes to optimal experience, it should be stressed that the body does not produce flow merely by its movements. The mind is always involved as well. To get enjoyment from swimming, for instance, one needs to cultivate a set of appropriate skills, which requires the concentration of attention. Without the relevant thoughts, motives, and feelings it would be impossible to achieve the discipline necessary to learn to swim well enough to enjoy it. Moreover, because enjoyment takes place in the mind of the
swimmer, flow cannot be a purely physical process: muscles and brain must be equally involved.

In the pages that follow we shall review some of the ways that the quality of experience can be improved through the refined use of bodily processes. These include physical activities like sports and dance, the cultivation of sexuality, and the various Eastern disciplines for controlling the mind through the training of the body. They also feature the discriminating use of the senses of sight, hearing, and taste. Each of these modalities offers an almost unlimited amount of enjoyment, but only to persons who work to develop the skills they require. To those who do not, the body remains indeed a lump of rather inexpensive flesh.

**HIGHER, FASTER, STRONGER**

The Latin motto of the modern Olympic games— _Altius, citius, fortius_—is a good, if incomplete summary of how the body can experience flow. It encompasses the rationale of all sports, which is to do something better than it has ever been done before. The purest form of athleticism, and sports in general, is to break through the limitations of what the body can accomplish.

However unimportant an athletic goal may appear to the outsider, it becomes a serious affair when performed with the intent of demonstrating a perfection of skill. Throwing things, for instance, is a rather trivial ability; even small babies are quite good at it, as the toys surrounding any infant's crib testify. But how far a person can throw an object of a certain weight becomes a matter of legend. The Greeks invented the discus, and the great discus throwers of antiquity were immortalized by the best sculptors; the Swiss gathered on holidays in mountain meadows to see who could toss the trunk of a tree farthest; the Scots did the same with gigantic rocks. In baseball nowadays pitchers become rich and famous because they can throw balls with speed and precision, and basketball players because they can sink them into hoops. Some athletes throw javelins; others are bowlers, shot-putters, or hammer throwers; some throw boomerangs or cast fishing lines. Each of these variations on the basic capacity to throw offers almost unlimited opportunities for enjoyment.

_Alteus_—higher—is the first word of the Olympic motto, and soaring above the ground is another universally recognized challenge. To break the bonds of gravity is one of the oldest dreams of mankind. The myth of Icarus, who had wings fashioned so he could reach the sun, has been long held to be a parable of the aims—noble and misguided at the same time—of civilization itself. To jump higher, to climb the loftiest peaks, to fly far above the earth, are among the most enjoyable activities people can do. Yet some savants have recently invented a special psychic infirmity, the so-called "Icarus complex," to account for this desire to be released from the pull of gravity. Like all explanations that try to reduce enjoyment to a defensive ploy against repressed anxieties, this one misses the point. Of course, in some sense all purposeful action can be regarded as a defense against the threats of chaos. But in that respect it is more worthwhile to consider acts that bring enjoyment as signs of health, not of disease.

Flow experiences based on the use of physical skills do not occur only in the context of outstanding athletic feats. Olympians do not have an exclusive gift in finding enjoyment in pushing performance beyond existing boundaries. Every person, no matter how unfit he or she is, can rise a little higher, go a little faster, and grow to be a little stronger. The joy of surpassing the limits of the body is open to all.

Even the simplest physical act becomes enjoyable when it is transformed so as to produce flow. The essential steps in this process are: (a) to set an overall goal, and as many subgoals as are realistically feasible; (b) to find ways of measuring progress in terms of the goals chosen; (c) to keep concentrating on what one is doing, and to keep making finer and finer distinctions in the challenges involved in the activity; (d) to develop the skills necessary to interact with the opportunities available; and (e) to keep raising the stakes if the activity becomes boring.

A good example of this method is the act of walking, which is as simple a use of the body as one can imagine, yet which can become a complex flow activity, almost an art form. A great number of different goals might be set for a walk. For instance, the choice of the itinerary; where one wishes to go, and by what route. Within the overall route, one might select places to stop, or certain landmarks to see. Another goal may be to develop a personal style, a way to move the body easily and efficiently. An economy of motion that maximizes physical well-being is another obvious goal. For measuring progress, the feedback may include how fast and how easily the intended distance was covered; how many interesting sights one has seen; and how many new ideas or feelings were entertained along the way.

The challenges of the activity are what force us to concentrate. The challenges of a walk will vary greatly, depending on the environment. For those who live in large cities, flat sidewalks and right-angle layouts make the physical act of walking easy. Walking on a mountain trail is another thing altogether: for a skilled hiker each step presents
events are the only "reality" that determines what they experience. For such individuals, joining a fancy health club should be almost a guarantee that they will enjoy themselves. However, enjoyment, as we have seen, does not depend on what you do, but rather on how you do it.

In one of our studies we addressed the following question: Are people happier when they use more material resources in their leisure activities? Or are they happier when they invest more of themselves? We tried to answer these questions with the Experience Sampling Method (ESM), the procedure I developed at the University of Chicago to study the quality of experience. As described earlier, this method consists in giving people electronic pagers, or beepers, and a booklet of response sheets. A radio transmitter is programmed to send signals about eight times a day, at random intervals, for a week. Each time the pager signals, respondents fill out a page of the booklet, indicating where they are and what they are doing and with whom, and rating their state of mind on a variety of dimensions, such as a seven-point scale ranging from "very happy" to "very sad."

What we found was that when people were pursuing leisure activities that were expensive in terms of the outside resources required—activities that demanded expensive equipment, or electricity, or other forms of energy measured in BTUs, such as power boating, driving, or watching television—they were significantly less happy than when involved in inexpensive leisure. People were happiest when they were just talking to one another, when they gardened, knitted, or were involved in a hobby; all of these activities require few material resources, but they demand a relatively high investment of psychic energy. Leisure that uses up external resources, however, often requires less attention, and as a consequence it generally provides less memorable rewards.

THE JOYS OF MOVEMENT

Sports and fitness are not the only media of physical experience that use the body as a source of enjoyment, for in fact a broad range of activities rely on rhythmic or harmonious movements to generate flow. Among these dance is probably the oldest and the most significant, both for its universal appeal and because of its potential complexity. From the most isolated New Guinea tribe to the polished troupes of the Bolshoi Ballet, the response of the body to music is widely practiced as a way of improving the quality of experience.

Older people may consider dancing at clubs a bizarre and senseless ritual, but many teenagers find it an important source of enjoyment.
Here is how some of the dancers describe the sensation of moving on the floor: "Once I get into it, then I just float along, having fun, just feeling myself move around." "I get sort of a physical high from it... I get very sweaty, very feverish or sort of ecstatic when everything is going really well." "You move about and try to express yourself in terms of those motions. That's where it's at. It's a body language kind of communicative medium, in a way... When it's going good, I'm really expressing myself well in terms of the music and in terms of the people that are out there."

The enjoyment of dancing is often so intense that people will give up many other options for its sake. Here is a typical statement from one of the dancers interviewed by Professor Massimini's group in Milan, Italy: "From the very first I wanted to become a professional ballerina. It has been hard: little money, lots of traveling, and my mother always complains about my work. But love of the dance has always sustained me. It is now part of my life, a part of me that I could not live without." In this group of sixty professional dancers of marriageable age, only three were married, and only one had a child; pregnancy was seen as too great an interference with a career.

But just as with athletics, one certainly need not become a professional to enjoy controlling the expressive potentials of the body. Dilettante dancers can have just as much fun, without sacrificing every other goal for the sake of feeling themselves moving harmoniously.

And there are other forms of expression that use the body as an instrument: miming and acting, for instance. The popularity of charades as a parlor game is due to the fact that it allows people to shed for a time their customary identity, and act out different roles. Even the most silly and clumsy impersonation can provide an enjoyable relief from the limitations of everyday patterns of behavior, a glimpse into alternative modes of being.

SEX AS FLOW

When people think of enjoyment, usually one of the first things that comes to mind is sex. This is not surprising, because sexuality is certainly one of the most universally rewarding experiences, surpassed in its power to motivate perhaps only by the need to survive, to drink, and to eat. The urge to have sex is so powerful that it can drain psychic energy away from other necessary goals. Therefore every culture has to invest great efforts in rechanneling and restraining it, and many complex social institutions exist only in order to regulate this urge. The saying that "love makes the world go round" is a polite reference to the fact that most of our deeds are impelled, either directly or indirectly, by sexual needs. We wash, dress, and comb our hair to be attractive, many of us go to work so as to afford keeping a partner and a household, we struggle for status and power in part so as to be admired and loved.

But is sex always enjoyable? By now the reader might be able to guess that the answer depends on what happens in the consciousness of those involved. The same sexual act can be experienced as painful, revolting, frightening, neutral, pleasant, pleasurable, enjoyable, or ecstatic—depending on how it is linked to a person's goals. A rape may not be distinguishable physically from a loving encounter, but their psychological effects are worlds apart.

It is safe to say that sexual stimulation in and of itself is generally pleasurable. That we are genetically programmed to derive pleasure from sexuality is evolution's rather clever way of guaranteeing that individuals will engage in activities likely to lead to procreation, thus ensuring the survival of the species. To take pleasure in sex one needs only to be healthy and willing; no special skills are required, and soon after the first experiences, few new physical challenges arise again. But like other pleasures, unless it is transformed into an enjoyable activity, sex easily becomes boring with time. It turns from a genuinely positive experience into either a meaningless ritual or an addictive dependence. Fortunately there are many ways to make sex enjoyable.

Eroticism is one form of cultivating sexuality that focuses on the development of physical skills. In a sense, eroticism is to sex as sport is to physical activity. The Kama Sutra and The Joy of Sex are two examples of manuals that aim to foster eroticism by providing suggestions and goals to help make sexual activity more varied, more interesting and challenging. Most cultures have elaborate systems of erotic training and performance, often overlaid with religious meanings. Early fertility rites, the Dionysian mysteries of Greece, and the recurring connection between prostitution and female priesthood are just a few forms of this phenomenon. It is as if in the early stages of religion, cultures coopted the obvious attraction of sexuality and used it as a basis on which to build more complex ideas and patterns of behavior.

But the real cultivation of sexuality begins only when psychological dimensions are added to the purely physical. According to historians, the art of love was a recent development in the West. With rare exceptions, there was very little romance in the sexual practices of the Greeks and the Romans. The wooing, the sharing of feelings between lovers, the
promises and the courtship rituals that now seem to be such indispensable attributes of intimate relations were only invented in the late Middle Ages by the troubadours who plied the castles of southern France, and then, as the “sweet new style,” they were adopted by the affluent classes in the rest of Europe. Romance—the rituals of wooing first developed in the Romance region of southern France—provides an entire new range of challenges to lovers. For those who learn the skills necessary to meet them, it becomes not only pleasurable, but enjoyable as well.

A similar refinement of sexuality took place in other civilizations, and roughly in the same not-too-distant past. The Japanese created extremely sophisticated professionals of love, expecting their geishas to be accomplished musicians, dancers, actresses, as well as appreciative of poetry and art. Chinese and Indian courtesans and Turkish odalisques were equally skillful. Regrettably this professionalism, while developing the potential complexity of sex to great heights, did little to improve directly the quality of experience for most people. Historically, romance seems to have been restricted to youth and to those who had the time and the money to indulge in it; the vast majority in any culture appear to have had a very humdrum sex life. “Decent” people the world over do not spend too much energy on the task of sexual reproduction, or on the practices that have been built on it. Romance resembles sports in this respect as well: instead of doing it personally, most people are content to hear about it or watch a few experts perform it.

A third dimension of sexuality begins to emerge when in addition to physical pleasure and the enjoyment of a romantic relationship the lover feels genuine care for his partner. There are then new challenges one discovers: to enjoy the partner as a unique person, to understand her, and to help her fulfill her goals. With the emergence of this third dimension sexuality becomes a very complex process, one that can go on providing flow experiences all through life.

At first it is very easy to obtain pleasure from sex, and even to enjoy it. Any fool can fall in love when young. The first date, the first kiss, the first intercourse all present heady new challenges that keep the young person in flow for weeks on end. But for many this ecstatic state occurs only once; after the “first love” all later relationships are no longer as exciting. It is especially difficult to keep enjoying sex with the same partner over a period of years. It is probably true that humans, like the majority of mammalian species, are not monogamous by nature. It is impossible for partners not to grow bored unless they work to discover new challenges in each other’s company, and learn appropriate skills for enriching the relationship. Initially physical challenges alone are enough to sustain flow, but unless romance and genuine care also develop, the relationship will grow stale.

How to keep love fresh? The answer is the same as it is for any other activity. To be enjoyable, a relationship must become more complex. To become more complex, the partners must discover new potentials in themselves and in each other. To discover these, they must invest attention in each other—so that they can learn what thoughts and feelings, what dreams reside in their partner’s mind. This in itself is a never-ending process, a lifetime’s task. After one begins to really know another person, then many joint adventures become possible: traveling together, reading the same books, raising children, making and realizing plans all become more enjoyable and more meaningful. The specific details are unimportant. Each person must find out which ones are relevant to his or her own situation. What is important is the general principle: that sexuality, like any other aspect of life, can be made enjoyable if we are willing to take control of it, and cultivate it in the direction of greater complexity.

**THE ULTIMATE CONTROL: YOGA AND THE MARTIAL ARTS**

When it comes to learning to control the body and its experiences, we are as children compared to the great Eastern civilizations. In many respects, what the West has accomplished in terms of harnessing material energy is matched by what India and the Far East have achieved in terms of direct control of consciousness. That neither of these approaches is, by itself, an ideal program for the conduct of life is shown by the fact that the Indian fascination with advanced techniques for self-control, at the expense of learning to cope with the material challenges of the physical environment, has conspired to let impotence and apathy spread over a great proportion of the population, defeated by scarcity of resources and by overcrowding. The Western mastery over material energy, on the other hand, runs the risk of turning everything it touches into a resource to be consumed as rapidly as possible, thus exhausting the environment. The perfect society would be able to strike a healthy balance between the spiritual and material worlds, but short of aiming for perfection, we can look toward Eastern religions for guidance in how to achieve control over consciousness.

Of the great Eastern methods for training the body, one of the oldest and most diffuse is the set of practices known as Hatha Yoga. It
is worth reviewing some of its highlights, because it corresponds in several areas to what we know about the psychology of flow, and therefore provides a useful model for anyone who wishes to be in better charge of psychic energy. Nothing quite like Hatha Yoga has ever been created in the West. The early monastic routines instituted by Saint Benedict and Saint Dominick and especially the “spiritual exercises” of Saint Ignatius of Loyola probably come the closest in offering a way to control attention by developing mental and physical routines; but even these fall far short of the rigorous discipline of Yoga.

In Sanskrit Yoga means “yoking,” which refers to the method’s goal of joining the individual with God, first by uniting the various parts of the body with one another, then making the body as a whole work together with consciousness as part of an ordered system. To achieve this aim, the basic text of Yoga, compiled by Patanjali about fifteen hundred years ago, prescribes eight stages of increasing skills. The first two stages of “ethical preparation” are intended to change a person’s attitudes. We might say that they involve the “straightening out of consciousness”; they attempt to reduce psychic entropy as much as possible before the actual attempts at mental control begin. In practice, the first step, yama, requires that one achieve “restraint” from acts and thoughts that might harm others—falsehood, theft, lust, and avarice. The second step, niyama, involves “obedience,” or the following of ordered routines in cleanliness, study, and obedience to God, all of which help to channel attention into predictable patterns, and hence make attention easier to control.

The next two stages involve physical preparation, or development of habits that will enable the practitioner—or yogin—to overcome the demands of the senses, and make it possible for him to concentrate without growing tired or distracted. The third stage consists in practicing various asana, ways of “sitting” or holding postures for long periods without succumbing to strain or fatigue. This is the stage of Yoga that we all know in the West, exemplified by a fellow in what looks like diapers standing on his head with his shanks behind his neck. The fourth stage is pranayama, or breath control, which aims to relax the body, and stabilizes the rhythm of breathing.

The fifth stage, the hinge between the preparatory exercises and the practice of Yoga proper, is called pratyahara (“withdrawal”). It involves learning to withdraw attention from outward objects by directing the input of the senses—thus becoming able to see, hear, and feel only what one wishes to admit into awareness. Already at this stage we see how close the goal of Yoga is to that of the flow activities described in this volume—to achieve control over what happens in the mind.

Although the remaining three stages do not properly belong to the present chapter—they involve the control of consciousness through purely mental operations, rather than physical techniques—we shall discuss them here for the sake of continuity, and also because these mental practices are, after all, solidly based on the earlier physical ones. Dharana, or “holding on,” is the ability to concentrate for long periods on a single stimulus, and thus is the mirror image of the earlier stage of pratyahara; first one learns to keep things out of the mind, then one learns to keep them in. Intense meditation, or dhyana, is the next step. Here one learns to forget the self in uninterrupted concentration that no longer needs the external stimuli of the preceding phase. Finally the yogin may achieve samadhi, the last stage of “self-collectedness,” when the meditator and the object of meditation become as one. Those who have achieved it describe samadhi as the most joyful experience in their lives.

The similarities between Yoga and flow are extremely strong; in fact it makes sense to think of Yoga as a very thoroughly planned flow activity. Both try to achieve a joyous, self-forgetful involvement through concentration, which in turn is made possible by a discipline of the body. Some critics, however, prefer to stress the differences between flow and Yoga. Their main divergence is that, whereas flow attempts to fortify the self, the goal of Yoga and many other Eastern techniques is to abolish it. Samadhi, the last stage of Yoga, is only the threshold for entering Nirvana, where the individual self merges with the universal force like a river blending into the ocean. Therefore, it can be argued, Yoga and flow tend toward diametrically opposite outcomes.

But this opposition may be more superficial than real. After all, seven of the eight stages of Yoga involve building up increasingly higher levels of skill in controlling consciousness. Samadhi and the liberation that is supposed to follow it may not, in the end, be that significant—they may in one sense be regarded as the justification of the activity that takes place in the previous seven stages, just as the peak of the mountain is important only because it justifies climbing, which is the real goal of the enterprise. Another argument favoring the similarity of the two processes is that, even till the final stage of liberation, the yogin must maintain control over consciousness. He could not surrender his self unless he was, even at the very moment of surrender, in complete control of it. Giving up the self with its instincts, habits, and desires is so unnatural an act that only someone supremely in control can accomplish it.
Therefore it is not unreasonable to regard Yoga as one of the oldest and most systematic methods of producing the flow experience. The details of how the experience is produced are unique to Yoga, as they are unique to every other flow activity, from fly-fishing to racing a Formula One car. As the product of cultural forces that occurred only once in history, the way of Yoga bears the stamp of the time and place in which it was created. Whether Yoga is a "better" way to foster optimal experience than others cannot be decided on its own merits alone—one must consider the opportunity costs involved in the practice, and compare them with alternative options. Is the control that Yoga makes possible worth the investment of psychic energy that learning its discipline requires?

Another set of Eastern disciplines that have become popular recently in the West are the so-called "martial arts." There are many variations of these, and each year a new one seems to arrive. They include judo, jujitsu, kung fu, karate, tae kwon do, aikido, T'ai Chi ch'uan—all forms of unarmed combat that originated in China—and kendo (fencing), kyudo (archery), and ninjutsu, which are more closely associated with Japan.

These martial arts were influenced by Taoism and by Zen Buddhism, and thus they also emphasize consciousness-controlling skills. Instead of focusing exclusively on physical performance, as Western martial arts do, the Eastern variety is directed toward improving the mental and spiritual state of the practitioner. The warrior strives to reach the point where he can act with lightning speed against opponents, without having to think or reason about the best defensive or offensive moves to make. Those who can perform it well claim that fighting becomes a joyous artistic performance, during which the everyday experience of duality between mind and body is transformed into a harmonious one-pointedness of mind. Here again, it seems appropriate to think of the martial arts as a specific form of flow.

FLOW THROUGH THE SENSES: THE JOYS OF SEEING

It is easy to accept the fact that sports, sex, and even Yoga can be enjoyable. But few people step beyond these physical activities to explore the almost unlimited capacities of the other organs of the body, even though any information that the nervous system can recognize lends itself to rich and varied flow experiences.

Seeing, for instance, is most often used simply as a distant sensing system, to keep from stepping on the cat, or to find the car keys. Occasionally people stop to "feast their eyes" when a particularly gorgeous sight happens to appear in front of them, but they do not cultivate systematically the potential of their vision. Visual skills, however, can provide constant access to enjoyable experiences. Menander, the classical poet, well expressed the pleasure we can derive from just watching nature: "The sun that lights us all, the stars, the sea, the train of clouds, the spark of fire—if you live a hundred years or only a few, you can never see anything higher than them." The visual arts are one of the best training grounds for developing these skills. Here are some descriptions by people versed in the arts about the sensation of really being able to see. The first recalls an almost Zen-like encounter with a favorite painting, and emphasizes the sudden epiphany of order that seems to arise from seeing a work that embodies visual harmony: "There is that wonderful Cezanne 'Bathers' in the Philadelphia Museum... which... gives you in one glance that great sense of a scheme, not necessarily rational, but that things come together... [That] is the way in which the work of art allows you to have a sudden appreciation of, an understanding of the world. That may mean your place in it, that may mean what batters on the side of a river on a summer day are all about... that may mean the ability to suddenly let go of ourselves and understand our connection to the world...."

Another viewer describes the unsettling physical dimension of the aesthetic flow experience, which resembles the shock a body feels when diving into a pool of cold water:

When I see works that come close to my heart, that I think are really fine, I have the strangest reaction: which is not always exhilarating, it is sort of like being hit in the stomach. Feeling a little nauseous. It's just this sort of completely overwhelming feeling, which then I have to grope my way out of, calm myself down, and try to approach it scientifically, not with all my antennae vulnerable, open... What comes to you after looking at it calmly, after you've really digested every nuance and every little thread, is the total impact. When you encounter a very great work of art, you just know it and it thrills you in all your senses, not just visually, but sensually and intellectually.

Not only great works of art produce such intense flow experiences; for the trained eye, even the most mundane sights can be delightful. A man who lives in one of Chicago's suburbs, and takes the elevated train to work every morning, says:
On a day like this, or days when it's crystal clear, I just sit in the train and look over the roofs of the city, because it's so fascinating to see the city, to be above it, to be there but not be a part of it, to see these forms and these shapes, these marvellous old buildings, some of which are totally ruined, and, I mean, just the fascination of the thing, the curiosity of it. . . . I can come in and say, "Coming to work this morning was like coming through a Sheeler precisionist painting." Because he painted rooftops and things like that in a very crisp, clear style. . . . It often happens that someone who's totally wrapped up in a means of visual expression sees the world in those terms. Like a photographer looks at a sky and says, "This is a Kodachrome sky. Way to go, God. You're almost as good as Kodak."

