

Commentary on *What is the Ego?*

By Allen Watson

Paragraph 1

The ego is idolatry; the sign of limited and separated self, born in a body, doomed to suffer and to end its life in death. It is the “will” that sees the Will of God as enemy, and takes a form in which it is denied. The ego is the “proof” that strength is weak and love is fearful, life is really death, and what opposes God alone is true. W-pII.12.1:1-3

“The ego is idolatry” (1:1). Idolatry is the worship of an idol, a false god. That is what the ego is; the insane attempt to make real an identity that is apart from God, and intended to replace Him in our awareness. The ego is “the sign of limited and separated self, born in a body, doomed to suffer and to end its life in death” (1:1).

Let’s pay attention here. The ego is not some “thing” inside of us, some sort of evil twin, the dark side of our soul. The ego *is* the whole concept of a separated self that is set apart from “other selves.” Isn’t that exactly what we think we are? A distinct soul, born in a body, struggling through this life and sure to end this life in death? Doesn’t that describe what we think we are? In other words, the “me” that I think I am, a thing separate from and different from you, *that* is the ego! Changing our self-concept from ego to spirit doesn’t just mean that this separate self, which was black, becomes white. It means that this separated self is completely replaced by something far more inclusive, in fact, by something all-inclusive. I cease to be “I” in the way I thought I was.

The ego “is the ‘will’ that sees the Will of God as enemy, and takes a form in which it is denied” (1:2). If what I think of as “I” is to be separate and independent, it cannot be united with the Will of God. The ego *must* see God’s Will as enemy because, to the ego, God is “other,” something different from and separate from itself. Since God is a very powerful “other,” His Will represents a threat, a challenge to the ego’s “will.” Therefore, the form the “will” of the ego takes will always be some form of denial of God’s Will. For instance, you know that a child is beginning to develop a psychological ego when he or she begins to say “no” every time you say “yes” (otherwise known as “the terrible two’s”). The ego is a big “no” to God and His Will.

This ego is precisely what we are *not*. “You are not an ego” (T-14.X.5:5). As we look at what the ego is (or appears to be), let us not be discouraged or depressed by the picture. What we are looking at is not what we are; in fact, it is what we are *not*. This imagined self is the source of all our guilt—and it is unreal, and does not exist.

To find its illusory independence, the ego simply negates God and everything about God. The strength of innocence, gentleness, and love is seen as “weak” and is shunned. Attack is seen instead as strong. “Standing on your own feet” and being “independent” is seen as maturity and strength, and union with others and dependence on God is seen as weakness. The ultimate image of a mighty ego is a lone individual screaming defiance at the entire universe. The ego cannot see nor understand that this lone, limited, and separated self is the very symbol of weakness.

In speaking of this choice we have made to become egos (a choice we can realize only in dreams, never in reality), the Course says:

Here does the Son of God ask not too much, but far too little. He would sacrifice his own identity with everything, to find a little treasure of his own. (T-26.VII.11:7-8)

To learn to listen to the Voice for God instead of the ego means far more than just listening to the little angel on our right shoulder instead of the devil on our left. That concept of things leaves the “me” who listens unchanged, still the same identity, a separated self. To listen to God instead of the ego means letting go entirely of that “little treasure of [my] own,” which is my entire conception of what I am as something apart from God, and instead affirming my “identity with everything” (T-26.VII.11:8).

I was mistaken when I thought I lived apart from God, a separate entity that moved in isolation, unattached, and housed within a body. Now I know my life is God’s, I have no other home, and I do not exist apart from Him. He has no Thoughts that are not part of me, and I have none but those which are of Him. (W-pII.223.1:1-3)

Paragraph 2

The ego is insane. In fear it stands beyond the Everywhere, apart from All, in separation from the Infinite. In its insanity it thinks it has become a victor over God Himself. And in its terrible autonomy it “sees” the Will of God has been destroyed. It dreams of punishment, and trembles at the figures in its dreams; its enemies, who seek to murder it before it can ensure its safety by attacking them. W-pII.12.2:1-5

“The ego is insane” (2:1). To the degree we identify with our egos, we are insane as well, as the Course so often tells us. And we all identify with our egos far more than we realize; indeed, identification with the ego is almost total. The ego is our fundamental assumption, the basis from which we operate all the time. We all see ourselves as limited, separate selves, living in a body, doomed to die with it. This insanity is not our reality, however; our true, shared Self remains sane, and that is our salvation and the ego’s doom.

