

Selfishness, Self-Sacrifice, & Self-Realization The Journey from other to Other

By
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Those of us old enough to remember iconic TV shows like *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *Father Knows Best*, and *Leave it to Beaver*, recall an idealized characterization of the American family that rarely, if ever, existed in real life. I never cared to watch them, even as a kid, because I just couldn't relate. They bored me. If anything, they only made me think that my family must not be normal, which it wasn't. So I preferred the next generation of more sophisticated shows about broken and dysfunctional families, like *The Big Valley*, depicting a strong female lead raising four children in the wild west, including her dead husband's illegitimate son; or the single mother in *The Partridge Family*, with a brood of kids constantly bickering with each other; or *The Courtship of Eddie's Father*, starring Bill Bixby as a tenderhearted single dad trying to fill his deceased wife's empty shoes. These seemed more like real families with real issues that I could actually relate to.

But the misfit family I best connected with was easily *The Addams Family*. You may recall this creepy kooky clan of misfits that, no matter how odd they are as individuals, seem to fit perfectly together. There's the hyperactive wild-eyed Gomez and his corpse like wife, Morticia, along with their morose daughter Wednesday, full of woe, who carries about a headless doll named Marie Antoinette, and their son Pugsley, who has a pet octopus named Aristotle. There's also uncle Fester, fond of being tortured and blowing things up, a seven foot tall butler named Lurch, a crazy old witch everyone affectionately calls "Grandmama," and a disembodied hand creeping around the house named Thing. On occasion, the Addams are visited by other relatives even stranger than themselves, my favorite of which by far is Cousin Itt.

Itt is three feet tall and covered with hair from head to foot. Were it not for the sunglasses Itt sometimes wears, it would be impossible to tell Itt's front from Itt's back. Itt also speaks a language all Itt's own, a squirrel like chattering that only the Addams can understand. We can only guess at Itt's gender based upon Itt's unfailing success with the ladies, but we can't be certain Itt isn't female, or androgynous, or a hermaphrodite. Although Itt does have Itt's own miniature room in the family mansion, Itt's usually off traveling, gallivanting around the world with women, partying or working successfully as an opera singer, an actor, or Itt's choice between a zoo director and a zoo attraction. In addition to being a real party animal, Itt is the person the family turns to most often for advice. As an Itt of the world, Itt has become respected for Itt's insight and wisdom and is easy to talk to, though somewhat difficult for most of us to understand. So, with the exception of Itt's slightly and understandably neurotic fear of hair loss, Itt is just about the best relative anyone could ever ask for. And that's the great thing about the Addams family; they live in a world where nobody is ever objectified, where even Itt's and Things are considered part of the family.

They exemplify what the great Jewish philosopher and mystic, Martin Buber was getting at in his classic work, *I and You*. In it he suggests that whenever we say, "I," we also imply either a "you" or an "it." That is, whenever we distinguish ourselves from another or others, we see the other as either a subject or an object, as a person, or a thing. Whenever we say *I* we're really saying, *I-You* or *I-It*, depending upon how we're relating to the world. He also distinguished between *experiencing* the world and *participating* in the world. In seeking to experience the world, he suggested, we turn it into an object, attempting to collect experiences like we do knowledge or things. But when participating in the world, we are one with it and it is one with us. Participating in the world makes us present, whereas experiencing the world, he says, "has only a past and no present."¹ In other words, he goes on to say, "insofar as a human being makes do with the things that he experiences and uses, he lives in the past, and his moment has no presence. He has nothing but objects; but objects consist in having been."²

So here's a mundane example. There's probably some place you regularly travel to with no problem, but you couldn't tell anyone how to get there because you've never paid any attention to street names and landmarks along your route. You haven't experienced the trip as a series of street names and other objects that you pass, and are in your past, but allow your body and mind to respond to wherever you are almost without thought. In brief, you're participating in the journey, not experiencing it.