Clearly, it takes training to be able to derive this degree of sensory delight from seeing. One must invest quite a bit of psychic energy in looking at beautiful sights and at good art before one can recognize the Sheeler-like quality of a roofscape. But this is true of all flow activities: without cultivating the necessary skills, one cannot expect to take true enjoyment in a pursuit. Compared to several other activities, however, seeing is immediately accessible (although some artists contend that many people have "tin eyes"), so it is a particular pity to let it rest undeveloped.

It might seem like a contradiction that, in the previous section, we have shown how Yoga can induce flow by training the eyes not to see, whereas we are now advocating the use of the eyes to make flow happen. This is a contradiction only for those who believe that what is significant is the behavior, rather than the experience to which it leads. It does not matter whether we see or we not-see, as long as we are in control of what is happening to us. The same person can meditate in the morning and shut out all sensory experience, and then look at a great work of art in the afternoon; either way he may be transformed by the same sense of exhilaration.

**THE FLOW OF MUSIC**

In every known culture, the ordering of sound in ways that please the ear has been used extensively to improve the quality of life. One of the most ancient and perhaps the most popular functions of music is to focus the listeners' attention on patterns appropriate to a desired mood. So there is music for dancing, for weddings, for funerals, for religious and for patriotic occasions; music that facilitates romance, and music that helps soldiers march in orderly ranks.

When bad times befall the pygmies of the Ituri forest in Central Africa, they assumed that their misfortune was due to the fact that the benevolent forest, which usually provided for all their needs, had accidentally fallen asleep. At that point the leaders of the tribe would dig up the sacred horns buried underground, and blow on them for days and nights on end, in an attempt to wake up the forest, thus restoring the good times.

The way music is used in the Ituri forest is paradigmatic of its function everywhere. The horns may not have awakened the trees, but their familiar sound must have reassured the pygmies that help was on the way, and so they were able to confront the future with confidence. Most of the music that pours out of Walkmans and stereos nowadays answers a similar need. Teenagers, who swing from one threat to their fragile evolving personhood to another in quick succession throughout the day, especially depend on the soothing patterns of sound to restore order in their consciousness. But so do many adults. One policeman told us: "If after a day of making arrests and worrying about getting shot I could not turn on the radio in the car on my way home, I would probably go out of my mind."

Music, which is organized auditory information, helps organize the mind that attends to it, and therefore reduces psychic entropy, or the disorder we experience when random information interferes with goals. Listening to music wards off boredom and anxiety, and when seriously attended to, it can induce flow experiences.

Some people argue that technological advances have greatly improved the quality of life by making music so easily available. Transistor radios, laser disks, tape decks blare the latest music twenty-four hours a day in crystal-clear recordings. This continuous access to good music is supposed to make our lives much richer. But this kind of argument suffers from the usual confusion between behavior and experience. Listening to recorded music for days on end may or may not be more enjoyable than hearing an hour-long live concert that one had been looking forward to for weeks. It is not the hearing that improves life, it is the listening. We hear Muzak, but we rarely listen to it, and few could have ever been in flow as a result of it.

As with anything else, to enjoy music one must pay attention to it. To the extent that recording technology makes music too accessible, and therefore taken for granted, it can reduce our ability to derive enjoyment from it. Before the advent of sound recording, a live musical performance retained some of the awe that music engendered when it
was still entirely immersed in religious rituals. Even a village dance band, let alone a symphonic orchestra, was a visible reminder of the mysterious skill involved in producing harmonious sounds. One approached the event with heightened expectations, with the awareness that one had to pay close attention because the performance was unique and not to be repeated again.

The audiences at today's live performances, such as rock concerts, continue to partake in some degree in these ritual elements; there are few other occasions at which large numbers of people witness the same event together, think and feel the same things, and process the same information. Such joint participation produces in an audience the condition Emile Durkheim called "collective effervescence," or the sense that one belongs to a group with a concrete, real existence. This feeling, Durkheim believed, was at the roots of religious experience. The very conditions of live performance help focus attention on the music, and therefore make it more likely that flow will result at a concert than when one is listening to reproduced sound.

But to argue that live music is innately more enjoyable than recorded music would be just as invalid as arguing the opposite. Any sound can be a source of enjoyment if attended to properly. In fact, as the Yaqui sorcerer taught the anthropologist Carlos Castaneda, even the intervals of silence between sounds, if listened to closely, can be exhilarating.

Many people have impressive record libraries, full of the most exquisite music ever produced, yet they fail to enjoy it. They listen a few times to their recording equipment, marveling at the clarity of the sound it produces, and then forget to listen again until it is time to purchase a more advanced system. Those who make the most of the potential for enjoyment inherent in music, on the other hand, have strategies for turning the experience into flow. They begin by setting aside specific hours for listening. When the time comes, they deepen concentration by dousing the lights, by sitting in a favorite chair, or by following some other ritual that will focus attention. They plan carefully the selection to be played, and formulate specific goals for the session to come.

Listening to music usually starts as a sensory experience. At this stage, one responds to the qualities of sound that induce the pleasant physical reactions that are genetically wired into our nervous system. We respond to certain chords that seem to have universal appeal, or to the plaintive cry of the flute, the rousing call of the trumpets. We are particularly sensitive to the rhythm of the drums or the bass, the beat on which rock music rests, and which some contend is supposed to remind the listener of the mother's throbbing heart first heard in the womb.

The next level of challenge music presents is the analogic mode of listening. In this stage, one develops the skill to evoke feelings and images based on the patterns of sound. The mournful saxophone passage recalls the sense of awe one has when watching storm clouds build up over the prairie; the Tchaikovsky piece makes one visualize a sleigh driving through a snowbound forest, with its bells tinkling. Popular songs of course exploit the analogic mode to its fullest by cuing in the listener with lyrics that spell out what mood or what story the music is supposed to represent.

The most complex stage of music listening is the analytic one. In this mode attention shifts to the structural elements of music, instead of the sensory or narrative ones. Listening skills at this level involve the ability to recognize the order underlying the work, and the means by which the harmony was achieved. They include the ability to evaluate critically the performance and the acoustics; to compare the piece with earlier and later pieces of the same composer, or with the work of other composers writing at the same time; and to compare the orchestra, conductor, or band with their own earlier and later performances, or with the interpretations of others. Analytic listeners often compare various versions of the same blues song, or sit down to listen with an agenda that might typically be: "Let's see how von Karajan's 1975 recording of the second movement of the Seventh Symphony differs from his 1963 recording," or "I wonder if the brass section of the Chicago Symphony is really better than the Berlin brasses?" Having set such goals, a listener becomes an active experience that provides constant feedback (e.g., "von Karajan has slowed down," "the Berlin brasses are sharper but less mellow"). As one develops analytic listening skills, the opportunities to enjoy music increase geometrically.

So far we have considered only how flow arises from listening, but even greater rewards are open to those who learn to make music. The civilizing power of Apollo depended on his ability to play the lyre, Pan drove his audiences to frenzy with his pipes, and Orpheus with his music was able to restrain even death. These legends point to the connection between the ability to create harmony in sound and the more general and abstract harmony that underlies the kind of social order we call a civilization. Mindful of that connection, Plato believed that children should be taught music before anything else; in learning to pay attention to graceful rhythms and harmonies their whole consciousness would become ordered.
Our culture seems to have been placing a decreasing emphasis on exposing young children to musical skills. Whenever cuts are to be made in a school's budget, courses in music (as well as art and physical education) are the first to be eliminated. It is discouraging how these three basic skills, so important for improving the quality of life, are generally considered to be superfluous in the current educational climate. Deprived of serious exposure to music, children grow into teenagers who make up for their early deprivation by investing inordinate amounts of psychic energy into their own music. They form rock groups, buy tapes and records, and generally become captives of a subculture that does not offer many opportunities for making consciousness more complex.

Even when children are taught music, the usual problem often arises: too much emphasis is placed on how they perform, and too little on what they experience. Parents who push their children to excel at the violin are generally not interested in whether the children are actually enjoying the playing; they want the child to perform well enough to attract attention, to win prizes, and to end up on the stage of Carnegie Hall. By doing so, they succeed in perverting music into the opposite of what it was designed to be: they turn it into a source of psychic disorder. Parental expectations for musical behavior often create great stress, and sometimes a complete breakdown.

Lorin Hollander, who was a child prodigy at the piano and whose perfectionist father played first violin in Toscanini's orchestra, tells how he used to get lost in ecstasy when playing the piano alone, but how he used to quake in sheer terror when his demanding adult mentors were present. When he was a teenager the fingers of his hands froze during a concert recital, and he could not open his clawed hands for many years thereafter. Some subconscious mechanism below the threshold of his awareness had decided to spare him the constant pain of parental criticism. Now Hollander, recovered from the psychologically induced paralysis, spends much of his time helping other gifted young instrumentalists to enjoy music the way it is meant to be enjoyed.

Although playing an instrument is best learned when young, it is really never too late to start. Some music teachers specialize in adult and older students, and many a successful businessman decides to learn the piano after age fifty. Singing in a choir and playing in an amateur string ensemble are two of the most exhilarating ways to experience the blending of one's skills with those of others. Personal computers now come with sophisticated software that makes composition easy, and allows one to listen immediately to the orchestration. Learning to produce harmonic sounds is not only enjoyable, but like the mastery of any complex skill, it also helps strengthen the self.

### THE JOYS OF TASTING

Gioachino Rossini, the composer of *William Tell* and many other operas, had a good grasp of the relationship between music and food: "What love is to the heart, appetite is to the stomach. The stomach is the conductor that leads and livens up the great orchestra of our emotions." If music modulates our feelings, so does food; and all the fine cuisines of the world are based on that knowledge. The musical metaphor is echoed by Heinz Maier-Leibnitz, the German physicist who has recently written several cookbooks: "The joy of cooking at home," he says, "compared to eating in one of the best restaurants, is like playing a string quartet in the living room as compared to a great concert."

For the first few hundred years of American history, food preparation was generally approached in a no-nonsense manner. Even as late as twenty-five years ago, the general attitude was that "feeding your face" was all right, but to make too much fuss about it was somehow decadent. In the past two decades, of course, the trend has reversed itself so sharply that earlier misgivings about gastronomic excesses seem almost to have been justified. Now we have "foodies" and wine freaks who take the pleasures of the palate as seriously as if they were rites in a brand-new religion. Gourmet journals proliferate, the frozen food sections of supermarkets bulge with esoteric culinary concoctions, and all sorts of chefs run popular shows on TV. Not so long ago, Italian or Greek cuisine was considered the height of exotic fare. Now one finds excellent Vietnamese, Moroccan, or Peruvian restaurants in parts of the country where a generation earlier one couldn't find anything but steak and potatoes for a radius of a hundred miles around. Of the many life-style changes that have taken place in the United States in the past few decades, few have been as startling as the turnabout concerning food.

Eating, like sex, is one of the basic pleasures built into our nervous system. The ESM studies done with electronic pagers have shown that even in our highly technological urban society, people still feel most happy and relaxed at mealtimes—although while at table they lack some of the other dimensions of the flow experience, such as high concentration, a sense of strength, and a feeling of self-esteem. But in every culture, the simple process of ingesting calories has been transformed with time into an art form that provides enjoyment as well as pleasure.
The preparation of food has developed in history according to the same principles as all other flow activities. First, people took advantage of the opportunities for action (in this case, the various edible substances in their environment), and as a result of attending carefully they were able to make finer and finer distinctions between the properties of foods. They discovered that salt preserves meats, that eggs are good for coating and binding, and that garlic, although harsh-tasting by itself, has medicinal properties and if used judiciously imparts subtle flavors to a variety of dishes. Once aware of these properties, people could experiment with them and then develop rules for putting together the various substances in the most pleasing combinations. These rules became the various cuisines; their variety provides a good illustration of the almost infinite range of flow experiences that can be evoked with a relatively limited number of edible ingredients.

Much of this culinary creativity was sparked by the jaded palates of princes. Referring to Cyrus the Great, who ruled Persia about twenty-five centuries ago, Xenophon writes with perhaps a touch of exaggeration: "... men travel over the whole earth in the service of the King of Persia, looking to find out what may be pleasant for him to drink; and ten thousand men are always contriving something nice for him to eat." But experimentation with food was by no means confined to the ruling classes. Peasant women in Eastern Europe, for instance, were not judged to be ready for marriage unless they had learned to cook a different soup for each day of the year.

In our culture, despite the recent spotlight on gourmet cuisine, many people still barely notice what they put in their mouths, thereby missing a potentially rich source of enjoyment. To transform the biological necessity of feeding into a flow experience, one must begin by paying attention to what one eats. It is astonishing—as well as discouraging—when guests swallow lovingly prepared food without any sign of having noticed its virtues. What a waste of rare experience is reflected in that insensitivity! Developing a discriminating palate, like any other skill, requires the investment of psychic energy. But the energy invested is returned many times over in a more complex experience. The individuals who really enjoy eating develop with time an interest in a particular cuisine, and get to know its history and its peculiarities. They learn to cook in that idiom, not just single dishes, but entire meals that reproduce the culinary ambience of the region. If they specialize in Middle Eastern food, they know how to make the best hummus, where to find the best tahini or the freshest eggplant. If their predilection includes the foods of Venice, they learn what kind of sausage goes best with polenta, and what kind of shrimp is the best substitute for scampi.

Like all other sources of flow related to bodily skills—like sport, sex, and aesthetic visual experiences—the cultivation of taste only leads to enjoyment if one takes control of the activity. As long as one strives to become a gourmet or a connoisseur of wines because it is the "in" thing to do, striving to master an externally imposed challenge, then taste may easily turn sour. But a cultivated palate provides many opportunities for flow if one approaches eating—and cooking—in a spirit of adventure and curiosity, exploring the potentials of food for the sake of the experience rather than as a showcase for one's expertise.

The other danger in becoming involved with culinary delights—and here again the parallels with sex are obvious—is that they can become addictive. It is not by chance that gluttony and lechery were included among the seven deadly sins. The fathers of the Church well understood that infatuation with the pleasures of the flesh could easily drain psychic energy away from other goals. The Puritans' mistrust of enjoyment is grounded in the reasonable fear that given a taste of what they are genetically programmed to desire, people will want more of it, and will take time away from the necessary routines of everyday life in order to satisfy their craving.

But repression is not the way to virtue. When people restrain themselves out of fear, their lives are by necessity diminished. They become rigid and defensive, and their self stops growing. Only through freely chosen discipline can life be enjoyed, and still kept within the bounds of reason. If a person learns to control his instinctual desires, not because he has to, but because he wants to, he can enjoy himself without becoming addicted. A fanatical devotee of food is just as boring to himself and to others as the ascetic who refuses to indulge his taste. Between these two extremes, there is quite a bit of room for improving the quality of life.

In the metaphorical language of several religions, the body is called the "temple of God," or the "vessel of God," imagery to which even an atheist should be able to relate. The integrated cells and organs that make up the human organism are an instrument that allows us to get in touch with the rest of the universe. The body is like a probe full of sensitive devices that tries to obtain what information it can from the awesome reaches of space. It is through the body that we are related to one another and to the rest of the world. While this connection itself may be quite obvious, what we tend to forget is how enjoyable it can
be. Our physical apparatus has evolved so that whenever we use its sensing devices they produce a positive sensation, and the whole organism resonates in harmony.

To realize the body's potential for flow is relatively easy. It does not require special talents or great expenditures of money. Everyone can greatly improve the quality of life by exploring one or more previously ignored dimensions of physical abilities. Of course, it is difficult for any one person to reach high levels of complexity in more than one physical domain. The skills necessary to become good athletes, dancers, or connoisseurs of sights, sounds, or tastes are so demanding that one individual does not have enough psychic energy in his waking lifetime to master more than a few. But it is certainly possible to become a dilettante—in the finest sense of that word—in all these areas, in other words, to develop sufficient skills so as to find delight in what the body can do.

THE FLOW OF THOUGHT

The good things in life do not come only through the senses. Some of the most exhilarating experiences we undergo are generated inside the mind, triggered by information that challenges our ability to think, rather than from the use of sensory skills. As Sir Francis Bacon noted almost four hundred years ago, wonder—which is the seed of knowledge—is the reflection of the purest form of pleasure. Just as there are flow activities corresponding to every physical potential of the body, every mental operation is able to provide its own particular form of enjoyment.

Among the many intellectual pursuits available, reading is currently perhaps the most often mentioned flow activity around the world. Solving mental puzzles is one of the oldest forms of enjoyable activity, the precursor of philosophy and modern science. Some individuals have become so skilled at interpreting musical notation that they no longer need to listen to the actual notes to enjoy a piece of music, and prefer reading the score of a symphony to hearing it. The imaginary sounds dancing in their minds are more perfect than any actual performance could be. Similarly, people who spend much time with art come to appreciate increasingly the affective, historical, and cultural aspects of the work they are viewing, occasionally more than they enjoy its purely visual aspects. As one professional involved in the arts expressed it: "[Works of] art that I personally respond to . . . have behind them a
THE MAKING
OF MEANING

It is not unusual for famous tennis players to be deeply committed to their game, to take pleasure in playing, but off the court to be morose and hostile. Picasso enjoyed painting, but as soon as he lay down his brushes he turned into a rather unpleasant man. Bobby Fischer, the chess genius, appeared to be helplessly inept except when his mind was on chess. These and countless similar examples are a reminder that having achieved flow in one activity does not necessarily guarantee that it will be carried over to the rest of life.

If we enjoyed work and friendships, and faced every challenge as an opportunity to develop new skills, we would be getting rewards out of living that are outside the realm of ordinary life. Yet even this would not be enough to assure us of optimal experience. As long as enjoyment follows piecemeal from activities not linked to one another in a meaningful way, one is still vulnerable to the vagaries of chaos. Even the most successful career, the most rewarding family relationship eventually runs dry. Sooner or later involvement in work must be reduced. Spouses die, children grow up and move away. To approach optimal experience as closely as is humanly possible, a last step in the control of consciousness is necessary.

What this involves is turning all life into a unified flow experience. If a person sets out to achieve a difficult enough goal, from which all other goals logically follow, and if he or she invests all energy in developing skills to reach that goal, then actions and feelings will be in harmony,
and the separate parts of life will fit together—and each activity will "make sense" in the present, as well as in view of the past and of the future. In such a way, it is possible to give meaning to one's entire life.

But isn't it incredibly naïve to expect life to have a coherent overall meaning? After all, at least since Nietzsche concluded that God was dead, philosophers and social scientists have been busy demonstrating that existence has no purpose, that chance and impersonal forces rule our fate, and that all values are relative and hence arbitrary. It is true that life has no meaning, if by that we mean a supreme goal built into the fabric of nature and human experience, a goal that is valid for every individual. But it does not follow that life cannot be given meaning. Much of what we call culture and civilization consists in efforts people have made, generally against overwhelming odds, to create a sense of purpose for themselves and their descendants. It is one thing to recognize that life is, by itself, meaningless. It is another thing entirely to accept this with resignation. The first fact does not entail the second any more than the fact that we lack wings prevents us from flying.

From the point of view of an individual, it does not matter what the ultimate goal is—provided it is compelling enough to order a lifetime's worth of psychic energy. The challenge might involve the desire to have the best beer-bottle collection in the neighborhood, the resolution to find a cure for cancer, or simply the biological imperative to have children who will survive and prosper. As long as it provides clear objectives, clear rules for action, and a way to concentrate and become involved, any goal can serve to give meaning to a person's life.

In the past few years I have come to be quite well acquainted with several Muslim professionals—electronics engineers, pilots, businessmen, and teachers, mostly from Saudi Arabia and from the other Gulf states. In talking to them, I was struck with how relaxed most of them seemed to be even under strong pressure. "There is nothing to it," those I asked about it told me, in different words, but with the same message: "We don't get upset because we believe that our life is in God's hands, and whatever He decides will be fine with us." Such implicit faith used to be widespread in our culture as well, but it is not easy to find it now. Many of us have to discover a goal that will give meaning to life on our own, without the help of a traditional faith.

WHAT MEANING MEANS

*Meaning* is a concept difficult to define, since any definition runs the risk of being circular. How do we talk about the meaning of meaning itself? There are three ways in which unpacking the sense of this word helps
illuminates the last step in achieving optimal experience. Its first usage points toward the end, purpose, significance of something, as in: *What is the meaning of life?* This sense of the word reflects the assumption that events are linked to each other in terms of an ultimate goal; that there is a temporal order, a causal connection between them. It assumes that phenomena are not random, but fall into recognizable patterns directed by a final purpose. The second usage of the word refers to a person’s intentions: *She usually means well.* What this sense of *meaning* implies is that people reveal their purposes in action; that their goals are expressed in predictable, consistent, and orderly ways. Finally, the third sense in which the word is used refers to ordering information, as when one says: *Otorhinolaryngology means the study of ear, nose, and throat,* or: *Red sky in the evening means good weather in the morning.* This sense of *meaning* points to the identity of different words, the relationship between events, and thus it helps to clarify, to establish order among unrelated or conflicting information.

Creating meaning involves bringing order to the contents of the mind by integrating one’s actions into a unified flow experience. The three senses of the word *meaning* noted above make it clearer how this is accomplished. People who find their lives meaningful usually have a goal that is challenging enough to take up all their energies, a goal that can give significance to their lives. We may refer to this process as achieving *purpose.* To experience flow one must set goals for one’s actions: to win a game, to make friends with a person, to accomplish something in a certain way. The goal in itself is usually not important; what matters is that it focuses a person’s attention and involves it in an achievable, enjoyable activity. In a similar way, some people are able to bring the same sharp focus to their psychic energy throughout the entirety of their lives. The unrelated goals of the separate flow activities merge into an all-encompassing set of challenges that gives purpose to everything a person does. There are very different ways to establish this directionality. Napoleon devoted his life, and in the process gladly led to death hundreds of thousands of French soldiers, to the single-minded pursuit of power. Mother Teresa has invested all her energies to help the helpless, because her life has been given purpose by an unconditional love based on the belief in God, in a spiritual order beyond the reach of her senses.

From a purely psychological point of view, Napoleon and Mother Teresa may both have achieved equal levels of inner purpose, and therefore of optimal experience. The obvious differences between them prompt a broader ethical question: What have the consequences of
these two ways of giving meaning to life been? We might conclude that Napoleon brought chaos to thousands of lives, whereas Mother Teresa reduced the entropy in the consciousness of many. But here we will not try to pass judgment on the objective value of actions; we will be concerned instead with the more modest task of describing the subjective order that a unified purpose brings to individual consciousness. In this sense the answer to the old riddle “What is the meaning of life?” turns out to be astonishingly simple. The meaning of life is meaning: whatever it is, wherever it comes from, a unified purpose is what gives meaning to life.

The second sense of the word meaning refers to the expression of intentionality. And this sense also is appropriate to the issue of how to create meaning by transforming all life into a flow activity. It is not enough to find a purpose that unifies one’s goals; one must also carry through and meet its challenges. The purpose must result in strivings; intent has to be translated into action. We may call this resolution in the pursuit of one’s goals. What counts is not so much whether a person actually achieves what she has set out to do; rather, it matters whether effort has been expended to reach the goal, instead of being diffused or wasted. When “the native hue of resolution is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,” Hamlet observed, “. . . enterprises of great pith and moment . . . lose the name of action.” Few things are sadder than encountering a person who knows exactly what he should do, yet cannot muster enough energy to do it. “He who desires but acts not,” wrote Blake with his accustomed vigor, “breeds pestilence.”