The ego “stands [in fear] beyond the Everywhere” (2:2). God, and His creation, is all there is. But the ego thinks it is somehow beyond all of that; it rejects God as Creator and tries to imagine itself as something outside of God and His creation. The ego “stands...apart from All” (2:2). How can you be apart from All? All is All. It includes everything. And the ego stands “in separation from the Infinite” (2:2). Same idea. All of these stances are, obviously, wholly imaginary. It is not possible to be separate from the Infinite. But the ego defiantly, and insanely, believes that this is its condition. That is the very definition of the ego. In this light, to believe that one is damned is the height of egoity.

“In its insanity it thinks it has become a victor over God Himself” (2:3). That is what damnation is: it is the assertion, “I have succeeded in thwarting the Will of God.” Guilt is an egoic denial of the power of God’s Love. The thought “I will never learn this Course, I will never become enlightened” is an assertion that your will is more powerful than God’s. If God’s Will is your happiness, then sadness is a proclamation of victory over God.

The Course is telling us that it is insane to think such things are possible. It does not condemn us for thinking them. Rather, it tells us to stop listening to such thoughts. The ego is an impossibility: “The whole purpose of this course is to teach you that the ego is unbelievable and will forever be unbelievable” (T-7.VIII.7:1). God is infinite; He is Everywhere; He is All. If the

ego is a thought that stands beyond God, separate and apart, then the ego is unbelievable. Such a thing cannot be.

This illusion of separation we call the ego, this “terrible autonomy,” seems to show us that we have triumphed over God’s Will for union. What a terrible thing it would be if this were reality! The ego’s very being, if it were real, would be evidence of the most awful guilt imaginable. If I am the ego, then what I am, my very being, is an accusation of murder most foul, for I have wrested my very existence from the destruction of God’s Will. And this is just what we believe in identifying with the ego. This is the primal guilt beneath all our vague, uneasy feelings, all our sense of unworthiness.

It dreams of punishment, and trembles at the figures in its dreams; its enemies, who seek to murder it before it can ensure its safety by attacking them. (2:4)

In the “terrible autonomy” of our identification with the ego, we have placed ourselves at odds with God and the universe. Everyone and everything else is a threat to our autonomy. Our dreams are filled with nightmarish punishment for our “crime.” The ego state is one of acute paranoia; we are afraid of everything. We expect the executioner’s axe to fall at any moment. No one can be trusted. Every figure in our dream is an enemy, and the only option for survival is to kill them before they kill us. The only safety is in attack.

This paranoid frame of mind is inevitable, given the ego’s premise of autonomy. We all experience it to greater or lesser degree; some of us merely hide it better than others. When we get down to it, each of us feels unbearably alone, an outsider, crouched in the shadows of the woods while the rest of the world holds hands and sings around the campfire. That is the inescapable result of the premise of ego autonomy. It is the outcome of what we mistakenly presume ourselves to be.

The good news is that this is not what we are; the aloneness is an illusion, an outrageous impossibility. The ego is forever unbelievable. We are no more apart from God and His creation than a cell in my body is apart from the body itself. We live in God; we move and have our being in God. We are, all of us, making this incredible transition from ego autonomy to a transpersonal unity, the recognition of a higher Whole to which we all belong, intrinsically, a Whole which exists in every part—in you, in me. Nothing can stop this transition, because it is simply the recognition of what has always been so.

Paragraph 3

The Son of God is ego-less. What can he know of madness and the death of God, when he abides in Him? What can he know of sorrow and of suffering, when he lives in eternal joy? What can he know of fear and punishment, of sin and guilt, of hatred and attack, when all there is surrounding him is everlasting peace, forever conflict-free and undisturbed, in deepest silence and tranquillity? W-pII.12.3:1-4

This begins a contrast between the ego and the Son of God, our true Identity. The Son of God, which is what I really am, has no ego! The ego is the sign of a limited and separated self. The Son of God is not limited or separated from God. The Son is unlimited, and coextensive with the Father; wherever God is, the Son is. They are One. There is no ego; no self that is apart from, and held distinct from, God.

Our true Self does not know the madness of the ego; the concept of the death of God (or victory over Him) is inconceivable because the Son lives (abides) in God (3:2). He lives in eternal joy, and does not know sorrow or suffering.

