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The Rejection of Conventional Transcendence

Often, humanity has depicted itself as standing on the periphery of godhood, touched by barely enough divinity to understand what it is and the reality which it inhabits. This has, over time, brought us the awareness of the inner workings of much of creation, such as how clouds are formed, how to cultivate agriculture, and how to organize the brimming, chaotic masses of humanity into nations and governments. We've just recently (on a relative anthropological scale) begun to use and standardize such knowledge, and are still working out the finer details of many of these processes. Even with all our developed sophistication, our inner divinity seems to continue to escape us, even with our insistence to perceive our contemporary selves as the most enlightened and knowledgeable generation that has walked the Earth. We now suffer, and wonder why and from where our suffering comes. We declare unfairness, as though we were promised any justice in the first place any time soon, or from any source but ourselves. We continually infight as to which path is best for mitigating our suffering and administering/defining the boundaries of justice, and splinter off en masse into different religions and ideologies to sate our particular brand of enlightenment. Luckily, when the world was still young and distractions were few, our progenitors decided to sit down and codify their beliefs, having the time, drive, and clarity that we so greatly lack to perforate the veil of Maya and, depending on the culture of origin, offer their own flavor of guidance on these matters. With the entropy so interwoven into our existence and the despicable things that happen as a result of it, we can direct our attention to

these texts to combat our own petulance, as well as divine (pun partially intended) some meaning to reality in spite of the bad. In this work, I hope to synthesize some sort of holistic message taken from their spirit. In short, “What’s the point? How can we create meaning without destroying the self?”.

Contempt for our current situation is understandable, as we have to grapple with our own mortality, the problems that come with the gift and guilt of life, the reconciliation of our own existence with that of others, and the aspirant idea that all this together must at least mean something. This contempt, for lack of a better word, is explored with some depth in the Epic of Gilgamesh, which deals principally with the weight of mortality. A text attributed to the collective spiritual and artistic precepts of the Mesopotamian people, the plot of the Epic deals with the inner crisis of Gilgamesh: the ruler of Uruk, an ardent warrior, demigod, tyrant (at first, at least), and transformative hero figure. Gilgamesh’s story, after gaining a friend from an enemy, subsequently losing him forever to the underworld, culminates in his questing to discover the secret to immortality, but after a long journey, fails when a serpent (symbolic of the physical struggle that makes dictionary-definition immortality impossible) steals the herb of immortality away from him. And so, the text ends on a surprisingly somber note, with Gilgamesh accepting his own mortality. In turn, he finds that immortality cannot be gained physically; rather, immortality is available to humanity only through the consequences of its deeds. So, we must interact with the temporary-physical to attain the enduring-spiritual, and it is in this idea that the groundwork is laid for further musing.

We move on from our basest fears in mortality to concepts with a bit more substance: questioning how a good death is composed, and our worries on how to live life well. Building off of these is the Iliad, an account of the Trojan War dating from before Greek Antiquity. This

work, being about war, portrays a Hellene warrior culture, and the cultural implications of this allow the narrative of the Iliad to emphasize glory above all virtues. The concept of a glorious death was, to a certain point in history, inherent to many world cultures (i.e. Germanic cultures, pre-WW2 Japan, various Native American traditions, etc.), and plays a rather central role in defining the morality of the work. To add context to such a value, one can turn to Yukio Mishima, a post-WW2 Japanese author, artist, hellenophile, and military coup leader whose work largely dealt with the concept of glory in death. In an interview years before he eventually committed ritual seppuku, he stated: "Death in the modern age, whether by illness or accident, is devoid of drama. We live in an age where there is no heroic death…", extolling his deep (and somewhat relatable) dissatisfaction with the world and an infatuation with meaning-making through the final act of death, mirrored in Hellenic antiquity. He continues, "Therefore, in my own work, I naturally consider any so-called "weariness of life"... patently vulgar… Human beings aren't strong enough to live and die only for themselves…we have ideals…We can only act for the sake of something. We soon tire of living only for ourselves. It is necessary follows [*sic*] that we also need to die for something." (Odysseus, timestamp 4:32). This is the driving force that propels the male mortal characters of the Iliad, until the eventual death of Patroclus, friend of the protagonist, legendary warrior Achilles. Achilles, grieving over Patroclus, begins to question the worth of glory in death, and begins to reject it as an indulgent mistake on the part of mortals. His loss-fueled rage consumes the battlefield, and threatens to do the same to him, as his self-destructive tendencies ironically strengthen alongside his fervency against death/loss. After getting revenge by slaying Hector, who killed Patroclus, Achilles recognizes his own glory and eventually (after the events of the Iliad) achieves his own glorious death, but not before paradoxically understanding that both a quiet life, full of love and meaningful acts, as well as a

self-sacrificing glorious death, done selflessly for another, can both be equally meaningful or meaningless. It should be noted, however, that there is, in both "good" deaths, an aspect of selflessness.