The third and final way in which life acquires meaning is the result of the previous two steps. When an important goal is pursued with resolution, and all one’s varied activities fit together into a unified flow experience, the result is that harmony is brought to consciousness. Someone who knows his desires and works with purpose to achieve them is a person whose feelings, thoughts, and actions are congruent with one another, and is therefore a person who has achieved inner harmony. In the 1960s this process was called “getting your head together,” but in practically every other historical period a similar concept has been used to describe this necessary step toward living a good life. Someone who is in harmony no matter what he does, no matter what is happening to him, knows that his psychic energy is not being wasted on doubt, regret, guilt, and fear, but is always usefully employed. Inner congruence ultimately leads to that inner strength and serenity we admire in people who seem to have come to terms with themselves.

Purpose, resolution, and harmony unify life and give it meaning
by transforming it into a seamless flow experience. Whoever achieves this state will never really lack anything else. A person whose consciousness is so ordered need not fear unexpected events, or even death. Every living moment will make sense, and most of it will be enjoyable. This certainly sounds desirable. So how does one attain it?

CULTIVATING PURPOSE

In the lives of many people it is possible to find a unifying purpose that justifies the things they do day in, day out—a goal that like a magnetic field attracts their psychic energy, a goal upon which all lesser goals depend. This goal will define the challenges that a person needs to face in order to transform his or her life into a flow activity. Without such a purpose, even the best-ordered consciousness lacks meaning.

Throughout human history innumerable attempts have been made to discover ultimate goals that would give meaning to experience. These attempts have often been very different from one another. For instance, in the ancient Greek civilization, according to the social philosopher Hannah Arendt, men sought to achieve immortality through heroic deeds, whereas in the Christian world men and women hoped to reach eternal life through saintly deeds. Ultimate goals, in Arendt’s opinion, must accommodate the issue of mortality: they must give men and women a purpose that extends beyond the grave. Both immortality and eternity accomplish this, but in very different ways. The Greek heroes performed noble deeds so as to attract the admiration of their peers, expecting that their highly personal acts of bravery would be passed on in songs and stories from generation to generation. Their identity, therefore, would continue to exist in the memory of their descendants. Saints, on the contrary, surrendered individuality so as to merge their thoughts and actions with the will of God, expecting to live forever after in union with Him. The hero and the saint, to the extent that they dedicated the totality of their psychic energy to an all-encompassing goal that prescribed a coherent pattern of behavior to follow until death, turned their lives into unified flow experiences. Other members of society ordered their own less exalted actions on these outstanding models, providing a less clear, but more or less adequate, meaning to their own lives.

Every human culture, by definition, contains meaning systems that can serve as the encompassing purpose by which individuals can order their goals. For instance, Pitirim Sorokin divided the various epochs of Western civilization into three types, which he believed have
alternated with one another for over twenty-five centuries, sometimes lasting hundreds of years, sometimes just a few decades. He called these the sensate, the ideational, and the idealistic phases of culture, and he attempted to demonstrate that in each one a different set of priorities justified the goals of existence.

Sensate cultures are integrated around views of reality designed to satisfy the senses. They tend to be epicurean, utilitarian, concerned primarily with concrete needs. In such cultures art, religion, philosophy, and everyday behavior glorify and justify goals in terms of tangible experience. According to Sorokin, sensate culture predominated in Europe from about 440 to about 200 B.C., with a peak between 420 and 400 B.C.; it has become dominant once again in the past century or so, at least in the advanced capitalist democracies. People in a sensate culture are not necessarily more materialistic, but they organize their goals and justify their behavior with reference primarily to pleasure and practicality rather than to more abstract principles. The challenges they see are almost exclusively concerned with making life more easy, more comfortable, more pleasant. They tend to identify the good with what feels good and mistrust idealized values.

Ideational cultures are organized on a principle opposite from the sensate: they look down on the tangible and strive for nonmaterial, supernatural ends. They emphasize abstract principles, asceticism, and transcendence of material concerns. Art, religion, philosophy, and the justification of everyday behavior tend to be subordinated to the realization of this spiritual order. People turn their attention to religion or ideology, and view their challenges not in terms of making life easier, but of reaching inner clarity and conviction. Greece from 600 to 500 B.C., and Western Europe from 200 B.C. to A.D. 400 are the high points of this worldview, according to Sorokin. More recent and disturbing examples might include the Nazi interlude in Germany, the communist regimes in Russia and China, and the Islamic revival in Iran.

A simple example may illustrate the difference between cultures organized around sensate and ideational principles. In our own as well as in fascist societies physical fitness is cherished and the beauty of the human body worshiped. But the reasons for doing so are very different. In our sensate culture, the body is cultivated in order to achieve health and pleasure. In an ideational culture, the body is valued primarily as a symbol of some abstract principle of metaphysical perfection associated with the idea of the "Aryan race," or "Roman valor." In a sensate culture, a poster of a handsome youth might produce a sexual response to be used for commercial ends. In an ideational culture, the
same poster would make an ideological statement, and be used for political ends.

Of course, at no time does any group of people shape its purpose through only one of these two ways of ordering experience to the exclusion of the other. At any given moment, various subtypes and combinations of the sensate and the ideational worldview may coexist in the same culture, and even in the consciousness of the same individual. The so-called yuppie life-style, for instance, is based primarily on sensate principles, while Bible Belt fundamentalism rests on ideational premises. These two forms, in their many variants, coexist somewhat uneasily in our current social system. And either one, functioning as a system of goals, can help to organize life into a coherent flow activity.

Not only cultures but individuals as well embody these meaning systems in their behavior. Business leaders like Lee Iacocca or H. Ross Perot, whose lives are ordered by concrete entrepreneurial challenges, often display the best features of the sensate approach to life. The more primitive aspects of the sensate worldview are represented by someone like Hugh Hefner, whose “playboy philosophy” celebrates the simpleminded pursuit of pleasure. Representatives of an unreflective ideational approach include ideologues and mystics who advocate simple transcendental solutions, such as blind faith in divine providence. There are, of course, many different permutations and combinations: televangelists like the Bakkers or Jimmy Swaggart publicly exhort their audience to value ideational goals, while in private indulging in luxury and sensuality.

Occasionally a culture succeeds in integrating these two dialectically opposed principles into a convincing whole that preserves the advantages of both, while neutralizing the disadvantages of each. Sorokin calls these cultures “idealistic.” They combine an acceptance of concrete sensory experience with a reverence for spiritual ends. In Western Europe the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance were classified by Sorokin as being relatively most idealistic, with the highest points reached in the first two decades of the fourteenth century. Needless to say, the idealistic solution seems to be the preferable one, as it avoids the listlessness that is often the keynote of purely materialistic worldviews and the fanatical asceticism that bedevils many ideational systems.

Sorokin’s simple trichotomy is a debatable method of categorizing cultures, but it is useful in illustrating some of the principles by which men and women end up ordering their ultimate goals. The sensate option is always quite popular. It involves responding to concrete challenges, and shaping one’s life in terms of a flow activity that tends toward
material ends. Among its advantages is the fact that the rules are comprehended by everyone and that feedback tends to be clear—the desirability of health, money, power, and sexual satisfaction is seldom controversial. But the ideational option also has its advantages: metaphysical goals may never be achieved, but then failure is almost impossible to prove: the true believer can always distort feedback to use it as a proof that he has been right, that he is among the chosen. Probably the most satisfying way to unify life into an all-embracing flow activity is through the idealistic mode. But setting challenges that involve the improvement of material conditions while at the same time pursuing spiritual ends is not easy, especially when the culture as a whole is predominantly sensate in character.

Another way to describe how individuals order their actions is to focus on the complexity of the challenges they set for themselves rather than on their content. Perhaps what matters most is not whether a person is materialist or ideational, but how differentiated and integrated are the goals he or she pursues in those areas. As was discussed in the final section of chapter 2, complexity depends on how well a system develops its unique traits and potentialities and on how well related these traits are to each other. In that respect, a well-thought-out sensate approach to life, one that was responsive to a great variety of concrete human experiences and was internally consistent, would be preferable to an unreflective idealism, and vice versa.

There is a consensus among psychologists who study such subjects that people develop their concept of who they are, and of what they want to achieve in life, according to a sequence of steps. Each man or woman starts with a need to preserve the self, to keep the body and its basic goals from disintegrating. At this point the meaning of life is simple; it is tantamount to survival, comfort, and pleasure. When the safety of the physical self is no longer in doubt, the person may expand the horizon of his or her meaning system to embrace the values of a community—the family, the neighborhood, a religious or ethnic group. This step leads to a greater complexity of the self, even though it usually implies conformity to conventional norms and standards. The next step in development involves reflective individualism. The person again turns inward, finding new grounds for authority and value within the self. He or she is no longer blindly conforming, but develops an autonomous conscience. At this point the main goal in life becomes the desire for growth, improvement, the actualization of potential. The fourth step, which builds on all the previous ones, is a final turning away from the self, back toward an integration with other people and with universal
values. In this final stage the extremely individualized person—like Siddhartha letting the river take control of his boat—willingly merges his interests with those of a larger whole.

In this scenario building a complex meaning system seems to involve focusing attention alternately on the self and on the Other. First, psychic energy is invested in the needs of the organism, and psychic order is equivalent to pleasure. When this level is temporarily achieved, and the person can begin to invest attention in the goals of a community, what is meaningful corresponds to group values—religion, patriotism, and the acceptance and respect of other people provide the parameters of inner order. The next movement of the dialectic brings attention back to the self: having achieved a sense of belonging to a larger human system, the person now feels the challenge of discerning the limits of personal potential. This leads to attempts at self-actualization, to experimentation with different skills, different ideas and disciplines. At this stage enjoyment, rather than pleasure, becomes the main source of rewards. But because this phase involves becoming a seeker, the person may also encounter a midlife crisis, a career change, and an increasingly desperate straining against the limitations of individual capability. From this point on the person is ready for the last shift in the redirection of energy: having discovered what one can and, more important, cannot do alone, the ultimate goal merges with a system larger than the person—a cause, an idea, a transcendental entity.

Not everyone moves through the stages of this spiral of ascending complexity. A few never have the opportunity to go beyond the first step. When survival demands are so insistent that a person cannot devote much attention to anything else, he or she will not have enough psychic energy left to invest in the goals of the family or of the wider community. Self-interest alone will give meaning to life. The majority of people are probably ensconced comfortably in the second stage of development, where the welfare of the family, or the company, the community, or the nation are the sources of meaning. Many fewer reach the third level of reflective individualism, and only a precious few emerge once again to forge a unity with universal values. So these stages do not necessarily reflect what does happen, or what will happen; they characterize what can happen if a person is lucky and succeeds in controlling consciousness.

The four stages outlined above are the simplest of the models for describing the emergence of meaning along a gradient of complexity; other models detail six, or even eight, stages. The number of steps is irrelevant; what counts is that most theories recognize the importance
of this dialectic tension, this alternation between differentiation on the one hand and integration on the other. From this point of view, individual life appears to consist of a series of different "games," with different goals and challenges, that change with time as a person matures. Complexity requires that we invest energy in developing whatever skills we were born with, in becoming autonomous, self-reliant, conscious of our uniqueness and of its limitations. At the same time we must invest energy in recognizing, understanding, and finding ways to adapt to the forces beyond the boundaries of our own individuality. Of course we don't have to undertake any of these plans. But if we don't, chances are, sooner or later, we will regret it.

FORGING RESOLVE

Purpose gives direction to one's efforts, but it does not necessarily make life easier. Goals can lead into all sorts of trouble, at which point one gets tempted to give them up and find some less demanding script by which to order one's actions. The price one pays for changing goals whenever opposition threatens is that while one may achieve a more pleasant and comfortable life, it is likely that it will end up empty and void of meaning.

The Pilgrims who first settled this country decided that the freedom to worship according to their conscience was necessary to maintain the integrity of their selves. They believed that nothing mattered more than maintaining control over their relationship with the supreme being. Theirs was not a novel choice for an ultimate goal by which to order one's life—many other people had done so previously. What distinguished the Pilgrims was that—like the Jews of Masada, the Christian martyrs, the Cathars of southern France in the late Middle Ages who had chosen similarly—they did not allow persecution and hardship to blunt their resolve. Instead they followed the logic of their convictions wherever it led, acting as if their values were worth giving up comfort, and even life itself, for. And because they acted thus, their goals in fact became worthwhile regardless of whether they had been originally valuable. Because their goals had become valuable through commitment, they helped give meaning to the Pilgrims' existence.

No goal can have much effect unless taken seriously. Each goal prescribes a set of consequences, and if one isn't prepared to reckon with them, the goal becomes meaningless. The mountaineer who decides to scale a difficult peak knows that he will be exhausted and endangered for most of the climb. But if he gives up too easily, his quest will be
revealed as having little value. The same is true of all flow experiences: there is a mutual relationship between goals and the effort they require. Goals justify the effort they demand at the outset, but later it is the effort that justifies the goal. One gets married because the spouse seems worthy of sharing one's life with, but unless one then behaves as if this is true, the partnership will appear to lose value with time.

All things considered, it cannot be said that humankind has lacked the courage to back its resolutions. Billions of parents, in every age and in every culture, have sacrificed themselves for their children, and thereby made life more meaningful for themselves. Probably as many have devoted all their energies to preserving their fields and their flocks. Millions more have surrendered everything for the sake of their religion, their country, or their art. For those who have done so consistently, despite pain and failure, life as a whole had a chance to become like an extended episode of flow: a focused, concentrated, internally coherent, logically ordered set of experiences, which, because of its inner order, was felt to be meaningful and enjoyable.

But as the complexity of culture evolves, it becomes more difficult to achieve this degree of total resolve. There are simply too many goals competing for prominence, and who is to say which one is worth the dedication of an entire life? Just a few decades ago a woman felt perfectly justified in placing the welfare of her family as her ultimate goal. Partly this was due to the fact that she did not have many other options. Today, now that she can be a businessperson, a scholar, an artist, or even a soldier, it is no longer "obvious" that being a wife and mother should be a woman's first priority. The same embarrassment of riches affects us all. Mobility has freed us from ties to our birthplaces: there is no longer any reason to become involved in one's native community, to identify with one's place of birth. If the grass looks greener across the fence, we simply move to the other field—How about opening that little restaurant in Australia? Life-styles and religions are choices that are easily switched. In the past a hunter was a hunter until he died, a blacksmith spent his life perfecting his craft. We can now shed our occupational identities at will: no one needs to remain an accountant forever.

The wealth of options we face today has extended personal freedom to an extent that would have been inconceivable even a hundred years ago. But the inevitable consequence of equally attractive choices is uncertainty of purpose; uncertainty, in turn, saps resolution, and lack of resolve ends up devaluing choice. Therefore freedom does not necessarily help develop meaning in life—on the contrary. If the rules of a
game become too flexible, concentration flags, and it is more difficult to
attain a flow experience. Commitment to a goal and to the rules it entails
is much easier when the choices are few and clear.

This is not to imply that a return to the rigid values and limited
choices of the past would be preferable—even if that were a possibility,
which it is not. The complexity and freedom that have been thrust upon
us, and that our ancestors had fought so hard to achieve, are a challenge
we must find ways to master. If we do, the lives of our descendants will
be infinitely more enriched than anything previously experienced on
this planet. If we do not, we run the risk of frittering away our energies
on contradictory, meaningless goals.

But in the meantime how do we know where to invest psychic
energy? There is no one out there to tell us, “Here is a goal worth
spending your life on.” Because there is no absolute certainty to which
to turn, each person must discover ultimate purpose on his or her own.
Through trial and error, through intense cultivation, we can straighten
out the tangled skein of conflicting goals, and choose the one that will
give purpose to action.

Self-knowledge—an ancient remedy so old that its value is easily
forgotten—is the process through which one may organize conflicting
options. “Know thyself” was carved over the entrance to the Delphic
oracle, and ever since untold pious epigrams have extolled its virtue. The
reason the advice is so often repeated is that it works. We need, however,
to rediscover afresh every generation what these words mean, what the
advice actually implies for each individual. And to do that it is useful
to express it in terms of current knowledge, and envision a contempo-
rary method for its application.

Inner conflict is the result of competing claims on attention. Too
many desires, too many incompatible goals struggle to marshal psychic
energy toward their own ends. It follows that the only way to reduce
conflict is by sorting out the essential claims from those that are not, and
by arbitrating priorities among those that remain. There are basically
two ways to accomplish this: what the ancients called the *vita activa*, a
life of action, and the *vita contemplativa*, or the path of reflection.

Immersed in the *vita activa*, a person achieves flow through total
involvement in concrete external challenges. Many great leaders like
Winston Churchill or Andrew Carnegie set for themselves lifelong goals
that they pursued with great resolve, without any apparent internal
struggle or questioning of priorities. Successful executives, experienced
professionals, and talented craftspeople learn to trust their judgment
and competence so that they again begin to act with the unsconscious
spontaneity of children. If the arena for action is challenging enough, a person may experience flow continuously in his or her calling, thus leaving as little room as possible for noticing the entropy of normal life. In this way harmony is restored to consciousness indirectly—not by facing up to contradictions and trying to resolve conflicting goals and desires, but by pursuing chosen goals with such intensity that all potential competition is preempted.

Action helps create inner order, but it has its drawbacks. A person strongly dedicated to achieving pragmatic ends might eliminate internal conflict, but often at the price of excessively restricting options. The young engineer who aims to become plant manager at age forty-five and bends all his energies to that end may sail through several years successfully and without hesitation. Sooner or later, however, postponed alternatives may reappear again as intolerable doubts and regrets. Was it worth sacrificing my health for the promotion? What happened to those lovely children who have suddenly turned into sullen adolescents? Now that I have achieved power and financial security, what do I do with it? In other words, the goals that have sustained action over a period turn out not to have enough power to give meaning to the entirety of life.

This is where the presumed advantage of a contemplative life comes in. Detached reflection upon experience, a realistic weighing of options and their consequences, have long been held to be the best approach to a good life. Whether it is played out on the psychoanalyst's couch, where repressed desires are laboriously reintegrated with the rest of consciousness, or whether it is performed as methodically as the Jesuits' test of conscience, which involves reviewing one's actions one or more times each day to check whether what one has been doing in the past few hours has been consistent with long-term goals, self-knowledge can be pursued in innumerable ways, each leading potentially to greater inner harmony.

Activity and reflection should ideally complement and support each other. Action by itself is blind, reflection impotent. Before investing great amounts of energy in a goal, it pays to raise the fundamental questions: Is this something I really want to do? Is it something I enjoy doing? Am I likely to enjoy it in the foreseeable future? Is the price that I—and others—will have to pay worth it? Will I be able to live with myself if I accomplish it?

These seemingly easy questions are almost impossible to answer for someone who has lost touch with his own experience. If a man has not bothered to find out what he wants, if his attention is so wrapped up in external goals that he fails to notice his own feelings, then he
cannot plan action meaningfully. On the other hand, if the habit of reflection is well developed, a person need not go through a lot of soul-searching to decide whether a course of action is entropic or not. He will know, almost intuitively, that this promotion will produce more stress than it is worth, or that this particular friendship, attractive as it is, would lead to unacceptable tensions in the context of marriage.

It is relatively easy to bring order to the mind for short stretches of time; any realistic goal can accomplish this. A good game, an emergency at work, a happy interlude at home will focus attention and produce the harmonious experience of flow. But it is much more difficult to extend this state of being through the entirety of life. For this it is necessary to invest energy in goals that are so persuasive that they justify effort even when our resources are exhausted and when fate is merciless in refusing us a chance at having a comfortable life. If goals are well chosen, and if we have the courage to abide by them despite opposition, we shall be so focused on the actions and events around us that we won’t have the time to be unhappy. And then we shall directly feel a sense of order in the warp and the woof of life that fits every thought and emotion into a harmonious whole.

RECOVERING HARMONY

The consequence of forging life by purpose and resolution is a sense of inner harmony, a dynamic order in the contents of consciousness. But, it may be argued, why should it be so difficult to achieve this inner order? Why should one strive so hard to make life into a coherent flow experience? Aren’t people born at peace with themselves—isn’t human nature naturally ordered?

The original condition of human beings, prior to the development of self-reflective consciousness, must have been a state of inner peace disturbed only now and again by tides of hunger, sexuality, pain, and danger. The forms of psychic entropy that currently cause us so much anguish—unfulfilled wants, dashed expectations, loneliness, frustration, anxiety, guilt—are all likely to have been recent invaders of the mind. They are by-products of the tremendous increase in complexity of the cerebral cortex and of the symbolic enrichment of culture. They are the dark side of the emergence of consciousness.

If we were to interpret the lives of animals with a human eye, we would conclude that they are in flow most of the time because their perception of what has to be done generally coincides with what they are prepared to do. When a lion feels hungry, it will start grumbling and
looking for prey until its hunger is satisfied; afterward it lies down to bask in the sun, dreaming the dreams lions dream. There is no reason to believe that it suffers from unfulfilled ambition, or that it is overwhelmed by pressing responsibilities. Animals' skills are always matched to concrete demands because their minds, such as they are, only contain information about what is actually present in the environment in relation to their bodily states, as determined by instinct. So a hungry lion only perceives what will help it to find a gazelle, while a sated lion concentrates fully on the warmth of the sun. Its mind does not weigh possibilities unavailable at the moment; it neither imagines pleasant alternatives, nor is it disturbed by fears of failure.

Animals suffer just as we do when their biologically programmed goals are frustrated. They feel the pangs of hunger, pain, and unsatisfied sexual urges. Dogs bred to be friends to man grow distraught when left alone by their masters. But animals other than man are not in a position to be the cause of their own suffering; they are not evolved enough to be able to feel confusion and despair even after all their needs are satisfied. When free of externally induced conflicts, they are in harmony with themselves and experience the seamless concentration that in people we call flow.

The psychic entropy peculiar to the human condition involves seeing more to do than one can actually accomplish and feeling able to accomplish more than what conditions allow. But this becomes possible only if one keeps in mind more than one goal at a time, being aware at the same time of conflicting desires. It can happen only when the mind knows not only what is but also what could be. The more complex any system, the more room it leaves open for alternatives, and the more things can go wrong with it. This is certainly applicable to the evolution of the mind: as it has increased its power to handle information, the potential for inner conflict has increased as well. When there are too many demands, options, challenges, we become anxious; when too few, we get bored.