Insanity, God as enemy, sorrow, and suffering are all consequences of the ego delusion. They are as delusional, and as unreal, as the ego itself. Having been locked in this delusion of a separate self for so long, we can barely begin to imagine a state of mind in which these things simply do not exist. Yet that is where the Course is taking us: beyond the ego, beyond the madness, back into the oneness that has always been and will always be. This is our true state of mind, and it calls to us in our isolation, drawing us to return.

In contrast to the ego, our true Self, the Son of God, is surrounded by everlasting peace. Where the ego sees itself at war with the universe, and trembles constantly in fear of attack from every figure in its dreams, the Son of God is “forever conflict-free.” The Son rests forever “undisturbed, in deepest silence and tranquility” (3:4).

When we begin to get in touch with our Self, we experience a taste of that deep, silent tranquility. That is one of the characteristics of the holy instant. There is a peace in the holy instant that beggars description.

There is a silence into which the world can not intrude. There is an ancient peace you carry in your heart and have not lost. There is a sense of holiness in you the thought of sin has never touched. (W-pI.164.4:1-3)

The ego, in isolation from the universe, can never know this peace. It comes only from within our Self, being an attribute of Who we are. It has nothing to do with external circumstance, and is unaffected by any such circumstance. It is part of what we are, together.

Paragraph 4

To know reality is not to see the ego and its thoughts, its works, its acts, its laws and its beliefs, its dreams, its hopes, its plans for its salvation, and the cost belief in it entails. In suffering, the price for faith in it is so immense that crucifixion of the Son of God is offered daily at its darkened shrine, and blood must flow before the altar where its sickly followers prepare to die. W-pII.12.4:1-2

Knowing reality consists simply of *not* seeing illusions. Without illusions to conceal it, reality is self-evident. That is why we “need do nothing.” We don’t have to make reality. We don’t have to make ourselves sinless, or happy, or peaceful. We simply have to stop seeing the thing that obscures reality from our sight: the ego, and everything to do with it.

The list of all the aspects of the ego that we are “not to see” is needful for us, because if the lesson simply said that “to know reality is not to see the ego” we would not be sure what was meant. By listing all the things related to the ego—thoughts, works, acts, laws, beliefs, dreams, hopes, plans for salvation, and the cost it demands of us—we are more likely to understand the full import of what not seeing the ego means. Not just the acts of the ego need to be banished from our sight, but all the things that drive those acts.

I am especially struck with “its plans for salvation.” The ego has many plans for getting us out of the mess we think we are in. But we aren’t really in a mess; we have simply covered over reality with illusions, and the reality is still there. We don’t have to do anything to find it. We don’t need to make plans for our salvation. Indeed, making plans for our salvation just digs the ego rut deeper. We need, as Lesson 337 points out, to understand that “I need do nothing of myself, for I need but accept my Self, my sinlessness, created for me, now already mine, to feel God’s Love protecting me from harm” (W-pII.337.1:6).

In suffering, the price for faith in it [the ego] is so immense that crucifixion of the Son of God is offered daily at its darkened shrine, and blood must flow before the altar where its sickly followers prepare to die.

This is one of the Course's darkest assessments of our ego. It evokes a picture of a primitive, blood-sacrifice religion such as we read about having existed in Central America, where human beings had their hearts ripped from their bodies still beating, and altars had channels cut into them to drain away the flowing blood. It says that our faith in the ego is the cause of suffering as immense and terrifying as that.

For our faith in the ego's illusion of autonomy, of separated identity, we pay an immense price in suffering. Each day we persist in this insane faith, we crucify the Son of God. For the existence of a separated identity demands the death of our unified Identity. As "sickly followers" of this religion (for religion it is), we are all preparing to die as we watch the sacrifice of the holy Son of God. (Of course, the Son of God cannot die; the sacrifice is illusion. But to our minds it is terribly, terribly real.) Our own death will vindicate our faith; it will prove our separation from God.

Although this suffering is not real in the final sense, it is real to us. And one of the things the Course asks of us, in order to bring about our deliverance from the ego, is that we honestly assess the cost of our belief in it. What does it cost me to hold a grievance? What does it cost me to hate? What does it cost me to insist on being right in an argument? What does it cost me to hold on to my view of myself as a victim? What does it cost me to hold on to my guilt? What does it cost me to hold on to my perception of sin in my brothers and sisters?