In attempting to define a distilled perception of the world by utilizing these texts, so far, extrapolating from Gilgamesh and continuing on to the Iliad, we can agree that either kind of death yields the same result, provided a life is lived well, so now we move on from discussing death to discussing what comes before it. The Bhagavad Gita and the Dhammapada, lumped together out of necessity and due to the broad overlapping of the core concepts of their respective religions, both speak on the substance of life. Hinduism and Buddhism take great concern with the concept of suffering, and both resonate greatly with Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian aspect of human existence (taken from *Birth of Tragedy*). The Dionysian, as opposed to the worldly Apollonian spirit, wishes to separate itself from the material and join into a more "pluralistic" existence, with connection to the unworldly and "greater than" individual existence. A few years ago, I first read the Gita and was left mentally incapacitated for about an hour; I felt nothing but visceral surprise. This surprise, which could also be described as disgust or the feeling that many of the core concepts of the Gita were at odds with my own, wasn't truly understood by me until recently, but has heavily influenced the overall trajectory of this essay. I find that which wants to separate from this plane of existence and diminishes that which is most human to be deeply troubling. There exists in the Gita and Dhammapada ideals that are intrinsically and venomously paradoxical: the concept of nishkama karma, the "enlightenment paradox", and the Atman-Brahaman dichotomy. I must, before delving, iterate that I have immense respect for Buddhism and Hinduism, as they have broadened the scope of human spirituality and societal flourishing immeasurably. I must also acknowledge that Hinduism is a

highly regional religion, and changes almost completely in its features when moving across India and the world from region to region, and so I may never be able to fully grasp its tenets as an outsider.

The concept of nishkama karma (action without attachments) presents the first leg of this paradox. Krishna teaches Arjuna about the duties of dharma alongside detachment from the fruits of his labor, but intrinsically this creates the desire for desirelessness. An individual soul is, when logistically working through the mechanics of this teaching, trapped in a loop of self-monitorship, which ironically reinforces the ego-individual consciousness they hope to transcend, creating the first paradox and a personal form of masochism for the devotee. In the same vein, the Dhammapada promises that suffering can be eliminated by detachment in this "enlightenment paradox", declaring that to end desire is to end suffering, but you must first desire the end of desire, then desire to not want to desire the end of desire, and then it's turtles all the way down. Secondly, the idea of a collective soul (Brahman) being united with the individual souls (representations of Atman) acts to layer these impossibilities atop each other. If all individual souls are manifestations of the same cosmic awareness, personal pain becomes both utterly real and total illusion. This teaching does not improve human experience; rather, it destroys it, transforming all individual effort, love, loss, and achievement into a caricature. Most poisonous of all is the unending yuga cycle in the core of these teachings. Even if one could reach moksha/nirvana, the flat circle of time would keep turning. The "enlightened" being attempts to conquer personal anguish, only to see it endlessly replicated over eternity; liberation becomes the most essential achievement attainable, but it is ultimately useless in the face of unending repetition. All these paradoxes mark the cognitively dissonant Dionysian spirit encased in Eastern philosophy; we become estranged from our own saliency and materiality through this

vein of thought and begin to regard creation and all things in it as mere distraction. Something offensively Gnostic and pessimistic emanates from this rejection of the material, the claims that reality itself is flawed and corrupt, that suffering must be avoided, and that we require escapism rather than fervent engagement. A close friend once explained to me the beauty and complexity of Buddhist meditation (which can be described as the dissolution of self into the universal), and I felt that same visceral revulsion I'd experienced with the Gita, and we stayed up arguing for hours before eventually settling the matter with a footrace. In any case, here was a man describing the systematic destruction of everything that made him uniquely himself as though it were the highest achievement possible. The individual personality, with all its fierceness, dissolves into a borscht of grey, universal consciousness, and in turn loses any salient meaning it may have had as individual, and creates not transcendence but the greatest conformity perpetrated. While I do acknowledge that the Buddhist "skillful means" defense treats these teachings as tools rather than absolutes, and that some perceive Krishna as advocating worldly action through "ego-reduction" rather than world-rejection. But this apologetic maneuvering only reveals a flaw: if detachment is just a means to better engagement, why not embrace directness from the start instead of this elaborate metaphysical detour? Even granting these charitable interpretations, the core problem remains; these traditions still require us to diminish our potent individuality rather than intensify it. The need for centuries of scholarly rescue-operations proves that something essential is corrupted when our own agency, cultivated and preened for millenia, has to be subjugated for a collective "higher consciousness".

We can double back now to the Epic of Gilgamesh, which gave us the most simple, yet elegant, truth: immortality (or rather, in the context of this discussion, transcendence and human flourishing) lies not in escaping or defeating the struggle in the physical world but in engaging

with it so intensely and savagely that our deeds echo beyond our mortal frames. The heroes of the Iliad chose glory in death not as an anxious need to escape the world, but as the highest form of interaction with it, for a cause that was more universal than themselves, but also a cause that was worldly. In this, we can see that "the point" that can be gleaned from these texts is not to wish to transcend our humanity and mortality, but to demand from ourselves transformation within the confines we are given. Reality is not broken; it is the eternal proving ground for the mortal soul and the trajectory of its evolution across generations, and the reason for it is purely due to the appreciation one intrinsically has for creation once created.

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