To pursue the evolutionary analogy, and to extend it from biological to social evolution, it is probably true that in less developed cultures, where the number and complexity of social roles, of alternative goals and courses of action, are negligible, the chances for experiencing flow are greater. The myth of the "happy savage" is based on the observation that when free of external threats, preliterate people often display a serenity that seems enviable to the visitor from more differentiated cultures. But the myth tells only half the story: when hungry or hurting, the "savage" is no more happy than we would be; and he may be in that
condition more often than we are. The inner harmony of technologically less advanced people is the positive side of their limited choices and of their stable repertory of skills, just as the confusion in our soul is the necessary consequence of unlimited opportunities and constant perfectibility. Goethe represented this dilemma in the bargain Doctor Faustus, the archetype of modern man, made with Mephistopheles: the good doctor gained knowledge and power, but at the price of introducing disharmony in his soul.

There is no need to visit far-off lands to see how flow can be a natural part of living. Every child, before self-consciousness begins to interfere, acts spontaneously with total abandon and complete involvement. Boredom is something children have to learn the hard way, in response to artificially restricted choices. Again, this does not mean that children are always happy. Cruel or neglectful parents, poverty and sickness, the inevitable accidents of living make children suffer intensely. But a child is rarely unhappy without good reason. It is understandable that people tend to be so nostalgic about their early years; like Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilyich, many feel that the wholehearted serenity of childhood, the undivided participation in the here and now, becomes increasingly difficult to recapture as the years go by.

When we can imagine only few opportunities and few possibilities, it is relatively easy to achieve harmony. Desires are simple, choices clear. There is little room for conflict and no need to compromise. This is the order of simple systems—order by default, as it were. It is a fragile harmony; step by step with the increase of complexity, the chances of entropy generated internally by the system increase as well.

We can isolate many factors to account for why consciousness gets to be more complex. At the level of the species, the biological evolution of the central nervous system is one cause. No longer ruled entirely by instincts and reflexes, the mind is endowed with the dubious blessing of choice. At the level of human history, the development of culture—of languages, belief systems, technologies—is another reason why the contents of the mind become differentiated. As social systems move from dispersed hunting tribes to crowded cities, they give rise to more specialized roles that often require conflicting thoughts and actions from the same person. No longer is every man a hunter, sharing skills and interests with every other man. The farmer and the miller, the priest and the soldier now see the world differently from one another. There is no one right way to behave, and each role requires different skills. Within the individual life span as well, each person becomes exposed with age to increasingly contradictory goals, to incompatible opportunities for ac-
tion. A child’s options are usually few and coherent; with each year, they become less so. The earlier clarity that made spontaneous flow possible is obscured by a cacophony of disparate values, beliefs, choices, and behaviors.

Few would argue that a simpler consciousness, no matter how harmonious, is preferable to a more complex one. While we might admire the serenity of the lion in repose, the tribesman’s untroubled acceptance of his fate, or the child’s wholehearted involvement in the present, they cannot offer a model for resolving our predicament. The order based on innocence is now beyond our grasp. Once the fruit is plucked from the tree of knowledge, the way back to Eden is barred forever.

THE UNIFICATION OF MEANING IN LIFE THEMES

Instead of accepting the unity of purpose provided by genetic instructions or by the rules of society, the challenge for us is to create harmony based on reason and choice. Philosophers like Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty have recognized this task of modern man by calling it the project, which is their term for the goal-directed actions that provide shape and meaning to an individual’s life. Psychologists have used terms like pro priate strivings or life themes. In each case, these concepts identify a set of goals linked to an ultimate goal that gives significance to whatever a person does.

The life theme, like a game that prescribes the rules and actions one must follow to experience flow, identifies what will make existence enjoyable. With a life theme, everything that happens will have a meaning—not necessarily a positive one, but a meaning nevertheless. If a person bends all her energies to making a million dollars before age thirty, whatever happens is a step either toward or away from that goal. The clear feedback will keep her involved with her actions. Even if she loses all her money, her thoughts and actions are tied by a common purpose, and they will be experienced as worthwhile. Similarly a person who decides that finding a cure for cancer is what she wants to accomplish above all else will usually know whether she is getting closer to her goal or not—in either case, what must be done is clear, and whatever she does will make sense.

When a person’s psychic energy coalesces into a life theme, consciousness achieves harmony. But not all life themes are equally productive. Existential philosophers distinguish between authentic and inau-
thetic projects. The first describes the theme of a person who realizes that choices are free, and makes a personal decision based on a rational evaluation of his experience. It does not matter what the choice is, as long as it is an expression of what the person genuinely feels and believes. Inauthentic projects are those a person chooses because they are what she feels ought to be done, because they are what everybody else is doing, and therefore there is no alternative. Authentic projects tend to be intrinsically motivated, chosen for what they are worth in themselves; inauthentic ones are motivated by external forces. A similar distinction is that between discovered life themes, when a person writes the script for her actions out of personal experience and awareness of choice; and accepted life themes, when a person simply takes on a predetermined role from a script written long ago by others.

Both types of life themes help give meaning to life, but each has drawbacks. The accepted life theme works well as long as the social system is sound; if it is not, it can trap the person into perverted goals. Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi who calmly shipped tens of thousands to the gas chambers, was a man for whom the rules of bureaucracy were sacred. He probably experienced flow as he shuffled the intricate schedules of trains, making certain that the scarce rolling stock was available where needed, and that the bodies were transported at the least expense. He never seemed to question whether what he was asked to do was right or wrong. As long as he followed orders, his consciousness was in harmony. For him the meaning of life was to be part of a strong, organized institution; nothing else mattered. In peaceful, well-ordered times a man like Adolf Eichmann might have been an esteemed pillar of the community. But the vulnerability of his life theme becomes apparent when unscrupulous and demented people seize control of society; then such an upright citizen turns into an accessory to crimes without having to change his goals, and without even realizing the inhumanity of his actions.

Discovered life themes are fragile for a different reason: because they are products of a personal struggle to define the purpose of life, they have less social legitimacy; because they are often novel and idiosyncratic, they may be regarded by others as crazy or destructive. Some of the most powerful life themes are based on ancient human goals, but freshly discovered and freely chosen by the individual. Malcolm X, who in his early life followed the behavioral script for young men in the slum, fighting and dealing drugs, discovered in jail, through reading and reflection, a different set of goals through which to achieve dignity and self-respect. In essence he invented an entirely new identity, although
one that was made up of bits and pieces of earlier human achievements. Instead of continuing to play the game of hustlers and pimps, he created a more complex purpose that could help order the lives of many other marginal men, black or white.

A man interviewed in one of our studies whom we shall designate as E. provides another example of how a life theme can be discovered, even though the purpose underlying it is a very ancient one. E. grew up the son of a poor immigrant family in the early part of this century. His parents knew only a few words of English, and were barely able to read and write. They were intimidated by the frenetic pace of life in New York, but they worshiped and admired America and the authorities who represented it. When he was seven, E.'s parents spent a good chunk of their savings to buy him a bicycle for his birthday. A few days later, as he was riding in the neighborhood, he was hit by a car that had ignored a stop sign. E. suffered serious wounds, and his bike was wrecked. The driver of the car was a wealthy doctor; he drove E. to a hospital, asking him not to report what had happened, but promising in return to pay for all expenses and to buy him a new bike. E. and his parents were convinced, and they went along with the deal. Unfortunately the doctor never showed up again, and E.'s father had to borrow money to pay the expensive hospital bill; the bike was never replaced.

This event could have been a trauma that left its scar on E. forever, turning him into a cynic who would from now on look out for his own self-interest no matter what. Instead E. drew a curious lesson from his experience. He used it to create a life theme that not only gave meaning to his own life but helped reduce entropy in the experience of many other people. For many years after the accident, E. and his parents were bitter, suspicious, and confused about the intentions of strangers. E.'s father, feeling that he was a failure, took to drinking and became morose and withdrawn. It looked as though poverty and helplessness were having their expected effects. But when he was fourteen or fifteen years old, E. had to read in school the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights. He connected the principles in those documents with his own experience. Gradually he became convinced that his family's poverty and alienation were not their fault, but were the result of not being aware of their rights, of not knowing the rules of the game, of not having effective representation among those who had power.

He decided to become a lawyer, not only to better his own life, but to make certain that injustices such as he had suffered would not occur so easily again to others in his position. Once he had set this goal for himself, his resolution was unwavering. He was accepted into law
school, clerked for a famous justice, became a judge himself, and at the
zenith of his career spent years in the cabinet helping the president
develop stronger civil rights policies and legislation to help the disadvant-
taged. Until the end of his life his thoughts, actions, and feelings were
unified by the theme he had chosen as a teenager. Whatever he did to
the end of his days was part of one great game, held together by goals
and rules he had agreed to abide by. He felt his life had meaning, and
enjoyed confronting the challenges that came his way.

E.'s example illustrates several common characteristics of how
people forge discovered life themes. In the first place, the theme is in
many cases a reaction to a great personal hurt suffered in early life—to being
orphaned, abandoned, or treated unjustly. But what matters is not the
trauma per se; the external event never determines what the theme will
be. What matters is the interpretation that one places on the suffering.
If a father is a violent alcoholic, his children have several options for
explaining what is wrong: they can tell themselves that the father is a
bastard who deserves to die; that he is a man, and all men are weak and
violent; that poverty is the cause of the father's affliction, and the only
way to avoid his fate is to become rich; that a large part of his behavior
is due to helplessness and lack of education. Only the last of these
equally likely explanations leads in the direction of a life theme such as
E. was able to develop.

So the next question is, What kinds of explanations for one's
suffering lead to negentropic life themes? If a child abused by a violent
father concluded that the problem was inherent in human nature, that
all men were weak and violent, there would not be much he or she could
do about it. How could a child change human nature? To find purpose
in suffering one must interpret it as a possible challenge. In this case, by
formulating his problem as being due to the helplessness of disenfran-
chised minorities, and not to his father's faults, E. was able to develop
appropriate skills—his legal training—to confront the challenges he saw
at the root of what had been wrong in his personal life. What transforms
the consequences of a traumatic event into a challenge that gives mean-
ing to life is what in the previous chapter was called a dissipative structure,
or the ability to draw order from disorder.

Finally, a complex, negentropic life theme is rarely formulated as
the response to just a personal problem. Instead, the challenge becomes
generalized to other people, or to mankind as a whole. For example, in E.'s
case, he attributed the problem of helplessness not only to himself or
to his own family but to all poor immigrants in the same situation as
his parents had been. Thus whatever solution he found to his own
problems would benefit not only himself, but many others besides. This altruistic way of generalizing solutions is typical of negentropic life themes; it brings harmony to the lives of many.

Gottfried, another one of the men interviewed by our University of Chicago team, provides a similar example. As a child Gottfried was very close to his mother, and his memories of those early years are sunny and warm. But before he turned ten, his mother developed cancer, and died in great pain. The young boy could have felt sorry for himself and become depressed, or he could have adopted hardened cynicism as a defense. Instead he began to think of the disease as his personal enemy, and swore to defeat it. In time he earned a medical degree and became a research oncologist, and the results of his work have become part of the pattern of knowledge that eventually will free mankind of this scourge. In this case, again, a personal tragedy became transformed into a challenge that can be met. In developing skills to meet that challenge, the individual improves the lives of other people.

Ever since Freud, psychologists have been interested in explaining how early childhood trauma leads to adult psychic dysfunction. This line of causation is fairly easy to understand. More difficult to explain, and more interesting, is the opposite outcome: the instances when suffering gives a person the incentive to become a great artist, a wise statesman, or a scientist. If one assumes that external events must determine psychic outcomes, then it makes sense to see the neurotic response to suffering as normal, and the constructive response as “defense” or “sublimation.” But if one assumes that people have a choice in how they respond to external events, in what meaning they attribute to suffering, then one can interpret the constructive response as normal and the neurotic one as a failure to rise to the challenge, as a breakdown in the ability to flow.

What makes some people able to develop a coherent purpose, while others struggle through an empty or meaningless life? There is no simple answer, of course, because whether a person will discover a harmonious theme in the apparent chaos of experience is influenced by many factors, both internal and external. It is easier to doubt that life makes sense if one is born deformed, poor, and oppressed. But even here, this is not inevitably the case: Antonio Gramsci, the philosopher of humane socialism and a man who left a profound mark on recent European thought, was born a hunchback in a miserable peasant hovel. As he was growing up, his father was jailed for many years (unjustly, as it turned out), and the family could barely survive from day to day. Antonio was so sickly as a child that for years his mother is said to have dressed him in his best clothes every evening and laid him out to sleep.
in a coffin, expecting him to be dead by morning. Altogether, it was not a very promising start. Yet despite these and many other handicaps Gramsci struggled to survive and even succeeded in getting himself an education. And he did not stop when he achieved a modest security as a teacher, for he had decided that what he really wanted from life was to struggle against the social conditions that broke his mother’s health and destroyed his father’s honor. He ended up being a university professor, a deputy in parliament, and one of the most fearless leaders against fascism. Until the very end, before he finally died in one of Mussolini’s prisons, he wrote beautiful essays about the wonderful world that could be ours if we stopped being fearful and greedy.

There are so many examples of this type of personality that one certainly cannot assume a direct causal relation between external disorder in childhood and internal lack of meaning later in life: Thomas Edison as a child was sickly, poor, and believed to be retarded by his teacher; Eleanor Roosevelt was a lonely, neurotic young girl; Albert Einstein’s early years were filled with anxieties and disappointments—yet they all ended up inventing powerful and useful lives for themselves.

If there is a strategy shared by these and by other people who succeed in building meaning into their experience, it is one so simple and obvious that it is almost embarrassing to mention. Yet because it is so often overlooked, especially nowadays, it will be valuable to review it. The strategy consists in extracting from the order achieved by past generations patterns that will help avoid disorder in one’s own mind. There is much knowledge—or well-ordered information—accumulated in culture, ready for this use. Great music, architecture, art, poetry, drama, dance, philosophy, and religion are there for anyone to see as examples of how harmony can be imposed on chaos. Yet so many people ignore them, expecting to create meaning in their lives by their own devices.

To do so is like trying to build up material culture from scratch in each generation. No one in his right mind would want to start reinventing the wheel, fire, electricity, and the million objects and processes that we now take for granted as part of the human environment. Instead we learn how to make these things by receiving ordered information from teachers, from books, from models, so as to benefit from the knowledge of the past and eventually surpass it. To discard the hard-won information on how to live accumulated by our ancestors, or to expect to discover a viable set of goals all by oneself, is misguided hubris. The chances of success are about as good as in trying to build an electron microscope without the tools and knowledge of physics.

People who as adults develop coherent life themes often recall that
when they were very young, their parents told them stories and read from books. When told by a loving adult whom one trusts, fairy tales, biblical stories, heroic historical deeds, and poignant family events are often the first intimations of meaningful order a person gleans from the experience of the past. In contrast, we found in our studies that individuals who never focus on any goal, or accept one unquestioningly from the society around them, tend not to remember their parents having read or told stories to them as children. Saturday morning kiddie shows on television, with their pointless sensationalism, are unlikely to achieve the same purpose.

Whatever one's background, there are still many opportunities later on in life to draw meaning from the past. Most people who discover complex life themes remember either an older person or a historical figure whom they greatly admired and who served as a model, or they recall having read a book that revealed new possibilities for action. For instance, a now famous social scientist, widely respected for his integrity, tells how when he was in his early teens he read A Tale of Two Cities, and was so impressed by the social and political chaos Dickens described—which echoed the turmoil his parents had experienced in Europe after World War I—that he decided then and there that he would spend his life trying to understand why people made life miserable for one another. Another young boy, reared in a harsh orphanage, thought to himself, after reading by chance a Horatio Alger story in which a similarly poor and lonely youth makes his way in life by dint of hard work and good luck, "If he could do it, why not me?" Today this person is a retired banker well known for his philanthropy. Others remember being changed forever by the rational order of the Platonic Dialogues or by the courageous acts of characters in a science fiction story.

At its best, literature contains ordered information about behavior, models of purpose, and examples of lives successfully patterned around meaningful goals. Many people confronted with the randomness of existence have drawn hope from the knowledge that others before them had faced similar problems, and had been able to prevail. And this is just literature; what about music, art, philosophy, and religion?

Occasionally I run a seminar for business managers on the topic of how to handle the midlife crisis. Many of these successful executives, having risen as far as they are likely to advance in their organizations, and often with their family and private lives in disarray, welcome the opportunity to spend some time thinking about what they want to do next. For years I have relied on the best theories and research results
in developmental psychology for the lectures and discussions. I was reasonably content with how these seminars worked out, and the participants usually felt that they had learned something useful. But I was never quite satisfied that the material made enough sense.

Finally it occurred to me to try something more unusual. I would begin the seminar with a quick review of Dante’s *Divina Commedia*. After all, written over six hundred years ago, this was the earliest description I knew of a midlife crisis and its resolution. “In the middle of the journey of our life,” writes Dante in the first line of his enormously long and rich poem, “I found myself inside a dark forest, for the right way I had completely lost.” What happens afterward is a gripping and in many ways still relevant account of the difficulties to be encountered in middle age.

First of all, wandering in the dark forest, Dante realizes that three fierce beasts are stalking him, licking their chops in anticipation. They are a lion, a lynx, and a she-wolf—representing, among other things, ambition, lust, and greed. As for the contemporary protagonist of one of the bestsellers of 1988, the middle-aged New York bond trader in Tom Wolfe’s *Bonfire of the Vanities*, Dante’s nemesis turns out to be the desire for power, sex, and money. To avoid being destroyed by them, Dante tries to escape by climbing a hill. But the beasts keep drawing nearer, and in desperation Dante calls for divine help. His prayer is answered by an apparition: it is the ghost of Virgil, a poet who died more than a thousand years before Dante was born, but whose wise and majestic verse Dante admired so much that he thought of the poet as his mentor. Virgil tries to reassure Dante: The good news is that there is a way out of the dark forest. The bad news is that the way leads through hell. And through hell they slowly wend their way, witnessing as they go the sufferings of those who had never chosen a goal, and the even worse fate of those whose purpose in life had been to increase entropy—the so-called “sinners.”

I was rather concerned about how the harried business executives would take to this centuries-old parable. Chances were, I feared, that they would regard it as a waste of their precious time. I need not have worried. We never had as open and as serious a discussion of the pitfalls of midlife, and of the options for enriching the years that would follow, as we had after talking about the *Commedia*. Later, several participants told me privately that starting the seminar with Dante had been a great idea. His story focused the issues so clearly that it became much easier to think and to talk about them afterward.

Dante is an important model for another reason as well. Although
his poem is informed by a deep religious ethic, it is very clear to anyone who reads it that Dante’s Christianity is not an accepted but a discovered belief. In other words, the religious life theme he created was made up of the best insights of Christianity combined with the best of Greek philosophy and Islamic wisdom that had filtered into Europe. At the same time, his Inferno is densely populated with popes, cardinals, and clerics suffering eternal damnation. Even his first guide, Virgil, is not a Christian saint but a heathen poet. Dante recognized that every system of spiritual order, when it becomes incorporated into a worldly structure like an organized church, begins to suffer the effects of entropy. So to extract meaning from a system of beliefs a person must first compare the information contained in it with his or her concrete experience, retain what makes sense, and then reject the rest.

These days we occasionally still meet people whose lives reveal an inner order based on the spiritual insights of the great religions of the past. Despite what we read every day about the amorality of the stock market, the corruption of defense contractors, and the lack of principles in politicians, examples to the contrary do exist. Thus there are also successful businessmen who spend some of their free time in hospitals keeping company with dying patients because they believe that reaching out to people who suffer is a necessary part of a meaningful life. And many people continue to derive strength and serenity from prayer, people for whom a personally meaningful belief system provides goals and rules for intense flow experiences.

But it seems clear that an increasing majority are not being helped by traditional religions and belief systems. Many are unable to separate the truth in the old doctrines from the distortions and degradations that time has added, and since they cannot accept error, they reject the truth as well. Others are so desperate for some order that they cling rigidly to whatever belief happens to be at hand—warts and all—and become fundamentalist Christians, or Muslims, or communists.

Is there any possibility that a new system of goals and means will arise to help give meaning to the lives of our children in the next century? Some people are confident that Christianity restored to its former glory will answer that need. Some still believe that communism will solve the problem of chaos in human experience and that its order will spread across the world. At present, neither of these outcomes seems likely.

If a new faith is to capture our imagination, it must be one that will account rationally for the things we know, the things we feel, the things we hope for, and the ones we dread. It must be a system of beliefs
that will marshal our psychic energy toward meaningful goals, a system that provides rules for a way of life that can provide flow.

It is difficult to imagine that a system of beliefs such as this will not be based, at least to some degree, on what science has revealed about humanity and about the universe. Without such a foundation, our consciousness would remain split between faith and knowledge. But if science is to be of real help, it will have to transform itself. In addition to the various specialized disciplines aimed at describing and controlling isolated aspects of reality, it will have to develop an integrated interpretation of all that is known, and relate it to humankind and its destiny.

One way to accomplish this is through the concept of evolution. Everything that matters most to us—such questions as: Where did we come from? Where are we going? What powers shape our lives? What is good and bad? How are we related to one another, and to the rest of the universe? What are the consequences of our actions?—could be discussed in a systematic way in terms of what we now know about evolution and even more in terms of what we are going to know about it in the future.

The obvious critique of this scenario is that science in general, and the science of evolution in particular, deals with what is, not with what ought to be. Faiths and beliefs, on the other hand, are not limited by actuality; they deal with what is right, what is desirable. But one of the consequences of an evolutionary faith might be precisely a closer integration between the is and the ought. When we understand better why we are as we are, when we appreciate more fully the origins of instinctual drives, social controls, cultural expressions—all the elements that contribute to the formation of consciousness—it will become easier to direct our energies where they ought to go.

And the evolutionary perspective also points to a goal worthy of our energies. There seems to be no question about the fact that over the billions of years of activity on the earth, more and more complex life forms have made their appearance, culminating in the intricacies of the human nervous system. In turn, the cerebral cortex has evolved consciousness, which now envelops the earth as thoroughly as the atmosphere does. The reality of complexification is both an is and an ought: it has happened—given the conditions ruling the earth, it was bound to happen—but it might not continue unless we wish it to go on. The future of evolution is now in our hands.

In the past few thousand years—a mere split second in evolutionary time—humanity has achieved incredible advances in the differentiation of consciousness. We have developed a realization that mankind is
separate from other forms of life. We have conceived of individual human beings as separate from one another. We have invented abstraction and analysis—the ability to separate dimensions of objects and processes from each other, such as the velocity of a falling object from its weight and its mass. It is this differentiation that has produced science, technology, and the unprecedented power of mankind to build up and to destroy its environment.

But complexity consists of integration as well as differentiation. The task of the next decades and centuries is to realize this underdeveloped component of the mind. Just as we have learned to separate ourselves from each other and from the environment, we now need to learn how to reunite ourselves with other entities around us without losing our hard-won individuality. The most promising faith for the future might be based on the realization that the entire universe is a system related by common laws and that it makes no sense to impose our dreams and desires on nature without taking them into account. Recognizing the limitations of human will, accepting a cooperative rather than a ruling role in the universe, we should feel the relief of the exile who is finally returning home. The problem of meaning will then be resolved as the individual's purpose merges with the universal flow.
CARNAL ISRAEL
READING SEX IN TALMUDIC CULTURE

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theory and in practice from the hierarchical structures that determine platonized cultures (whether Jewish or Christian)? Can any useful cultural criticism be achieved by historically specifying the ways in which the rabbinic Judaism of late antiquity is different in its discourse of the body and with it of gender from the cultural formation in which we have all participated since the early Middle Ages? Specifically, can the dialectical description of these cultures as alternate solutions and failures to solve socio-cultural problems provide us with tools for a synthesis that will enable both the valorization of sexuality and the liberation of women (see also Kraemer [1992, 199–200])? Let us begin, then, to read some of the texts produced in this culture in the light of these questions.