We need to count the cost of our belief in the ego. The Course says:

You will not accept the cost of fear if you recognize it. (T-11.V.10:3)

The ego is trying to teach you how to gain the whole world and lose your own soul. The Holy Spirit teaches that you cannot lose your soul and there is no gain in the world, for of itself it profits nothing. To invest without profit is surely to impoverish yourself, and the overhead is high. Not only is there no profit in the investment, but the cost to you is enormous. For this investment costs you the world's reality by denying yours, and gives you nothing in return. (T-12.VI.1:1-5)

You must learn the cost of sleeping, and refuse to pay it. (T-12.VI.5:2)

Belief in sin needs great defense, and at enormous cost. All that the Holy Spirit offers must be defended against and sacrificed. For sin is carved into a block out of your peace, and laid between you and its return. (T-22.V.2:6-8)

We pay an immense price in suffering in order to hold on to our tattered, treasured ego. We lose awareness of our real Identity to hold on to an imagined one that we can never make real. Once we see this, once we recognize the insanity of it, we will no longer be willing to accept it. Once we see what the ego demands of us, we will refuse to pay the price, because we will realize that the ego is not what we really want. But first, very often, we must confront the horror of what we have done. We must look at that altar dripping with blood and realize we have been choosing this.

It is not difficult to relinquish judgment. But it is difficult indeed to try to keep it. The teacher of God lays it down happily the instant he recognizes its cost. All of the ugliness he sees about him is its outcome. All of the pain he looks upon is its result. All of the loneliness and sense of loss; of passing time and growing hopelessness; of sickening despair and fear of death; all these have come of it. And now he knows that these things need not be. Not one is true. For he has given up their cause, and they, which never were but the effects of his mistaken choice, have fallen from him. Teacher of God, this step will bring you peace. Can it be difficult to want but this? (M-10.6:1-11)

Paragraph 5

Yet will one lily of forgiveness change the darkness into light; the altar to illusions to the shrine of Life Itself. And peace will be restored forever to the holy minds which God created as His Son, His dwelling place, His joy, His love, completely His, completely one with Him. W-pII.12.5:1-2

The “darkened shrine” of the ego is flooded with light; the bloody altar to death is transformed into “the shrine to Life Itself.” How? By “one lily of forgiveness.” I think of a magical, fantasy tale, where the heroine or hero enters the black, forbidding temple of the evil god, carrying only a single flower. With great trepidation she approaches the altar and lays the pure, white lily upon it, and in a flash, the entire scene is transformed.

Forgiveness is that “magical.” It isn’t magic, though, it’s a miracle. “The holiest of all the spots on earth is where an ancient hatred has become a present love” (T-26.IX.6:1). That is the miracle forgiveness works. I have seen it with my own eyes. I have watched a relationship filled with blood and bitterness transformed into sweet, mutual devotion—through forgiveness. This is no idle theory, no idealistic fantasy; this works.

Forgiveness undoes the ego. The blackest of blackness that the ego has manifested becomes flooded with light when touched by forgiveness. We need not fear to look at our ego’s darkness; there is nothing forgiveness cannot heal.

How is it that simple forgiveness can do this? The guilt and fear induced by our belief in the ego’s reality is the cause of all our suffering. It is our mad wish to be a separated self that has caused us to see God, and all the universe, as our enemies, and filled us with nightmares of punishment. Forgiveness shows us that what we think we did to ourselves has not occurred. There is no cause for our guilt. Forgiveness releases us from the dread of punishment, and brings us to realize that our oneness with God is undisturbed. We are still “His dwelling place, His joy, His love, completely His, completely one with Him.” And in that knowledge, peace is restored forever.

When forgiveness washes over us, we realize that “I can be free of suffering today” (W-pII.340.Heading). It is the ego thought in our mind that paints unrest over the eternal calm of our mind as God created it. Letting go of that thought, even for an instant, brings immediate peace. The thought of separation, of an independent identity, was the original mistake:

That one error, which brought truth to illusion, infinity to time, and life to death, was all you ever made. Your whole world rests upon it. Everything you see reflects it...

...You do not realize the magnitude of that one error. It was so vast and so completely incredible that from it a world of total unreality *had* to emerge. (T-18.I.4:4-6; 5:2-3)

Forgiveness shows us that what we think we have done has no real consequence. It removes the barriers to our awareness of God. That terrible mistake, upon which our whole world rests, was inconsequential; our union with God remains forever uninterrupted. We rest, now and ever, in His peace.