"Behold Israel According to the Flesh"

On Anthropology and Sexuality
in Late-Antique Judaisms

DEFINING THE HUMAN BEING:
PHILO, PAUL, AND THE RABBIS

One of the tendencies of Greek-speaking Judaism—including Paul’s—that divided it from rabbinic Judaism seems to have been the acceptance of what might be broadly called a platonic conception of the human being, for which the soul is the self, and the body only its dwelling place or worse. “In this life itself, what constitutes our self in each of us is nothing other than the soul” (Laws 12:159–378; Vernant 1991, 190). For Philo, “the soul may be seen as entombed in the body” (Winston 1988, 214). This was a commonly held conception through much of the Hellenistic cultural world. Philo speaks of the body as “wicked and a plotter against the soul,” as “a cadaver and always dead,” and claims that

1. Brian Stock has reminded me that not all platonists would have defined the human being as a soul trapped in a body either, that “Some platonist thinkers, notably Philo, Plotinus, and Porphyry, thought that the soul was trapped in the body; others, those, for instance, interested in medicine, astrology, or other sciences, combined their otherworldliness with a model of macrocosm/microcosm, which placed greater weight on the body, sexuality, and one’s activity in the world.” Dillon has discussed this issue with regard to the middle platonists, e.g., Antiochus of Ascalon, and concludes that for him, “We are our minds not our bodies,” but remarks that that same “second-rate philosophers”—one of the founding figures of middle platonism—in a treatise on ethics could maintain that we are both mind and body (Dillon 1977, 88). Dillon comments that these writers would somewhat modify their doctrine depending on the rhetorical needs of a particular genre. Nevertheless, it seems at any rate that most thinkers, Jewish and Christian, who adopted the platonistic dualisms as their philosophical base were led to a severe downgrading (at best) of the role of the body in the constitution of the human being. See also Spidelik (1986, 106), who writes, “No matter what school they belonged to, the philosophers arrived at the same conclusion: the body was despised as the ‘enemy’ of the soul, or it became a thing that was useful, like a ‘slave’: one either used it at one’s good pleasure or got rid of it. In the Platonic tradition the union of the body with the soul was viewed as a fall.”
the chief cause of ignorance is the flesh and our affinity for it. Moses himself affirms this when he says "because they are flesh" the divine spirit cannot abide. Marriage, indeed, and the rearing of children, the provision of necessities, the ill repurp that comes in the wake of poverty, business both private and public, and a host of other things wilt the flower of wisdom before it blooms. Nothing, however, so thwarts its growth as our fleshly nature.

(Philo 1981, 65)

Paul also uses similar platonizing imagery, but significantly, without such negative attributes. The clearest example appears in 2 Corinthians 5:1-4:

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. Here indeed we groan, and long to put on our heavenly dwelling, so that by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety; not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

Beyond any doubt, Paul refers here to a resurrection in the body, though the resurrected body is not the same kind of body as the one "that we dwell in" now. Paul considers some kind of a body necessary, in order that the human being not be naked, and he polemicizes here against those who deny resurrection in the flesh. It is out of the question, therefore, to regard Paul as a radically anti-body dualist on the model of Plotinus, for example. But crucially, Paul maintains an image of the human being as a soul dwelling in or clothed by a body. In the very text in which Paul is valorizing body, arguing against those who deny body, he nevertheless refers to "we who are in this tent." The coincidence between Philo and Paul in their anthropologies, in spite of many significant differences between them, leads me to think that such platonizing notions of the human being were commonplace—although not necessarily universal—among Greek-speaking Jews. Certainly, such concepts of the human being became common among the Fathers of the church, who promulgated such metaphors for the body as "prison, tomb, fetters, vestment, ugly mask, garment of skin, dwelling place" of the soul (Spalik 1986, 171; Dodd 1965, 30).

Rabbinic Judaism, in contrast, defined the human being as an animated body and not as a soul trapped or even housed or clothed in a body.

Alic Goshen-Gottstein has brilliantly articulated this difference:

Rabbinic anthropology differs in this respect from Hellenistic (including Hellenistic Jewish), and later—Christian—anthropology. The distinction between soul and body may be seen as a soft distinction rather than a hard one. There is much talk of soul and body in the rabbinic sources. There is also a recognition of their different qualities. However, there is not a fundamental metaphysical opposition between these two aspects. There may be an existential confrontation, but metaphysically soul and body form a whole, rather than a polarity. Crudely put—the soul is like a battery that operates an electronic gadget. It may be of humanity was for the purpose of bringing God into the material world, thus uniting the world with God, but they, nevertheless, considered sexuality as temporary and a sign of "man's" fallerness. Bynum (1991) is a very important discussion of these questions from a different point of view. Although her focus is on the medieval period, her discussion raises the question of whether the "platonic" ideology of the person as soul was ever fully accepted in Christian culture.

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different and originally external to the gadget. However, the difference is not one of essence. Nowhere in rabbinic literature is the soul regarded as Divine. It may be of heavenly origin, but is not Divine. More significantly, the gadget and its power source ultimately belong together, rather than separately. Thus the soul is the vitalizing agent, whose proper place is in the body, not out of it.

(Goschen-Gottstein 1991)

The Rabbis are thus only one ideological group within late-antique Judaism, and their anthropology is one of their main distinguishing marks. The soul is frequently likened in their writings to salt which preserves meat (Theodor and Albeck 1965, 320–21; see also Urbań 1975, 220–21 and Stiegemann 1977, 508–16). Perhaps the most elegant demonstration of the essentially monistic anthropology of rabbinic Judaism is from its daily prayer service; after urinating or defecating, the Jew is enjoined to pronounce the following blessing:

Blessed art Thou O Lord, King of the Universe, Who has made the human with wisdom, and created in it orifices and hollows. Revealed and known it is before Your Throne of Glory, that should any of these be opened or shut up, it would be impossible to live before You. Blessed art Thou, the Healer of all flesh Who does wondrous things.

This text shows clearly two things: first, the acceptance of fleshliness in its most material and lower-body forms as the embodiment of God’s wisdom, and second, the definition of the human as his or her body. No wonder that Augustine regarded the Jews as indisputably carnal.

Nonetheless, the body was hardly unproblematic or uncontested in the rabbinic culture, nor was asceticism unknown. In a recent essay, Steven Fraade has formulated the question which must be addressed in a study of this discourse:

[A] broader understanding of asceticism sees it as responding, in a variety of ways, to a tension inherent in all religious systems: humans (whether individually or collectively) aspire to advance ever closer to an ideal of spiritual fulfillment and perfection, while confronting a self and a world that continually set obstacles in that path, whatever its particular course. How can one proceed along that path with a whole,

undivided, undistracted “heart” (all one’s energies and intentions) while living among the distractions of the present world? (Fraade 1986, 255)

Although “confronting a self” and “spiritual fulfillment” seem to beg some questions they ought rather to be asking, Fraade’s definition is useful. Asceticism is not, on his account, a product of dualistic contempt for the body; indeed, that dualistic contempt, which we find in several forms of ancient Judaism, is one response to the ascetic tension. Askesis itself is religious athleticism, “the willful and arduous training and testing, often through abstention from what was generally permitted, of one’s creaturely faculties in the positive pursuit of moral and spiritual perfection” (Fraade 1986, 257; see also Dodd 1965, 24).

Unlike other forms of asceticism, sexual renunciation was excluded for the Rabbis. Everyone was expected to marry, have sex, and have children, and people who refused to do so were hyperbolically stigmatized as murderers and blasphemers (Tosefta Yevamot 8:7 and Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 63b). The necessity for such hyperbole attests to the attractions of celibacy for Semitic-speaking Jews. The Rabbis were part of the Hellenistic world, even though their conception of the body departed significantly from (or even resisted) prevailing Hellenistic anthropological notions that other Jews had assimilated. Because the Rabbis understood the human being as a body, sexuality was an essential component of being human, while in platonized formations, one could imagine an escape from sexuality into a purely spiritual and thus truly “human” state. The rabbinic insistence on the essentiality of the corporeal and thus the sexual in the constitution of human being represents then a point of resistance to the dominant discursive practices of both Jewish and non-Jewish cultures of late antiquity.

INTEGRATING THE PRIMAL ANDROGYNE

One of the clearest arguments for rabbinic resistance to the surrounding discourse of the body is the Rabbis’ citation of that discourse while

6. I am going to use this form for ethical reasons rooted in present practice. It does not constitute a declaration that sex is a “natural” category, which will be preciselyVendor name: Varna Harrison.

7. For discussion of this matter, see Chapter 5 below.

8. See Mosk (1989, 50). See, however, n. 3 above, concerning the important qualification of this point by Verna Harrison.
significantly modifying its meaning. The myth of a primal androgynous was widespread in late antiquity, particularly among platonists in the Jewish (and eventually, Christian) traditions (Meeks 1973; Crouzel 1989, 94). This myth is cited in Genesis Rabba, the earliest midrash on the first book of the bible. The midrashic version is, however, significantly different from preceding and surrounding versions of the narrative. One of the motivations of this myth in the midrash is to harmonize the two different accounts of the creation of humanity contained in the first and second chapters of Genesis:

Genesis 1:27–28
[27] And God created the earth-creature in His image; in the image of God, He created him; male and female He created them. [28] And God blessed them, and God said to them: Reproduce and fill the earth.

Genesis 2:7 ff.
[7] And God formed the earth-creature of dust from the earth and breathed in its nostrils the breath of life, and the earth-creature became a living being. ... [9] And the earth-creature gave names to all of the animals and to the birds of the air and all of the animals of the fields, but the earth-creature could not find any helper equal to it. [21] And God

9. See also Daube (1973, 71–89). I would like, however, to note that I think Daube errs in associating the rabbinic citation of the Septuagint as evidence for an early date for this myth in Jewish circles, an error repeated in Tov (1984) as well. Bereishit Rabba cites the Septuagint as the reading of the verse, “A male with orifices created He him,” involving what is in the Hebrew a very slight emendation of “female” to “orifices.” Daube (72–73) sees here a version of the primal androgynous myth, because he understands “orifices” here to refer to female genitals. The word, ἄνδραν, however, means no such thing. It is well attested in rabbinic Hebrew with the meaning of all of the bodily orifices, including specifically male ones, so that when the Mishna in Berakhot says that one who needs to attend to his orifices should not pray, it means simply a man or woman who needs to urinate! The Septuagint emendation, if it is authentic, would indicate a Hebrew text which tendentiously changed the verse from indicating simultaneous creation of male and female, whether as androgynous or not, to the single creation of a wholly male human. It may, nevertheless, perhaps be taken as evidence for the early date of the androgynous myth in that it seemingly seeks to refute it.

10. Genesis Rabba, from which this quotation comes, is the classic and most important midrash on Genesis. This interpretation appears in several parallel versions, for which see Theodor and Albeck (1965). As are all midrashic texts, Genesis Rabba is a collection of many different sayings from different Rabbis and different periods, edited however into a single, multi-vocal text in Palestine some time in the fifth century or so. Its closest cultural congener are, accordingly, the Greek Fathers.

11. Following Tribe (1978) and Bal (1987), I do not translate “adam” as man, but as earth-creature (at this stage) both to reproduce the pun of its name: adam/adama (earth) and to avoid prejudging the question of its gender.

that God created Adam in the image of God He made him. [2] Male and female He created them, and He blessed them, and called their name Adam, on the day He created them.

caused a deep sleep to fall on the earth-creature, and it slept, and He took one of its ribs and closed the flesh beneath it. [24] And the Lord God constructed the rib which He had taken from the earth-creature into a woman and brought her to the earth-man. [25] And the earth-man said, this time this one is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called wo-man, from man was she taken.

In the first story it seems clear that the original creation of the human species included both sexes, while the second suggests an original male creature for whom a female was created out of his flesh. The contradiction presents a classic hermeneutic problem.

The Spiritual Androgyne: Philo

In the interpretation of Philo, the first Adam is an entirely spiritual being, whose non-corporeal existence can be defined as both male and female. The second chapter introduces a carnal Adam, who is at first ungendered or male and then from whom the female is constructed. Bodily gender is thus twice displaced from the origins of "man." Further, in this reading, the creation of Eve, and thus sexuality itself, rehearse the Fall (Bloch 1987, 10):

"It is not good that any man should be alone." For there are two races of men, the one made after the (Divine) Image, and the one molded out of the earth. ... With the second man a helper is associated. To begin with, the helper is a created one, for it says "Let us make a helper for him"; and in the next place, is subsequent to him who is to be helped, for He had formed the mind before and is about to form its helper.

(Bloch 1929b, 227)

12. Again, I am following Bal (1987) on this. If the earth-creature is sexually undifferentiated (in one way or another), only the production of a woman turns it into a man.

13. The ambiguity, indeed the contradiction, in my own discourse between referring to the first Adam as "male" and as "ungendered" is no accident. If there is no other sex, then there is no gender, so Adam is ungendered. On the other hand, when Adam refers to his situation before the creation of Eve, he remembers himself as male. See Bal (1987) and Boyarin (1990d).
Philo is resolving the hermeneutical contradiction. He here regards the two stories as referring to two entirely different creative acts of God and accordingly to the production of two different races of “man.”14 Because the texts, Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, refer to two entirely different species, he can claim that only the first species is identified as “in the image of God”—that is, only the singular, unbody Adam-creature is in God’s likeness, in which context its male-and-femaleness must be understood spiritually. In other words, the designation of this creature as male-and-female means really neither male nor female. The verse “It is not good that a man be alone” is understood in accordance with both species of man, the purely spiritual androgynous one and the embodied, male one. For the first, the verse has the allegorical significance of the necessity of the soul for God; with reference to the second, the text says that a helper is necessary. Another passage of Philo is explicit on this point:

After this he says that “God formed man by taking clay from the earth, and breathed into his face the breath of life” (Gen. ii. 7). By this also he shows very clearly that there is a vast difference between the man thus formed and the man that came into existence earlier after the image of God: for the man so formed is an object of sense-perception, partaking already of such or such quality, consisting of body and soul, man or woman, by nature mortal; while he that was after the Image was an idea or type or seal, an object of thought, incorporeal, neither male nor female, by nature incorruptible.

(Philo 1929, 107)

The second story refers, then, to humanity as we know it, and “woman” is explicitly marked as supplement. This double creation provides Philo with one of his sources for platonistic “ideas” in the work of Moses, who according to Philo anticipated Plato’s philosophy (Tobin 1983, 132).16

Philo’s interpretation is not an idiosyncrasy. As Thomas Tobin has shown, Philo refers to a tradition he already knows (1983, 32; see also Mack 1984, 243). The fundamental point is that for the Hellenistic Jews, the oneness of the pure spirit is ontologically privileged in the constitution of humanity. Fraade elegantly summarizes this platonistic Jewish anthropography in its relation to Philo: “Philo inherits from Plato a radically dualistic conception of the universe. In this view, the material world of sense perception is an imperfect reflection of the intelligible order which emanates from God. The human soul finds its fulfillment through separation from the world of material desires, a world that lacks true reality, and through participation in the life of the spirit and divine intellect; the soul finally reunites the true self with its divine source and thereby achieves immortality” (Fraade 1986, 265–64; emphasis added). If the primal state is one of spiritual androgyny, in which man-and-female means neither male nor female, this fulfillment entails the return to a state of non-corpooreal androgyny—a notion with social consequences for Philo, which he presents in an image of perfected human life.17

In his On the Contemplative Life, Philo describes a Jewish sect called the Therapeutae that lived in his time on the shores of Lake Mareotis near Alexandria. The tone of his depiction of this sect and its practice makes clear that he considers it an ideal religious community. The fellowship consisted of celibate men and women who lived in individual cells and spent their lives in prayer and contemplative study of allegorical interpretations of scripture (like the ones that Philo produced). Once a year, the community came together for a remarkable ritual celebration. Following a simple meal and a discourse, all of the celebrants began to sing hymns together. Initially, the men and the women remained separate from each other in two choirs, but as the celebration became more ecstatic, the men and the women joined to form one chorus, “the treble of the women blending with the bass of the men.”17 The model of an ecstatic joining of the male and the female in a mystical ritual re-creates in social practice the image of the purely spiritual masculine-female first human of which Philo speaks in his commentary; indeed, this ritual of the Therapeutae is a return to the originary Adam (Meeks 1973, 179).18

14. Philo contradicts himself on this point in several places. I am not interested here in sorting out Philo’s different interpretations and their sources. Moreover, this has been very well done already in Tobin (1983). My interest here is in how the reading given here enters into a certain tradition of discourse on the body.

15. For further discussion of this passage in the writings of Philo and his followers, see Tobin (1983, 108–19) and Jeremy Cohen (1989, 74–76 and 229).

16. My friend and colleague Albert Baumgarten reminded me of this point.

17. An article by Ross Kraemer (1989) is the most recent and fullest description of the Therapeutae.

18. This hypothesis explains the otherwise seemingly unmotivated reference in Philo’s text to the Symposium of Plato and especially to Aristophanes’s story of double-creatures (not necessarily androgynes by any means) at the origins of humanity. Philo is countering this “abhorrent” image of physically double bodies an ideal one of spiritually dual humans. Philo’s reversal will be double-reversed in part by the Rabbis, as I argue below.
sees an impurity in sexual relations even when they are legitimated by marriage” (Crouzel 1989, 138). On the other hand, Clement and others who supported marriage against the Encratites cited the verse “Male and female created He them” as prefiguring the creation of woman and therefore as endorsing marriage (Alexandre 1988, 198). Similarly, somewhat later, John Chrysostom wrote with great enthusiasm of the creation of humanity in two sexes and of sexual desire and intercourse as restoration of the “male and female” of Genesis and even of the “neither male nor female” of Galatians 3:28 (1986, 43). Many of the formulations of Chrysostom’s later writings on sexual desire and marriage are nearly indistinguishable from those of the Rabbis: “From the beginning God has been revealed as the fashioner, by His providence, in this union of man and woman, and He has spoken of the two as one: ‘male and female He created them’ and ‘there is neither male nor female.’ There is never such intimacy between a man and a man as there is between husband and wife, if they are united as they ought to be.” And perhaps even more movingly, “But suppose there is no child; do they then remain two and not one? No; their intercourse effects the joining of their bodies, and they are made one, just as when perfume is mixed with ointment” (1986, 76).

But even those Fathers who were in this latter category privileged virginity over marriage as the higher state (Jeremy Cohen 1989, 231–35, 237–38, 243–44). Clement was the most friendly of the Fathers toward marriage, but “when he set out his own matrimonial ideal, it amounted to sexless marriage, lived as if between a brother and a sister” (Fox 1987, 358; but see Ford 1989, 21). Also Gregory Nazianzen, in the midst of precisely an encomium to marriage, says “I will join you in wedlock. I will dress the bride. We do not dishonour marriage, because we give a higher honour to virginity” (quoted in Ford 1989, 25). The same John Chrysostom, who so warmly and movingly praised desire and the intimacy of husband and wife remained a virgin and highly valued the virgin life over the married state, while the Rabbis disallowed virginity in principle.22 As

19. Meeks has discussed Gnostic rituals which consist of a reconstitution of the androgyny of the first human and moreover considered the interpretation of various Pauline passages in their light in his excellent paper (Meeks 1973, 188–96). I have purposely omitted any discussion of Paul in this section, because the interpretation of his doctrine is so contested.

20. See also Peter Brown’s magnificent chapter on Origen (Brown 1988, 160–78).
21. See also Ford (1989, 43–49). See, however, next note.
22. I am quite convinced by Ford’s description of the later John Chrysostom’s ideology of sexuality that his mature view was not very different from that of the Rabbis (Ford 1989, 49 and passim), but, once again it is important to note that despite all that, Chrysostom himself was celibate, and as Ford notes, “he continued all his life to consider a life of virginity in dedication to God as an even higher calling” (73).
close as some of these Fathers come to the Rabbis in their appreciation, then, of human sexuality, there remains an irreducible kernel of difference in the anthropologies. The difference is not so much, sometimes, in the ethics as in the fundamental understanding of human essence.

The Corporeal Androgyne: Palestinian Midrash

Palestinian midrash also knows and cites the myth of a primateval androgyne as a solution to the contradiction of the two creation stories in Genesis, but it metamorphoses the meaning and virtually reverses the understanding of the myth. According to these midrashic texts, the primordial Adam was a dual-sexed creature in one body. The story in the second chapter is the story of the splitting off of the two equal halves of an originary body:

And God said let us make a human etc. . . . R. Yeruia the son of Efazar interpreted: When the Holiness (Be it Blessed) created the first human, He created him androgynous, for it says, "Male and female created He them." R. Samuel the son of Nahman said: When the Holiness (Be it Blessed) created the first human, He made it two-faced, then He saw it and made a back for this one and a back for that one. They objected to him: but it says, "He took one of his ribs (tsela')." He

In this text, we have two accounts of the origin of the sexes of humanity. The first interpretation is that the first human, the one called "the adam," was androgyne. It had genitals of both sexes, and the act of creation described in Genesis 2 merely separated out the two sexes from each other and reconstructed them into two human bodies. The second statement (that of Rabbi Samuel) seems best understood as a specification and interpretation of the first, namely that the first human was like a pair of Siamese twins who were then separated by a surgical procedure. Both of these interpretations use Greek terminology (androgyne, dyprosopo) to describe the original two-sexed (or two-faced) Adam, and, as usual, the use of the "alien" word is not culturally innocent.

The myth of the first human as androgyne, which is mocked in Plato's Symposium, is of course well known from Greek literature as old as the pre-Socratic Empedocles (Macdonald 1987, 25). The Rabbis, however, were much more likely to have encountered the myth in the form in which it became widely known among both Jews and Gentiles in late antiquity: the myth of the spiritual, primordial androgyne. For Philo and his congeners, as we have seen, the return to the original state of humankind involves a putting off of the body and sexuality and returning to a purely spiritual androgyne (Macdonald 1988, 282–85, and King 1988, 165). Those Rabbis for whom the original state of physical androgyne was divided to create the two separate sexes believed that the physical union of man and wife restores the image of the original whole human. What my reading proposes is the rabbinic usage of a topos of Hellenistic Jewish culture to reverse its meaning. The very allusion to the surrounding culture signals resistance to it.

The interpretation that the first human was an androgyne later split into two bodies is explicitly motivated by the same hermeneutic issue that led to Philo’s interpretation: the desire to render the two accounts

25. Compare Augustine who “grants woman humanity as long as she is joined by a man, so the whole substance may be one image.” Marriage becomes a prerequisite for women’s humanity. A single woman remains essentially incomplete. The male, on the other hand, represents the divine by himself” (von Kellenbach 1990, 207). I am not suggesting that Augustine’s position represents all of Christianity.

23. Neither Daube (1973), Meeks (1973, 185), Stiegman (1977, 517), nor Macdonald (1987, 38) seems to have sensed how different the rabbinic androgyne myth is from that of Philo and the Gnostics. On the other hand, Daube (1973, 71–73) makes a very convincing case for reading Mark 10:13 ff. as based on the androgyne interpretation of this verse, arguing that Jesus’s “What God has put together, let no man put asunder” is only intelligible on that reading. If his proposal be accepted then Jesus certainly understood the primal androgyne as a physical one, as did the Rabbis somewhat later. On the other hand, while Idel (1989, 211–12) well understands the implications of the spiritual androgyne of Gnosticism and some “Orthodox” Christian imagery, he does not see that Philo is very close to this view as well. Moreover, again, while he clearly understands how different rabbinic sex ideology was from that which longed for a restoration of an asexual androgyne, he does not cite the midrash from which this point can be most clearly supported, namely the one treated here.

24. The inconsistencies in the pronouns in the translation of this sentence reflect ambiguities that I perceive in the text (and the culture). On the one hand, there is virtually no question that the appellation of God usually translated as “The Holy One, Blessed be He” is so mistranslated, for the term translated “Holy One” means literally “Holiness,” as proven by Ancient Aramaic renditions of this formula. On the other hand, it is very difficult to use the pronoun “it” with reference to God, as I think the culture did imagine “Him” as male (with female attributes).
coherent and produce them as a single narrative. But in addition to the widespread midrashic view that Primal Adam was a physical androgynous, we also find readings that take him to be a male, from whom the female was created, as in our Western culture's more familiar interpretations of the story:

And He took one of his ribs sides (tsela); Rabbi Samuel the son of Nahman says, "one of his sides, as you say and the side (tsela') of the Tabernacle on the North" [Exod. 26:20]. And Shmuel said, "He took a rib from between two of his ribs."

(Theodor and Albeck 1965, 157)

First, the reading of Rabbi Samuel the son of Nahman is recapitulated in brief, namely that the first human was androgynous and the so-called rib was really a side. But then this view is challenged by Shmuel, who understands the rib as a rib and therefore holds that the first human was male and the woman was a secondary creation. All of the Rabbis assume that the two accounts describe the creation of one kind of humanity, not two kinds. According to the Talmud, Shmuel, who holds that woman was not created at the beginning, understands the verse "Male and female created Him" to indicate that it was God's intention to create both male and female at the beginning. Indeed, because the Rabbis' non-dualist anthropo-logy precludes a theory of dual creation such as Philo's, there is no other way to read the verse. Thus even Shmuel, who does interpret the woman as a secondary construction, understands sexuality and difference to be essential rather than supplemental to the constitution of the human. The traditional rabbinic marriage ceremony, in which the following blessings are chanted, also follows the "rib" version of the story and understands sexuality as essential:

[Blessed art thou, O Lord King of the Universe,] who created the Adam in his image, in the image of the likeness of his form, and constructed for him, from him, an eternal construction. Blessed art thou, O Lord, the creator of humanity.

The Barren Woman will be exceedingly joyful and glad when she gathers her children into her with happiness. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who makes Zion happy in her children.

Make happy the loving friends, as you made your creation happy in the Garden of Eden in the beginning. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who makes the groom and bride happy.

Blessed art thou, O Lord King of the Universe, who has created joy and happiness, groom and bride, bliss, rejoicing, elation and cheer, love, brotherhood, peace and friendship. Quickly, O Lord, our God,

may there be heard in the hills of Judea the voice of joy and voice of happiness, the voice of the singing of bridegrooms from their bridal chambers and youths from their marriage celebrations. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who makes the groom rejoice with his bride.

This ritual text is a reading of the creation of gender and sex that is narrated in Genesis. Like Philo's ritual of the Therapeutae, it is a translation into explicit social practice of the interpretative moment encompassed by midrash. In the first of the blessings, God is thanked for making Adam and then, from him, Eve. In the second blessing, abandoned Zion is figured as a barren woman. In the third, a prayer is said for the newly married couple, that they should be as happy together as Adam was at the creation of Eve. The final moment of the ritual is the declaration that God makes the groom rejoice with his bride. This "rejoicing," which certainly refers to the sexual act (Anderson 1989, 133-36), is that for which God is being praised and thanked in the entire ceremony. It is in the joyful union of husband and wife that the happiness that God vouchsafed his creature in the Garden of Eden is to be restored, for a moment in the present and forever at the eschaton. And at the eschaton, as well, this union will be the site and marker of the greatest redemption. If such a celebratory attitude toward married sex is maintained even by a text that adheres to the view that Eve was created second, how much more so do we expect it according to the more common rabbinic vision of Eve and Adam (or at any rate, their genitals) were both contained physically in the first human being.

In the rabbinic culture, the human race is thus marked from the very beginning by corporeality, difference, and heterogeneity. For the Rabbis, sexuality belongs to the original created (and not fallen) state of humanity. Humanity did not fall from a metaphysical condition, nor is there any Fall into sexuality in rabbinic Judaism (Pardes 1989). The midrashic reading of the text cited above presents the originary human person as dual-sexed, as two sexes joined in one body. The splitting of the androgynous body ordains sexuality:

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his woman and they become one flesh

There is nothing in the biblical text or in our midrashic reading of it that indicates that marriage is either a Fall or a concession. The definitive rabbinic statement on marriage is from Genesis Rabba:
And God said, it is not good for the man to be alone: it has been taught: one who has no wife remains without good, without help, without joy, without blessing, and without atonement. . . . R. Hiyya the son of Gamaliel said, also he is not a complete human, for it says, "And He blessed them and called their name, Adam." [Gen. 5:2]. And there are those who say that he even decreases the likeness of God, for it says, "In the image of God, He made the Adam," [Gen. 9:6], and what does it say after this? "And as for you, be fruitful and multiply." [Gen. 9:7].

(Theodor and Albeck 1965, 152)

This midrashic text explicitly grounds the Rabbis' ideology of marriage in their interpretation of the creation stories of Genesis. The telos of marriage is a return to the condition of completeness or even of imago dei in the act of marriage that reconstructs the Divine Image in which the original androgynous was created. No wonder, then, that Augustine and other Christian writers would make reference to this difference between Judaism and Christianity and consider the Jews "indisputably carnal."

THE RABBIS ON SEX:
PALESTINE AND BABYLONIA

The Jews disdained the beauty of virginity, which is not surprising, since they heaped ignominy upon Christ himself, who was born of a virgin. The Greeks admired and revered the virgin, but only the Church of God adored her with zeal.

(John Chrysostom, On Virginity 1.1)

In this passage the fourth-century Father represents the basic difference between rabbinic Judaism and Christianity, as well as the Greek origins of the valorization of virginity. Once again, I would claim, this sensibility is grounded in cultural reality. Marriage is the positively marked term in rabbinic culture, while virginity is marked as negative. Within this frame...

26. Emphasis mine. Here we have the most clear antithesis to the view held by some Christian thinkers that only the virgin is a complete human. Whether can be said about the "status" of women in rabbinic Judaism, "woman" is not essentialized to lack (as in Freud, e.g.), but as the fulfillment of lack. I will come back to this in Chapter 3 and again in the conclusion, but meanwhile see Dubois (1988).

27. Another take on this would be that procreation is the imago dei. Other rabbinic texts would certainly interpret that way.

work, however, there is a range of ideologies toward sexuality among the talmudic Rabbis. At one extreme is Rabbi Eliezer, who is said to have made love to his wife "as if being forced to by a demon, uncovering an inch of her body and immediately covering it again." He held that sex was only for procreation. His view on sexuality is closest to that of Clement, the most positive of the Fathers on sexuality (Clement 1989a, 259–63; Brown 1988, 133). Each of the cultures should be seen not as a monologic language but as a heteroglossic collection of dialects. However, the range of possibility within the two formations is different. Sexual renunciation is simply not an option in the rabbinic cultural formation and ideology. But for some early Rabbis in Palestine, a kind of ascetic sexual practice was possible. Their practice represents the rabbinic Judaism closest in appearance to the Hellenistic Jewish of Philo and Paul. In fact, a fair amount of evidence suggests that the Palestinian Judaism of the Rabbis of the second and third centuries most closely approaches (but does not merge with) the ideology of sexuality of the Hellenized Jews, while as we move further in time and space from that moment, we also move further from that ideology.

Historical Variation in the
Rabbinic Discourse of Sexuality

As I have mentioned, the rabbinic figure who seemed most negative on sex was Rabbi Eliezer (that is, the figure of Rabbi Eliezer as portrayed in much rabbinic writing, which may or may not be historically accurate). The story of how he had intercourse with his wife is a locus classicus for ascetic sexual practice:

They asked Imma Shalom [Mother Peace], the wife of Rabbi Eliezer, "Why do you have such beautiful children?" She said to them, "He does not have intercourse with me at the beginning of the night, nor at the end of the night, but at midnight, and when he has intercourse with me, he unfolds an inch and veils it again, and appears as if he was driven by a demon."

(Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 20b)

The story represents a highly negative attitude toward sexual pleasure. Rabbi Eliezer's behavior as if driven by a demon apparently represents his conviction that he is fulfilling an obligation that should not be enjoyed but should be performed as quickly as possible. The text presents a point
of view (similar to that of the Stoics, Philo, and Clement, among others) that sex is legitimate, but only for procreation, and when procreation is the sole rationale for sex, then the reward is beautiful children. Rabbi Eliezer is strongly attracted to asceticism as a religious model—the same asceticism that characterized the life of the Hellenistic philosophical schools—but as a Rabbi he could not choose celibacy. The fact that he was married, despite such an ascetic personality, only strengthens this argument.

Rabbi Eliezer’s point of view, however, is only one pole of the dialectic of the discourse of sexuality in marriage in rabbinic literature. If it is possible to interpret the represented views of this Rabbi as David Biale has done—"The goal . . . was a marriage in which a man could fulfill his procreative duties while remaining loyal to an ascetic sexual ideal" (Biale 1989, 26)—it is certainly not possible to follow Biale and regard this asceticism in general as the “goal of the Rabbis,” for even in Palestinian stories Rabbi Eliezer is presented as an extreme figure, and in Babylonian talmudic texts his practice is sharply rejected. As Biale himself points out, the story’s implied prescription to wear clothes while having intercourse is vigorously contested by a Babylonian talmudic statement:

Rav Yosef cited a tannaitic tradition, “Flesh: This means the intimacy of the flesh, namely that he should not behave with her in the manner of the Persians, who make love while dressed.” This supports the view of Rav Huna, for Rav Huna said, “One who says, I do not desire it unless she is in her clothing and I in mine, must divorce his wife and pay her the marriage settlement.”

(Ketubbot 48a)

Among the three debts that a man owes his wife are “her flesh, her covering, and her seasons” (Exod. 21:10). While the last is normally understood to mean sexual relations and the first to mean food, Rav Yosef the Babylonian knows of a tannaitic tradition (perhaps of Palestinian origin but not cited in Palestinian texts) that interprets the first term to mean bodily intimacy, the touching of skin during sexual intercourse, and he interprets this to mean nudity during sex. Further evidence for this difference between Palestine and Babylonia can be adduced from the fact that in a Palestinian text, Rabbi Shim'on the son of Yohai is reported to have said that God hates one who has intercourse naked (Wayiqra Rabba 21:8), while in the Babylonian version of precisely the same statement, this has been changed to one who has intercourse in front of any creature (Babylonian Talmud Nidda 17a; see below Chapter 4, discussion of this passage). Whatever the views of some of the Palestinian tannaim, such views were certainly not characteristic of the ethos of all of rabbinic Judaism. The pattern of an earlier asceticism replaced later (and especially in Babylonia) by an anti-ascetic discourse of sexuality can be found in several other passages of the talmudic literature. One of the clearest signs of early Palestinian ambivalence about the body and sexuality is the talmudic discussion of requisite immersion in a ritual bath before resuming the study of Torah after sex:30

Rabbi Yehoshua the son of Levi said: How do we know that those who have had a seminal emission may not study Torah, for it says And you shall make them known to your children [Deut. 4:9], and He appended to it: The day on which you stood before the Lord, your God at Horev: Just as there, those who had had seminal emissions were forbidden, so here, those who have had seminal emissions are forbidden.

(Berakhot 21b)

Rabbi Yehoshua the son of Levi draws an analogy between the receiving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai and the study of Torah for all of the generations. Just as the Jews were commanded not to have sexual intercourse for three days before receiving of Torah, so one who has sex or another seminal emission is forbidden to study Torah until purifying himself by immersion in a ritual bath.

(even if not belonging to Rabban Gamaliel), it is fascinating to see that the Sassanian Rabbis resisted and opposed a practice of their surroundings, while precisely the distant Palestinians approved of it.

30. For an alternative reading of this material see Eilberg-Schwartz (1989).
The Talmud, however (after some further discussion of this point irrelevant to our purposes), indicates unambiguously that the requirement of immersion in a ritual bath after sex was later abrogated. The anxiety about sexuality that was manifested by such an idea of impurity was incompatible with later rabbinic sensibilities around the body:

It is taught: Rabbi Yehuda the son of Betayra used to say: “The words of Torah are not susceptible to impurity.” There was a case of a student who was hesitating to speak in the presence of Rabbi Yehuda the son of Betayra. He said to him: “My son, open your mouth and let your words be radiant, for the words of Torah are not susceptible to impurity, for it says Behold my words are like fire; a speech of the Lord [Jer. 23:29]. Just as fire is unsusceptible to impurity, so the words of Torah are unsusceptible to impurity.” . . . Rav Nahman the son of Yitzhaq says: “The community is accustomed to follow the view of that venerable sage Rabbi Yehuda the son of Betayra with regard to the words of Torah, in accordance with what Rabbi Yehuda the son of Betayra has said, ‘The words of Torah are not susceptible to impurity.’” When Zeiri came, he said: “They have rescinded immersion, in accordance with the view of Rabbi Yehuda the son of Betayra.”

The early Palestinian authority Rabbi Yehuda ben Betayra is represented as having opposed the entire principle of immersion after sex and before the study of Torah. He gives a technical midrashic reading in support of his position, arguing that since the words of Torah are like fire, they cannot be made impure by contact with an impure person, and that there is no reason for one made impure by seminal emission to refrain from the study of Torah. Pasting through fire is one of the ways that objects become pure in rabbinc law, so the Torah would purify the one who studies it. The prohibition against the study of Torah in this state of impurity, however, did not have a technical basis in the laws of purity. Rather, it was based on a moral/psychological foundation: as the Torah had been received in a state of full concentration on spirituality, so also should it be studied. Otherwise, it would be impossible to understand why menstruating women whose state of technical impurity is identical to that of men who have had a seminal emission (or, if anything, more severe) would be permitted to study Torah without immersion, a point made at several junctures in the Palestinian literature (see below, p. 180). Furthermore, by the talmudic period, cultic impurity had been abrogated because of the destruction of the Temple. Clearly, then, the belief that a man must immerse after sex was not held on the basis of technical, cultic impurity but because of a sense that sex was somehow incompatible with holy activity. It follows, therefore, that Rabbi Yehuda ben Betayra’s objection to the requirement of immersion before Torah-study constitutes a rejection of the moral notion that the earlier Palestinian text represented. Strong support was later given to his view by the Babylonian authority Rabbi Nahman the son of Yitzhaq and the Palestinian tradition of Rabbi Zeiri. These later traditions indicate the shift in sensibility that took place diachronically—a shift that the text renders explicit by saying that the earlier practice had been abrogated. To have had sex was no longer held an obstacle to fully serious Torah-study, any more than menstruating had been such an obstacle earlier in Palestine. I suggest that it is much more plausible to interpret this change as evidence for differing discourses of sexuality than for a shift in the status of Torah.

Further evidence of the incompatibility between enthusiastic acceptance of sexuality and the requirement of immersion after any seminal emission can be seen in a very curious report of earlier attempts to ameliorate (perhaps) the effects of the requirement of immersion after sex on the love-lives of Torah-scholars. The Talmud continues with the following account:

The Rabbis have taught: One who has had an emission upon whom nine pecks of water is poured is pure. Nahum the man of Gamzu whispered it to Rabbi Akiva who whispered it to Ben-Azzai who went out and taught it in the marketplace.

Two amora'im [the later authorities] disagreed about it in the West [Palestine], namely Rabbi Yose the son of Avin and Rabbi Yose the son of Zevida. One teaches it “taught it” and one “whispered it.” The one who says “taught it,” says [that he did so to prevent] the neglect of Torah-study and the neglect of procreation, while the one who says “whispered it,” so that the Torah-scholars will not be at their wives like roosters.

It is hard to imagine a more perfect representation of ambivalence. Either Ben-Azzai went out into the marketplace and declared that one need only take a shower after sex in order to study Torah, or he did the opposite, and whispered it as his teachers had done. Either he was trying to prevent scholars from neglecting either the Torah or their sexual obligations, or he was trying to prevent them from having sex too often. In any case, this text renders explicit the tension between seminal pollution, on the one hand, and affirmation of sexuality on the other.31 The Talmud

31. In Chapter 4 below, I will make explicit my reasons for glossing “procreation” as “sexuality” in describing this culture.
leaves this question open, but the later halakha is codified in accord with the view of Rabbi Yehuda ben Batayra, supported by Rav Nahman the son of Yitzhaq, that the whole matter of seminal impurity is irrelevant for the study of Torah. We have seen evidence for a highly ambivalent set of notions about sex on the part of early Palestinian authorities and the reduction of that ambivalence in the later rabbinic (especially Babylonian) period. We will find this pattern repeated in other texts as well.

Some early Palestinian authorities seem to hold a highly ironic, ambivalent stance toward sexuality. One of the most colorful expressions of this stance is the utterance of the Palestinian Resh Lakish cited (and contested) in the Babylonian Talmud: “Said Resh Lakish, ‘Come let us be grateful to our ancestors, for had they not sinned we would not have come into the world, for it says I said, you are all angels and heavenly creatures, but you have spoiled your behavior; therefore like Adam you will die [Ps. 82:6]’” (Babylonian Talmud Avoda Zara 5a). Resh Lakish’s gnomic is subtle and complex. At first glance it seems to encode a highly negative marking for sexuality, allowing it place only insofar as it leads to procreation; it is similar, then, to the ideologues of Philo and Clement. But careful reading reveals a more complicated and sophisticated meaning. First, it is vital to realize that Resh Lakish’s statement says nothing direct about sexuality at all. The psalm that he cites refers only to social evils, such as mistreatment of the poor in courts that favor the wicked rich. Resh Lakish can be understood to mean only that we should be grateful to our ancestors who sinned (not through sexuality) and, by sinning, brought death into the world, for without death there would be no generation, and we would not exist. Read this way, Resh Lakish does not explicitly call sexual intercourse sin. By seemingly understanding, however, that before the sin the ancestors were like angels, did not die, and therefore did not procreate, his apothegm nevertheless strongly encodes the association of sexuality with sin and death that lies at the bottom of Christian notions about the Fall and Original Sin. Even given this, however, Resh Lakish’s utterance is hardly Christian in spirit, in its affirmation of having come into the world. It is hard to imagine an early Christian writer arguing that we should be grateful to Adam and Eve for having sinned. The Babylonian Talmud did not accept, however, even these tenuous or ironic associations, for it continues:

Shall we say that had they not sinned, they would not have procreated? But it says, And as for you, be fruitful and multiply. Until Sinai. But

which the eleventh-century commentator Rashi glosses, “For they would have lived forever, and as long as they live, we would not have been significant at all.” The Babylonian Talmud could tolerate neither the ironic, ascetic implication of Resh Lakish’s original statement, nor the possible associations it had with Christian doctrine. To escape such implications, the Talmud distorted his obvious meaning and provided us with some precious evidence for an alternative view of sexuality in the phrase “the joy of intercourse.” In opposition to one rabbinic view (which held that sex was only for procreation), there was another view that strongly encoded a value for sexual pleasure in its own right. This hardly fits Brown’s characterization of sexuality for “the Rabbis” as “an irritating but necessary aspect of existence.”

Certain rabbinic texts, moreover, recognize the emotional value of married sex. Thus, when a decision must be made about whether consummation is necessary for the contraction of a valid marriage, it is made in the following terms: “Ravin asked, if she entered the marriage canopy but has not had intercourse, what is the law? Does the fondness of the marriage canopy effect the marriage or the fondness of intercourse?” (Babylonian Talmud Ketubbot 56a). Two things can be learned from this text. First, the validity of the speech-act of marrying is conditional upon a feeling of intimacy, and second, this feeling of intimacy is produced by—is one of the aims of—sexual intercourse.32

The strongest arguments that procreation was by no means the sole purpose of sex in rabbinic Judaism come from texts and situations in which the sex and procreation are differentiated or even in conflict with each

32. See Brown on Plutarch’s notion of charis, “the ‘graciousness’ created by intercourse—that indefinable quality of mutual trust and affection gained through the pleasure of the bed itself,” a notion as foreign, it would seem, to Philo as it was to Clement (Brown 1983, 153). Indeed, I would claim that the later rabbinic ethos of married love is very similar to the doctrine of Plutarch as described by Foucault (1986a, 202–8) even to the approving references to Solonic laws regarding the frequency of intercourse owed by a husband to a chaste wife as a “mark of esteem and affection,” for which compare the Talmud Yevamot 65a, “Anyone who knows that his wife is God-fearing and does not sleep with her is called a sinner.” See, however, Fox (1987, 349) for a somewhat different account of Plutarch’s position.
other, as in the situation of the barren wife. In the following story, procreation and erotic companionship come into conflict, and love prevails:

We will rejoice and be happy with you [Song of Songs 1:4]. There we have taught: If a man married a woman and remained with her for ten years and had no children, he is not permitted to refrain from procreation [i.e., he must divorce her and marry another].

Said Rabbi Iddi: There was a case of a woman in Sidon, who remained ten years with her husband and did not give birth. They came before Rabbi Shimon the son of Yohai; they wanted to get divorced one from the other. He said to them, “On your lives—just as you got married with feasting and drinking, so shall you separate in feasting and drinking.” They followed his suggestion, and they made for themselves a festival and a banquet, and she got him too drunk. When his sensibility returned to him, he said, “My daughter, choose any precious object of mine that is in the house, and take it with you when you go to your father’s house.” What did she do? When he was asleep, she told her maidservants and maidservants and said to them, “Pick him up in the bed, and take him to Father’s house.” At midnight he woke up. When his wine had worn off, he said to her, “My daughter, where am I?” She said, “in Father’s house.” He said, “What am I doing in your father’s house?” She said to him, “Did you not see me this very evening, Any precious object which you have in your house, take and go to your father’s house? There is no object in the world which is more precious to me than you!” They went to Rabbi Shimon the son of Yohai. He stood and prayed for them, and they were remembered [she became pregnant].

(Shir Hashirim Rabba 1:31)

There is one startling moment of narrative illogic in this otherwise perfectly constructed little tale. Why are we told that “she got him too drunk,” and then, “when his sensibility returned to him, he said . . .”? What function did his drunkenness play, if all that we know about it is that his sensibility returned to him afterwards, and why was it important that he was too drunk? Note that it is impossible to understand this drunkenness as that which resulted in his being so sleepy that he didn’t detect that he was being first carried off, because that sleep takes place after he has recovered from his drunkenness. I think that the most plausible way to fill this gap is that the story delicately hints that they made love while he was drunk, and that during intercourse they realized that they loved each other too much to allow the halakha to separate them. This seems to have been her plan, for after all, “she made him too drunk,” too drunk to resist. Moreover, this seems to have been the Rabbi’s plan. Otherwise, what was his intention in suggesting that they make a marriage feast to celebrate their divorce? Indeed, the very language he uses is suggestive, for he says literally, “Just as you coupled with feasting, so shall you separate with feasting,” the word “coupled” (niẓavvagem) having direct connotations of sexual intercourse. To be sure, he may not have predicted how clever the wife would be in achieving the goal, or what the means would be, but the story only makes sense if the Rabbi was trying by gentle means and indirectness to deflect them from their pious path of divorce. But whether or not this reading is accepted, the text is opposing “love” to procreation as the telos of marriage, and it is love that prevails. It goes without saying that the story, considering the context, must recuperate the halakha by the deus ex machina of the miraculous pregnancy at the end, but by returning to each other for however long it took for the Rabbi’s prayers to work, the husband and wife had already violated the halakha, and the tallet of the tale clearly approves. This legend may encode a moment of tension between a voice for which procreation was perceived as the sole or the overridingly important telos of marriage and one for which companionship was becoming increasingly important. This tension would bear some typological similarity to the development in the Roman world documented by Paul Veyne: “In the old civic code, the wife was nothing but an accessory to the work of the citizen and paterfamilias. She produced children and added to the family patrimony. In the new code, the wife was a friend, a ‘life’s companion’” (1987, 37). In point of historical fact, the Jewish practice did change, and the halakha that a man must divorce his barren wife came to be honored more in the breach than in the observance (Biale 1984). Sexual companionship had come

33. “Two things united them, he [Ovid] said: the ‘marital pact,’ but also ‘the love that makes us partners.’ It was possible for conflict to arise between duty and these extraneous tender feelings. What to do, for instance, if one’s wife turned out to be sterile? The first man who repudiated his wife on grounds of sterility had an acceptable motive but did not escape censure [prophrenos], because even the desire to have children should not have outweighed lasting devotion to his wife,” according to the moralist Valerius Maximus” (Veyne 1987, 42). I am suggesting that the story here represents at least a partial accommodation here to these Roman mores, but one which “indigenous” ideas of the role of sexuality and intimacy had prepared for.

34. See the remarkable text quoted by Winston (1981, 369) from a sixteenth-century Orthodox Rabbi: “The Sages of previous generations could not find it in their hearts to permit in actual practice divorce against her will or the taking of a second wife because of childlessness.”
to be valued for its own sake, even when procreation was impossible or contraindicated medically. Further support for this point can be drawn from the following facts: In rabbinic practice sex is recommended during pregnancy and following menopause; widowers are enjoined to remarry (by the Babylonian Shmuel Yevamot 61b) even when they have fulfilled the obligation of procreation; and widowers may even marry a woman proven to be infertile. To this should be compared, once more, Philo and Clement, for whom only procreation legitimated sexual intercourse (Clement 1989b, 391–92, 394; Clement 1989a, 261; Brown 1988, 133; Winston 1981, 368).

The overall picture that I can draw, albeit guarded, is of an earlier Palestinian discourse on sexuality that seems closest in spirit to that of the Stoics, who indeed considered sex to be an irritating and necessary part of human existence but also an “enduring aspect of the personality.” Rabbi Eliezer personifies, perhaps, an extreme representation of this discourse. The view encoded in the later tradition and especially its Babylonian variant, however, strongly opposed even this ambivalence. Both the earlier and the later views assert the value of procreation, but only the later and Babylonian variants seem to regard sexuality as a beneficence of God for the pleasure and well-being of humans.

I wish to propose a historical hypothesis to account for the relation between these two discourses of sexuality. As I claim above, in the first century there was no sharp distinction between Hellenistic and Pharisaic Judaism. Philo, Paul, and Josephus all attest to this; though all of them were highly acculturated Greek-speaking urban Jews, they manifest considerable Jewish (if not Hebrew) learning and apparently cannot be distinguished from other Jews in Palestine in terms of religious practice. There appears to have been a fair degree of Greek culture among Semitic-speaking Palestinian urban Jews. Paul, however, created Gentile Christianity, which, aside from its Christology, seems largely to have been contiguous with certain extreme allegorizing and spiritualizing tendencies within Hellenistic, platonized Judaism, at least in Egypt and likely in Palestine. Philo, after all, rails against those who maintained that the allegorical meaning had replaced the physical practice of the commandments, thus suggesting the existence of such groups, not altogether different from Pauline Christianity. With the increasing threat to the corporeal integrity of the Jewish people from these platonizing tendencies within Judaism, which culminated in post-Pauline Christianity, the Rabbis more and more rejected dualistic understandings of the relation of body to soul. Such rejection—which the Fathers characterized as carnality—became the very marker of the rabbinic formation. Increasing distance from both platonism and Stoicism carried with it a logic that affirmed sexuality per se. That affirmation has been documented here. There was to be, however, a reversal of this historical tendency when Greek thought re-entered the center of Jewish cultural practice in the Middle Ages.

THE RETURN OF THE DUAL: MAIMONIDES’S INTERPRETATION OF EVE

The religion and culture of the medieval Jewish scholastics, with Maimonides at their head, is quite distinct from that of the Rabbis. Maimonides’s reading of the story of the creation of Adam and Eve introduces into the later rabbinic culture the very dualisms from which the midrashic Rabbis escaped in theirs. Maimonides accepts and interprets the common rabbinic understanding of the Creation of Eve narrative as the splitting off of two halves of an originally androgynous being. However, this story is no longer read literally as the creation of an androgynous body which is split off physically into two bodies, one male and one female; rather, it is thoroughly allegorized. Again, the content of this privileged founding allegory thematicizes and justifies the very form of allegory.

37. This represents only one possibility of understanding Paul’s position. It is, however, the interpretation that I find most compelling, as I shall argue in a forthcoming work.

38. I emphasize, “scholastics,” because there were other opposing tendencies in medieval Judaism as well. In fact, in his day, Maimonides’s philosophy was considered by many—if not most—Jewish authorities as heretical. His allegorization of rabbinic myth and biblical anthropomorphisms of God were particularly opposed. Moreover, texts directly opposing his negative view of the body and sexuality were also produced at this time.

39. For much of what follows I am dependent on Klein-Braslavsky (1986, 193 ff.).
Maimonides justifies his move toward allegorical interpretation by citing an explicit example from Plato: "For they concealed what they said about the first principles and presented it in enigmas. Thus Plato... designated Matter as the female and Form as the male" (Maimonides 1963, 43; see Klein-Braslavsky 1986, 198). This example, presented as if random and innocent, becomes in fact the master allegory of Maimonides's writing. The connection between matter and the female, according to Maimonides, lies in the fact that "woman" is a name for that which needs to be joined to something else, and matter, of course, in Platonist-Aristotelian physics, desires to be joined with a form. What is astounding here is how quickly Maimonides's ontology and its connected hermeneutic practice bring him to expressions of virulent misogyny, much more virulent, indeed, than any known in the older formation of midrashic Judaism:

How extraordinary is what Solomon said in his wisdom when likening matter to a married harlot, for matter is in no way found without form and is consequently always like a married woman who is never separated from a man and is never free. However, notwithstanding her being a married woman, she never ceases to seek for another man to substitute for her husband, and she deceives and draws him on in every way until she obtains from her what her husband used to obtain. (Maimonides 1963, 431)

Maimonides's allegorization of "woman" and "man" as matter and form, and his physical philosophy of matter as always in need of form and always exchanging forms, essentializes woman (as the allegorized term) into an ontological whoredom. We typically refer to such allegory as personification allegory and forget that it is also a reification of persons. When those persons are not individual fictional characters but categories of real human beings, the social results can be dramatic—indeed devastating. Maimonides continues his exposition of the relation of matter to form:

For example, man's apprehension of his Creator, his mental representation of every intelligible, his control of his desire and his anger... are all of them consequent upon his form. On the other hand, his eating and drinking and copulation and his passionate desire for these things, as well as his anger and all bad habits found in him, are all of them consequent on his matter. Inasmuch as it is clear that this is so, and as according to what has been laid down by divine wisdom it is impossible for matter to exist without form and for any of the forms in question to exist without matter, and as consequently it was necessary that man's very noble form, which, as we have explained, is the image of God and His likeness, should be bound to earthy, turbid, and dark matter, which calls upon man every imperfection and corruption.

(1963, 431)

Maimonides rivals nearly any neo-platonist here in his horror of matter and his revulsion from bodily life. And as we might expect, Maimonides's doctrine regarding sexuality differs sharply from that of the talmudic Rabbis: "With regard to copulation, I need not add anything to what I have said in my Commentary on Aboth about the aversion in which it is held by what occurs in our wise and pure Law, and about the prohibition against mentioning it or against making it in any way or for any reason a subject of conversation" (1963, 434). This characterization of sex and the body in general as being held in "aversion" by the Torah needs only to be confronted by the talmudic story of the disciple who hid under his teacher's bed to observe him making love to his wife, "because it is Torah and I must learn," to show how far the medieval rabbi has moved from the Rabbis of the Talmud and midrash. Where the Rabbis had showed an easy acceptance of contained, married sex and the body and indeed had conversed about these subjects freely, for Maimonides they become subjects of shame and repression.

Maimonides accepts and transmits the midrashic interpretation of the narrative describing the creation of woman at the same time as man. However, by introducing a Platonic conception of language and an Aristotelian physical theory, he effectively undermines the cultural import of that very midrash. Yes, Adam and Eve were created as one, but only because matter and form never exist without each other. And as for the second part of the story, the separation narrated in the second chapter of Genesis according to the midrash, Maimonides responds that it simply describes the conflict between form and matter. Even if, for Maimonides, matter was in harmony with form before the separation of the woman,

40. Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 62a. In another section of the present project, I shall undertake a fuller reading of that story and its congeners.

41. It is true that an anthology of rabbinic sayings could be produced in support of Maimonides's disposition. Nevertheless, the statement that copulation is held in aversion by the Law is one that is impossible to support from talmudic sources, and indeed, the more traditional (i.e., non-Aristotelian) opponents of Maimonides roundly attacked him on this point, as well as on others closely related to it, viz. the corporeality of God and corporeal resurrection.
this is no longer the case afterward. Hence matter—the body—will be referred to as a “helper which is over-against him,” and with this moment, rabbinic Judaism had come full circle. Maimonides reads, in this respect, like nothing so much as a recapitulation of Philo.

In the next chapter, we will see how much cultural struggle and tension was involved in the effort to produce sexual desire as “good” in a cultural environment in which it was heavily problematized.

Dialectics of Desire
“The Evil Instinct Is Very Good”

Far from being a simple legacy of its cultural heritage, the rabbinic insistence on the positive valence of sexuality seems to have been hard won and contested. The Talmud relates the following strange history of the returnees from the exile in Babylonia:

[1] “And they cried out unto God in a loud voice” [Nehemiah 9:4]. What did they say? Rav (and some say Rabbi Yohanan) says: “Woe, Woe: This is the one who destroyed the temple, and burned the Holy Place, and killed all of the righteous ones, and expelled Israel from their land, and still he dances among us. What is the reason You gave him to us? Is it not to receive reward (for resisting him)? We don’t want him or his reward!” A sherd fell from heaven with the word “truth” written on it. Said Rav Hanina: Learn from this that the seal of the Holy Blessed One is truth! They sat in fast for three days and three nights, and he was given over to them. A figure like a lion of fire went out from the Holy of Holies. A prophet said unto Israel: “That was the Desire for worship of strange gods, as it is said, This is the evil” [Zach. 5:7]. While they were capturing him, a hair was pulled from his head. He cried out, and his voice carried four hundred parasangs (The entire distance from heaven to earth is five hundred!). They said: “What shall we do? Perhaps, God forbid, they will have pity on him in heaven.” A prophet said to them: “Throw him into a leaden pot and stop up his mouth with lead, for lead absorbs sound, for it says, This is the evil, and he throw the leaden stone into its mouth” [loc. cit.].

[2] They said, “Since this is a time of [God’s] favor, let us pray regarding Desire for sexual sin.” They prayed and he was committed into their hands. He said to them, “Be careful, for if you kill that one, the world will end.” They imprisoned him for three days, and then they looked for a fresh egg in all of the land of Israel, and they did not find one. They said, “What shall we do? If we kill him, the world will end. If we pray for half [i.e., that people will only desire licit sex; Rashi], in heaven they do not answer halfway prayers. Blind him and let him go.” At least, a man does not become aroused by his female relatives.

(Babylonian Talmud Yoma 69b)
BOOK II

1

I must now carry my thoughts back to the abominable things I did in those days, the sins of the flesh which defiled my soul. I do this, my God, not because I love those sins, but so that I may love you. For love of your love I shall retrace my wicked ways. The memory is bitter, but it will help me to savour your sweetness, the sweetness that does not deceive but brings real joy and never fails. For love of your love I shall retrieve myself from the havoc of disruption which tore me to pieces when I turned away from you, whom alone I should have sought, and lost myself instead on many a different quest. For as I grew to manhood I was inflamed with desire for a surfeit of hell’s pleasures. Foolhardy as I was, I ran wild with lust that was manifold and rank. In your eyes my beauty vanished and I was foul to the core, yet I was pleased with my own condition and anxious to be pleasing in the eyes of men.

2

I cared for nothing but to love and be loved. But my love went beyond the affection of one mind for another, beyond the arc of the bright beam of friendship. Bodily desire, like a morass, and adolescent sex welling up within me exuded mists which clouded over and obscured my heart, so that I could not distinguish the clear light of true love from the murk of lust. Love and lust together seethed within me. In my tender youth they swept me away over the precipice of my body’s appetites and plunged me in the whirlpool of sin. More and more I angered you, unawares. For I had been deafened by the clank of my chains, the fetters of the death which was my due to punish the pride in my soul. I strayed still farther from you and you did not restrain me. I was tossed and spilled, floundering in the broiling sea of my fornication, and you said no word. How long it was before I
learned that you were my true joy! You were silent then, and I went on
my way, farther and farther from you, proud in my distress and rest-
less in fatigue, sowing more and more seeds whose only crop was grief.

Was there no one to lull my distress, to turn the fleeting beauty of
these new-found attractions to good purpose and set up a goal for
their charms, so that the high tide of my youth might have rolled in
upon the shore of marriage? The surge might have been calmed and
contented by the procreation of children, which is the purpose of
marriage, as your law prescribes, O Lord. By this means you form the
offspring of our fallen nature, and with a gentle hand you prune back
the thorns that have no place in your paradise. For your almighty
power is not far from us, even when we are far from you. Or, again,
I might have listened more attentively to your voice from the clouds,
saying of those who marry that they will meet with outward distress,
but I leave you your freedom; that a man does well to abstain from all
commerce with women, and that he who is unmarried is concerned with
God’s claim, asking how he is to please God; whereas the married man
is concerned with the world’s claim, asking how he is to please his wife.
These were the words to which I should have listened with more care, and if
I had made myself a eunuch for love of the kingdom of heaven, I should
have awaited your embrace with all the greater joy.

But, instead, I was in a ferment of wickedness. I deserted you and
allowed myself to be carried away by the sweep of the tide. I broke
all your lawful bounds and did not escape your lash. For what man can
escape it? You were always present, angry and merciful at once,
strewing the pangs of bitterness over all my lawless pleasures to lead
me on to look for others unallied with pain. You meant me to find
them nowhere but in yourself, O Lord, for you teach us by inflicting
pain, you smite so that you may heal, and you kill us so that we may
not die away from you. Where was I then and how far was I banished
from the bliss of your house in that sixteenth year of my life? This
was the age at which the frenzy gripped me and I surrendered myself
entirely to lust, which your law forbids but human hearts are not
ashamed to sanction. My family made no effort to save me from my
fall by marriage. Their only concern was that I should learn how to
make a good speech and how to persuade others by my words.

1 Cor. 7: 28. 2 Cor. 7: 1. 3 Cor. 7: 32, 33. 4 Matt. 19: 12.
SAINT AUGUSTINE CONFESSIONS

How presumptuous it was of me to say that you were silent, my God, when I drifted farther and farther away from you! Can it be true that you said nothing to me at that time? Surely the words which rang in my ears, spoken by your faithful servant, my mother, could have come from none but you? Yet none of them sank into my heart to make me do as you said. I well remember what her wishes were and how she most earnestly warned me not to commit fornication and above all not to seduce any man’s wife. It all seemed womanish advice to me and I should have blushed to accept it. Yet the words were yours, though I did not know it. I thought that you were silent and that she was speaking, but all the while you were speaking to me through her, and when I disregarded her, your handmaid, I was disregarding you, though I was both her son and your servant. But I did this unawares and continued headlong on my way. I was so blind to the truth that among my companions I was ashamed to be less dissolute than they were. For I heard them bragging of their depravity, and the greater the sin the more they glorièd in it, so that I took pleasure in the same vices not only for the enjoyment of what I did, but also for the applause I won.

Nothing deserves to be despised more than vice; yet I gave in more and more to vice simply in order not to be despised. If I had not sinned enough to rival other sinners, I used to pretend that I had done things I had not done at all, because I was afraid that innocence would be taken for cowardice and chastity for weakness. These were the companions with whom I walked the streets of Babylon. I wallowed in its mire as if it were made of spices and precious ointments, and to fix me all the faster in the very depths of sin the unseen enemy trod me underfoot and enticed me to himself, because I was an easy prey for his seductions. For even my mother, who by now had escaped from the centre of Babylon, though she still loitered in its outskirts, did not act upon what she had heard about me from her husband with the same earnestness as she had advised me about chastity. She saw that I was already infected with a disease that would become dangerous later on, but if the growth of my passions could not be cut back to the quick, she did not think it right to restrict them to the bounds of married love. This was because she was afraid that the bonds of marriage might be a hindrance to my hopes for the future—not of course the hope of the life to come, which she reposed in you,
I went to Carthage, where I found myself in the midst of a hissing cauldron of lust. I had not yet fallen in love, but I was in love with the idea of it, and this feeling that something was missing made me despise myself for not being more anxious to satisfy the need. I began to look around for some object for my love, since I badly wanted to love something. I had no liking for the safe path without pitfalls, for although my real need was for you, my God, who are the food of the soul, I was not aware of this hunger. I felt no need for the food that does not perish, not because I had had my fill of it, but because the more I was starved of it the less palatable it seemed. Because of this my soul fell sick. It broke out in ulcers and looked about desperately for some material, worldly means of relieving the itch which they caused. But material things, which have no soul, could not be true objects for my love. To love and to have my love returned was my heart's desire, and it would be all the sweeter if I could also enjoy the body of the one who loved me.

So I muddied the stream of friendship with the filth of lewdness and clouded its clear waters with hell's black river of lust. And yet, in spite of this rank depravity, I was vain enough to have ambitions of cutting a fine figure in the world. I also fell in love, which was a snare of my own choosing. My God, my God of mercy, how good you were to me, for you mixed much bitterness in that cup of pleasure! My love was returned and finally shackled me in the bonds of its consummation. In the midst of my joy I was caught up in the coils of trouble, for I was lashed with the cruel, fiery rods of jealousy and suspicion, fear, anger, and quarrels.

I was much attracted by the theatre, because the plays reflected my own unhappy plight and were tinder to my fire. Why is it that men
enjoy feeling sad at the sight of tragedy and suffering on the stage, although they would be most unhappy if they had to endure the same fate themselves. Yet they watch the plays because they hope to be made to feel sad, and the feeling of sorrow is what they enjoy. What miserable delirium this is! The more a man is subject to such suffering himself, the more easily he is moved by it in the theatre. Yet when he suffers himself, we call it misery: when he suffers out of sympathy with others, we call it pity. But what sort of pity can we really feel for an imaginary scene on the stage? The audience is not called upon to offer help but only to feel sorrow, and the more they are pained the more they applaud the author. Whether this human agony is based on fact or is simply imaginary, if it is acted so badly that the audience is not moved to sorrow, they leave the theatre in a disgruntled and critical mood; whereas, if they are made to feel pain, they stay to the end watching happily.

This shows that sorrow and tears can be enjoyable. Of course, everyone wants to be happy; but even if no one likes being sad, is there just the one exception that, because we enjoy pitying others, we welcome their misfortunes, without which we could not pity them? If so, it is because friendly feelings well up in us like the waters of a spring. But what course do these waters follow? Where do they flow? Why do they trickle away to join that stream of boiling pitch, the hideous flood of lust? For by their own choice they lose themselves and become absorbed in it. They are diverted from their true course and deprived of their original heavenly calm.

Of course this does not mean that we must arm ourselves against compassion. There are times when we must welcome sorrow on behalf of others. But for the sake of our souls we must beware of uncleanness. My God must be the Keeper of my soul, the God of our fathers, who is to be exalted and extolled for ever more. My soul must guard against uncleanness.

I am not nowadays insensible to pity. But in those days I used to share the joy of stage lovers and their sinful pleasure in each other even though it was all done in make-believe for the sake of entertainment; and when they were parted, pity of a sort led me to share their grief. I enjoyed both these emotions equally. But now I feel more pity for a man who is happy in his sins than for one who has to endure the ordeal of forgoing some harmful pleasure or being deprived of some

enjoyment which was really an affliction. Of the two, this sort of pity is certainly the more genuine, but the sorrow which it causes is not a source of pleasure. For although a man who is sorry for the sufferings of others deserves praise for his charity, nevertheless, if his pity is genuine, he would prefer that there should be no cause for his sorrow. If the impossible could happen and kindness were unkind, a man whose sense of pity was true and sincere might want others to suffer so that he could pity them. Sorrow may therefore be commendable but never desirable. For it is powerless to stay you, Lord God, and this is why the love you bear for our souls and the compassion you show for them are pure and unalloyed, far purer than the love and pity which we feel ourselves. But who can prove himself worthy of such a calling? ¹

However, in those unhappy days I enjoyed the pangs of sorrow. I always looked for things to wring my heart and the more tears an actor caused me to shed by his performance on the stage, even though he was portraying the imaginary distress of others, the more delightful and attractive I found it. Was it any wonder that I, the unhappy sheep who strayed from your flock, impatient of your shepherding, became infected with a loathsome mange? Hence my love of things which made me sad. I did not seek the kind of sorrow which would wound me deeply, for I had no wish to endure the sufferings which I saw on the stage; but I enjoyed fables and fictions, which could only graze the skin. But where the fingers scratch, the skin becomes inflamed. It swells and fester with hideous pus. And the same happened to me. Could the life I led be called true life, my God?

Yet all the while, far above, your mercy hovered faithfully about me. I exhausted myself in depravity, in the pursuit of an unholy curiosity, I deserted you and sank to the bottom-most depths of scepticism and the mockery of devil-worship. My sins were a sacrifice to the devil, and for all of them you chastised me. I defied you even so far as to relish the thought of lust, and gratify it too, within the walls of your church during the celebration of your mysteries. For such a deed I deserved to pluck the fruit of death, and you punished me for it with

¹ II Cor. 2: 16.
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BOOK III

eternal truth. I began to climb out of the depths to which I had sunk, in order to return to you. For I did not use the book as a whetstone to sharpen my tongue. It was not the style of it but the contents which won me over, and yet the allowance which my mother paid me was supposed to be spent on putting an edge on my tongue. I was now in my nineteenth year and she supported me, because my father had died two years before.

My God, how I burned with longing to have wings to carry me back to you, away from all earthly things, although I had no idea what you would do with me! For yours is the wisdom. In Greek the word ‘philosophy’ means ‘love of wisdom,’ and it was with this love that the Hortensius inflamed me. There are people for whom philosophy is a means of misleading others, for they misuse its great name, its attractions, and its integrity to give colour and gloss to their own errors. Most of these so-called philosophers who lived in Cicero’s time and before are noted in the book. He shows them up in their true colours and makes quite clear how wholesome is the admonition which the Holy Spirit gives in the words of your good and true servant, Paul: Take care not to let anyone cheat you with his speculations, with empty fancies drawn from human tradition, from worldly principles; they were never Christ’s teaching. In Christ the whole plenitude of Deity is embodied and dwells in him.

But, O Light of my heart, you know that at that time, although Paul’s words were not known to me, the only thing that pleased me in Cicero’s book was his advice not simply to admire one or another of the schools of philosophy, but to love wisdom itself, whatever it might be, and to search for it, pursue it, hold it, and embrace it firmly. These were the words which excited me and set me burning with fire, and the only check to this blaze of enthusiasm was that they made no mention of the name of Christ. For by your mercy, Lord, from the time when my mother fed me at the breast my infant heart had been suckled dutifully on his name, the name of your Son, my Saviour. Deep inside my heart his name remained, and nothing could entirely captivate me, however learned, however neatly expressed, however true it might be, unless his name were in it.

3 Job 12: 13. 4 Col. 2: 8, 9.
So I made up my mind to examine the holy Scriptures and see what kind of books they were. I discovered something that was at once beyond the understanding of the proud and hidden from the eyes of children. Its gait was humble, but the heights it reached were sublime. It was enfolded in mysteries, and I was not the kind of man to enter into it or bow my head to follow where it led. But these were not the feelings I had when I first read the Scriptures. To me they seemed quite unworthy of comparison with the stately prose of Cicero, because I had too much conceit to accept their simplicity and not enough insight to penetrate their depths. It is surely true that as the child grows these books grow with him. But I was too proud to call myself a child. I was inflated with self-esteem, which made me think myself a great man.

I fell in with a set of sensualists, men with glib tongues who ranted and raved and had the shores of the devil in their mouths. They baited the traps by confusing the syllables of the names of God the Father, God the Son Our Lord Jesus Christ, and God the Holy Ghost, the Paraclete, who comforts us. These names were always on the tips of their tongues, but only as sounds which they mouthed aloud, for in their hearts they had no inkling of the truth. Yet ‘Truth and truth alone’ was the motto which they repeated to me again and again, although the truth was nowhere to be found in them. All that they said was false, both what they said about you, who truly are the Truth, and what they said about this world and its first principles, which were your creation. But I ought not to have been content with what the philosophers said about such things, even when they spoke the truth. I should have passed beyond them for love of you, my supreme Father, my good Father, in whom all beauty has its source.

Truth! Truth! How the very marrow of my soul within me yearned for it as they dinned it in my ears over and over again! To them it was no more than a name to be voiced or a word to be read in their libraries of huge books. But while my hunger was for you, for Truth itself, these were the dishes on which they served me up the sun and the moon, beautiful works of yours but still only your works, not you yourself nor even the greatest of your created things. For your spiritual works are greater than these material things, however brightly they may shine in the sky.

But my hunger and thirst were not even for the greatest of your works, but for you, my God, because you are Truth itself with whom there can be no change, no swerving from your course. Yet the dishes they set before me were still loaded with dazzling fantasies, illusions with which the eye deceives the mind. It would have been better to love the sun itself, which at least is real as far as we can see. But I gulped down this food, because I thought that it was you. I had no relish for it, because the taste it left in my mouth was not the taste of truth — it could not be, for it was not you but an empty sham. And it did not nourish me, but starved me all the more. The food we dream of is very like the food we eat when we are awake, but it does not nourish because it is only a dream. Yet the things they gave me to eat were not in the least like you, as now I know since you have spoken to me. They were dream-substances, mock realities, far less true than the real things which we see with the sight of our eyes in the sky or on the earth. These things are seen by bird and beast as well as by ourselves, and they are far more certain than any image we conceive of them. And in turn we can picture them to ourselves with greater certainty than the vaster, infinite things which we surmise from them. Such things have no existence at all, but they were the visionary foods on which I was then fed but not sustained.

But you, O God whom I love and on whom I lean in weakness so that I may be strong, you are the sun and the moon and the stars, even though we see these bodies in the heavens; nor are you those other bodies which we do not see in the sky, for you created them and, in your reckoning, they are not even among the greatest of your works. How far, then, must you really be from those fantasies of mine, those imaginary material things which do not exist at all! The images we form in our mind’s eye, when we picture things that really do exist, are far better founded than these inventions; and the things themselves are more certain than the images we form of them. But you are not these things. Neither are you the soul,
to be convinced that he is deceiving himself. So he hates the real truth for the sake of what he takes to his heart in its place. Men love the truth when it bathes them in its light: they hate it when it proves them wrong. Because they hate to be deceived themselves, but are glad if they can deceive others, they love the truth when it is revealed to them but hate it when it reveals that they are wrong. They reap their just reward, for those who do not wish to stand condemned by the truth find themselves unmasked against their will and also find that truth is denied to them. This is precisely the behaviour of the human mind. In its blind inertia, in its abject shame, it loves to lie concealed, yet it wishes that nothing should be concealed from it. Its reward is just the opposite of its desire, for it cannot conceal itself from the truth, but truth remains hidden from it. Yet even in this wretched state it would still rather find joy in truth than in falsehood. One day, then, it shall be happy, if it learns to ignore all that distracts it and to rejoice in truth, the sole Truth by which all else is true.

See how I have explored the vast field of my memory in search of you, O Lord! And I have not found you outside it. For I have discovered nothing about you except what I have remembered since the time when I first learned about you. Ever since then I have not forgotten you. For I found my God, who is Truth itself, where I found truth, and ever since I learned the truth I have not forgotten it. So, since the time when I first learned of you, you have always been present in my memory, and it is there that I find you whenever I am reminded of you and find delight in you. This is my holy joy, which in your mercy you have given me, heedful of my poverty.

But in which part of my memory are you present, O Lord? What cell have you constructed for yourself in my memory? What sanctuary have you built there for yourself? That you should be present in it is a great honour, but I must now ask myself in what part of it you are present. When I remind myself of you I go beyond those functions of the memory which I share with the beasts, for I did not find you amongst the images of material things. I went on to search for you in the part of my memory where the emotions of my mind are stored, but here too I did not find you. I passed on to the seat of the mind itself—for this too is in the memory, since the mind can remember itself—but you were not there. For you are not the image of a material body, nor are you an emotion such as is felt by living men when they are glad or sorry, when they have sensations of desire or fear, when they remember or forget, or when they experience any other feeling. In the same way you are not the mind itself, for you are the Lord God of the mind. All these things are subject to change, but you remain supreme over all things, immutable. And yet you have deigned to be present in my memory ever since I first learned of you. Why do I ask what place is set aside in my memory as your dwelling, as if there were distinctions of place in the memory? Truly you do dwell in it, because I remember you ever since I first came to learn of you, and it is there that I find you when I am reminded of you.

Where, then, did I find you so that I could learn of you? For you were not in my memory before I learned of you. Where else, then, did I find you, to learn of you, unless it was in yourself, above me? Whether we approach you or depart from you, you are not confined in any place. You are Truth, and you are everywhere present where all seek counsel of you. You reply to all at once, though the counsel each seeks is different. The answer you give is clear, but not all hear it clearly. All ask you whatever they wish to ask, but the answer they receive is not always what they want to hear. The man who serves you best is the one who is less intent on hearing from you what he wills to hear than on shaping his will according to what he hears from you.

I have learnt to love you late, Beauty at once so ancient and so new! I have learnt to love you late! You were within me, and I was in the world outside myself. I searched for you outside myself and, disfigured as I was, I fell upon the lovely things of your creation. You were with me, but I was not with you. The beautiful things of this
world kept me far from you and yet, if they had not been in you, they would have had no being at all. You called me; you cried aloud to me; you broke my barrier of deafness. You shone upon me; your radiance enveloped me; you put my blindness to flight. You shed your fragrance about me; I drew breath and now I gasp for your sweet odour. I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am inflamed with love of your peace.

When at last I cling to you with all my being, for me there will be no more sorrow, no more toil. Then at last I shall be alive with true life, for my life will be wholly filled by you. You raise up and sustain all whose lives you fill, but my life is not yet filled by you and I am a burden to myself. The pleasures I find in the world, which should be cause for tears, are at strife with its sorrows, in which I should rejoice, and I cannot tell to which the victory will fall. Have pity on me, O Lord, in my misery! My sorrows are evil and they are at strife with joys that are good, and I cannot tell which will gain the victory. Have pity on me, O Lord, in my misery! I do not hide my wounds from you. I am sick, and you are the physician. You are merciful: I have need of your mercy. Is not our life on earth a period of trial? For who would wish for hardship and difficulty? You command us to endure these troubles, not to love them. No one loves what he endures, even though he may be glad to endure it. For though he may rejoice in his power of endurance, he would prefer that there should be nothing for him to endure. When I am in trouble long for good fortune, but when I have good fortune I fear to lose it. Is there any middle state between prosperity and adversity, some state in which human life is not a trial? In prosperity as the world knows it there is twofold cause for grief; for there is grief in the fear of adversity and grief in joy that does not last. And in what the world knows as adversity the causes of grief are threefold, for not only is it hard to bear, but it also causes us to long for prosperous times and to fear that our powers of endurance may break. Is not man’s life on earth a long, unbroken period of trial?

There can be no hope for me except in your great mercy. Give me the grace to do as you command, and command me to do what you will! You command us to control our bodily desires. And, as we are told, when I knew that no man can be master of himself, except of God’s bounty, I was wise enough already to know whence the gift came. Truly it is by continence that we are made as one and regain that unity of self which we lost by falling apart in the search for a variety of pleasures. For a man loves you so much the less if, besides you, he also loves something else which he does not love for your sake. O Love ever burning, never quenched! O Charity, my God, set me on fire with your love! You command me to be continent. Give me the grace to do as you command, and command me to do what you will!

It is truly your command that I should be continent and restrain myself from gratification of corrupt nature, gratification of the eye, the empty pomp of living. You commanded me not to commit fornication, and though you did not forbid me to marry, you counselled me to take a better course. You gave me the grace and I did your bidding, even before I became a minister of your sacrament. But in my memory, of which I have said much, the images of things imprinted upon it by my former habits still linger on. When I am awake they obtrude themselves upon me, though with little strength. But when I dream, they not only give me pleasure but are very much like acquiescence in the act. The power which these illusory images have over my soul and my body is so great that what is no more than a vision can influence me in sleep in a way that the reality cannot do when I am awake. Surely it cannot be that when I am asleep I am not myself, O Lord my God? And yet the moment when I pass from wakefulness to sleep, or return again from sleep to wakefulness, marks a great difference in me. During sleep where is my reason which, when I am awake, resists such suggestions and remains firm and undismayed even in face of the realities themselves? Is it sealed off when I close my eyes? Does it fall asleep with the senses of the

1 Wisdom 8: 21. 2 I John 2: 16.
body? And why is it that even in sleep I often resist the attractions of these images, for I remember my chaste resolutions and abide by them and give no consent to temptations of this sort? Yet the difference between waking and sleeping is so great that even when, during sleep, it happens otherwise, I return to a clear conscience when I wake and realize that, because of this difference, I was not responsible for the act, although I am sorry that by some means or other it happened to me.

The power of your hand, O God Almighty, is indeed great enough to cure all the diseases of my soul. By granting me more abundant grace you can even quench the fire of sensuality which provokes me in my sleep. More and more, O Lord, you will increase your gifts in me, so that my soul may follow me to you, freed from the concupiscence which binds it, and rebel no more against itself. By your grace it will no longer commit in sleep these shameful, unclean acts inspired by sensual images, which lead to the pollution of the body: it will not so much as consent to them. For to you, the Almighty, who are powerful enough to carry out your purpose beyond all our hopes and dreams, it is no great task to prescribe that no temptations of this kind, even such slight temptations as can be checked by the least act of will, should arouse pleasure in me, even in sleep, provided that my dispositions are chaste. This you can do for me at any time of life, even in the prime of manhood. But now I make this confession to my good Lord, declaring how I am still troubled by this kind of evil.

With awe in my heart I rejoice in your gifts, yet I grieve for my deficiencies, trusting that you will perfect your mercies in me until I reach the fullness of peace, which I shall enjoy with you in soul and body, when death is swallowed up in victory.

There is another evil which we meet with day by day. If only it were the only one! For we repair the daily wastage of our bodies by eating and drinking, until the time comes when we will bring both food and our animal nature to an end. When that time comes, your wonderful fullness will spell the end of our need, and you will clothe this corruptible nature of ours with incorruptible life. But for the

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You grant us many gifts when we pray for them. And even before we pray for them, all the good things that we have ever received have come from you. That we should later recognize that they came from you is also your gift. I have never been a drunkard myself, but I have known drunkards made sober by you. Therefore, just as it is by your doing that men who were once drunkards are not so for ever, it is also by your doing that those who were never drunkards are not drunkards now. And in the same way it is also by your doing that men of both sorts know that it was you who did this for them.

I have also heard these other words of yours: Do not follow the counsel of appetite. Turn your back on your own liking. By your gift I have also heard and found great comfort in the words: We gain nothing by eating, lose nothing by abstaining. This means that eating will not bring me plenty nor abstinence reduce me to misery. I have heard these words too: I have learned to be content with my circumstances as they are. I know what it is to have abundant means and what it is to live in want. Nothing is beyond my powers, thanks to the strength God gives me. Here speaks a true soldier of the heavenly army, not mere dust like the rest of us! But remember, O Lord, that we are dust. Remember that you made man from dust, and that he was lost and found again. My heart goes out to Paul for the words that he wrote by your inspiration: Nothing is beyond my powers, thanks to the strength God gives me. But he too was dust and could not do all things by his own power. Give me strength, O Lord, so that I may do all things. Give me the grace to do as you command, and command me to do what you will! Paul acknowledges your gifts and the boast that he makes is made in the Lord. I have also heard another of your servants begging for your gifts in these words: Let the itch of gluttony pass me by. All this makes it clear, O holy God, that when your commands are obeyed, it is from you that we receive the power to obey them.

Good Father, you have taught me that nothing can be unclean for those who have clean hearts, yet it goes ill with the man who eats to the hurt of his own conscience. You have taught me that all is good that God has made, nothing is to be rejected; only we must be thankful to him when we partake of it; that it is not what we eat that gives us our standing in God’s sight, that no one must be allowed to take us to task over what we eat or drink, and that no man, over his meat, should mock at him who does not eat it, nor, while he abstains, pass judgment on him who eats it. For these lessons which I have learnt all praise and all thanks be to you, my God, my Master, to you who knock at the door of my ears and shed your light over my heart! Deliver me from all temptation. It is the uncleanness of gluttony that I fear, not unclean meat. For I know that Noe was allowed to eat all kinds of meat that were suitable as food; that Elias was fed on meat; and that John the Baptist, remarkable ascetic though he was, was not polluted by the flesh of living creatures, the locusts which were granted him as food. On the other hand I know that Esau was defrauded by his greed for a dish of lentils; that David reproached himself for longing for a drink of wine; and that Christ our King was tempted not by meat but by bread. And the Israelites in the desert deserved rebuke, not because they wanted meat, but because in their greed for food they sulked and grumbled against the Lord.

In the midst of these temptations I struggle daily against greed for food and drink. This is not an evil which I can decide once and for all to repudiate and never to embrace again, as I was able to do in the case of fornication. I must therefore hold back my appetite with neither too firm nor too slack a rein. But is there anyone, O Lord, who is never enticed a little beyond the strict limit of need? If there is such a one, he is a great man. Let him praise your name. But I am not such a man: I am a poor sinner. Yet I too praise your name, and Christ, who conquered the world, pleads with you for my sins. He numbers me among the weak members of his Body, for your eyes looked upon me, when I was yet unformed; all human lives are already written in your record.

The sense of smell does not trouble me greatly with its attractions. I do not miss sweet scents when they are absent, but neither do I refuse them where I find them. I am even ready to do without them altogether. This, at least, is my own opinion of myself, but I may be wrong. For the powers of my inner self are veiled in darkness which I must deplore. When my mind speculates upon its own capabilities, it realizes that it cannot safely trust its own judgement, because its...
inner workings are generally so obscure that they are only revealed in the light of experience; and, besides this, during this life, which may be called a perpetual trial, no one should be confident that although he has been able to pass from a worse state to a better, he may not also pass from a better state to a worse. Our only hope, our only confidence, the only firm promise that we have is your mercy.

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I used to be much more fascinated by the pleasures of sound than the pleasures of smell. I was enthralled by them, but you broke my bonds and set me free. I admit that I still find some enjoyment in the music of hymns, which are alive with your praises, when I hear them sung by well-trained, melodious voices. But I do not enjoy it so much that I cannot tear myself away. I can leave it when I wish. But if I am not to turn a deaf ear to music, which is the setting for the words which give it life, I must allow it a position of some honour in my heart, and I find it difficult to assign it to its proper place. For sometimes I feel that I treat it with more honour than it deserves. I realize that when they are sung these sacred words stir my mind to greater religious fervour and kindle in me a more ardent flame of piety than they would if they were not sung; and I also know that there are particular modes in song and in the voice, corresponding to my various emotions and able to stimulate them because of some mysterious relationship between the two. But I ought not to allow my mind to be paralysed by the gratification of my senses, which often leads it astray. For the senses are not content to take second place. Simply because I allow them their due, as adjuncts to reason, they attempt to take precedence and forge ahead of it, with the result that I sometimes sin in this way but am not aware of it until later.

Sometimes, too, from over-anxiety to avoid this particular trap I make the mistake of being too strict. When this happens, I have no wish but to exclude from my ears, and from the ears of the Church as well, all the melody of those lovely chants to which the Psalms of David are habitually sung; and it seems safer to me to follow the precepts which I remember often having heard ascribed to Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, who used to oblige the lectors to recite the psalms with such slight modulation of the voice that they seemed to be speaking rather than chanting. But when I remember the tears that I shed on hearing the songs of the Church in the early days, soon after I had recovered my faith, and when I realize that nowadays it is not the singing that moves me but the meaning of the words when they are sung in a clear voice to the most appropriate tune, I again acknowledge the great value of this practice. So I waver between the danger that lies in gratifying the senses and the benefits which, as I know from experience, can accrue from singing. Without committing myself to an irrevocable opinion, I am inclined to approve of the custom of singing in church, in order that by indulging the ears weaker spirits may be inspired with feelings of devotion. Yet when I find the singing itself more moving than the truth which it conveys, I confess that this is a grievous sin, and at those times I would prefer not to hear the singer.

This, then, is my present state. Let those of my readers whose hearts are filled with charity, from which good actions spring, weep with me and weep for me. Those who feel no charity in themselves will not be moved by my words. But I beg you, O Lord my God, to look upon me and listen to me. Have pity on me and heal me, for you see that I have become a problem to myself, and this is the ailment from which I suffer.

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Finally I must confess how I am tempted through the eye. Let the ears of your Church, the ears of my devout brothers in Christ, listen to my words, so that I may bring to an end my discussion of the body’s temptations to pleasure, which still provoke me as I sigh, longing for the shelter of that home which heaven will give me.¹

The eyes delight in beautiful shapes of different sorts and bright and attractive colours. I would not have these things take possession of my soul. Let God possess it, he who made them all. He made them all very good,² but it is he who is my Good, not they. All day and every day, while I am awake, they are there before my eyes. They allow me no respite such as I am granted in moments of silence when there is no singing and sometimes no sound at all to be heard. For light, the queen of colours, pervades all that I see, wherever I am throughout the day, and by the ever-changing pattern of its rays it entices me

¹ II Cor. 5: 2. ² Gen. 1: 31.

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these things are additional temptations to the eye, made by men who
love the worldly things they make themselves but forget their own
Maker and destroy what he made in them. But, O my God, my
Glory, for these things too I offer you a hymn of thanksgiving. I
make a sacrifice of praise to him who sanctifies me, for the beauty
which flows through men’s minds into their skilful hands comes
from that Beauty which is above their souls and for which my soul
sighs all day and night. And it is from this same supreme Beauty
that men who make things of beauty and love it in its outward
forms derive the principle by which they judge it: but they do not
accept the same principle to guide them in the use they make of it.
Yet it is there, and they do not see it. If only they could see it, they
would not depart from it. They would preserve their strength for
you, not squander it on luxuries that make them weary.

Though I say this and see that it is true, my feet are still caught
in the toils of this world’s beauty. But you will free me, O Lord; I know
that you will free me. For ever I keep your mercies in mind. I am
caught and need your mercy, and by your mercy you will save me
from the snare. Sometimes, if I have not fallen deep into the trap, I
shall feel nothing when you rescue me; but at other times, when I
am fast ensnared, I shall suffer the pain of it.

I must now speak of a different kind of temptation, more dangerous
than these because it is more complicated. For in addition to our
bodily appetites, which make us long to gratify all our senses and our
pleasures and lead to our ruin if we stay away from you by becoming
their slaves, the mind is also subject to a certain propensity to use the
sense of the body, not for self-indulgence of a physical kind, but for
the satisfaction of its own inquisitiveness. This futile curiosity mas-
querades under the name of science and learning, and since it derives
from our thirst for knowledge and sight is the principal sense by
which knowledge is acquired, in the Scriptures it is called gratifica-
tion of the eye. For although, correctly speaking, to see is the proper
function of the eyes, we use the word of the other senses too, when
we employ them to acquire knowledge. We do not say ‘Hear how it

1 Saint Ambrose’s ‘Evening Hymn’; see Book IX, chapter 12.
2 Ps. 24: 15 (25: 15).
3 Ps. 120: 4 (121: 4).