Being present in the moment, in this place and time, can only happen, according to Buber, when we relate to the world as a You and not an It. Another, more noble example is *love*. If we experience love as a personal feeling, we objectify it as something in us that belongs to us. But when we participate in such a relationship, love is not in us, we are in love. As Buber put it, "Feelings dwell in [us], but [we] dwell in [our] love."³ So to truly be present, we must love others and the world. Or, as Buber described it, love is a "responsibility of an I for a You."⁴

As esoteric and mystical as Buber's 1923 philosophy might sound, it seems to compliment what psychology is now telling us about human development; Namely, that we grow, or should grow, from a state of self-centeredness and self-interest, to a greater awareness of others and our responsibilities toward them. At the start of life we are necessarily and understandably very self-centered. This is so because as infants our survival is extremely dependent upon others to care for us and meet our needs, and we must scream and cry until our demands are met. It's a stage when we

¹ Buber, Martin, *I and Thou*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann, Charles Scribner's Sons, U.S., 1970, p. 63.

² *Ibid.*, p. 63f.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.66.

see others only in terms of our own needs and desires. Others are valuable only inasmuch as they satisfy us. It's tolerable, understandable, and even attractive when infants and toddlers behave this way, but once a child is 5 or 6, such behavior becomes annoying and inappropriate. And when adults continue to think and act as if others exist only for their own amusements, self-interests, and purposes, they can rightly be considered narcissistic, sadistic, and inhumane.

Freud called this childlike mindset the *Id*, which seeks the immediate gratification of its own desires and instinctive impulses, without any thought of others or the long-term consequences. The philosopher Kierkegaard called it the *aesthetic* stage for this same reason, because it overemphasizes one's own immediate physical pleasures without regard for the needs of others. The Buddha called it *indulgence*, emphasizing its focus on sensual pleasures, something he had lots of experience with at the beginning of his life as a pampered prince. Transactional Analysis, which integrates a variety of disciplines, refers to it as the *archaeopsyche*, or, more simply, as the *child-ego state*, a state in which adults continue to think and behave like they did as children, often as if their needs and desires are all that matter. And the father of Developmental psychology, Lawrence Kohlberg, called it the *pre-conventional* stage, describing an egocentric stage that has little concern for social convention, norms, mores, or values; with little concern, that is, for others.

Other, more contemporary, developmentalists describe this stage in similar ways. One of my favorites, Robert Kegan, a Harvard psychologist, divides this phase of life into two stages. The first is the *incorporated self*, when we are first born and can't distinguish ourselves from the world or anybody in it. When we are first born we are the whole world. Just as soon as we lay down a few neural pathways, however, and begin to become aware of our environment, we become, what he calls, an *impulsive self*, which, like Freud's *Id*, Kierkegaard's *aesthetic stage*, Buddha's *Indulgence*, TA's *child-ego state*, and Kohlberg's *pre-conventional* level, is based upon that immediate satisfaction of one's one desires.

Thus, this first stage of human development is what I have come to summarize simply as *selfishness*. I'm particularly indebted for this summation to Carol Gilligan, a protégé of Kohlberg's who argued that his research focused too much on a male perspective, resulting in an emphasis on universal principles. Women, she said, have a morality that is based more upon our relationships with others, which, I think, is much more in line with what Buber was getting at in *I and Thou*. When little boys have a dispute while playing a game together, for example, they will argue about the rules until one party ends up disqualified or unsatisfied. Little girls, in the same situation, will often just quit playing the game rather than risk leaving anyone out.

So Gilligan describes the focus of the first stage of development as “caring for the self in order to ensure survival.”⁵ And I would suggest that throughout our male dominated human history there have been many women, in particular, who haven’t gotten beyond this stage because, in our patriarchal world, they have never been able to truly secure their own survival. In other words, there are and have been a lot of women who, even as adults, continue to almost solely concern themselves with their own survival. They often see others, again, as the instruments of their own needs. But this, to me, seems as necessary and understandable as it does for infants who must also depend upon others for their survival. In an environment that gives one little other choice, infant or adult, selfishness must become a way of life.

But most women do not stay here, precisely because they are so naturally relationship oriented. Men are often complimented as “men of principle,” and often think it is enough to take a stand based upon “the principle of the thing.” Women, on the other hand, are less willing to damage their real relationships merely for the sake of an intangible principle. Hurting others becomes a source of guilt and shame. So, often out of remorse, they transition into the second stage of development, during which, according to Gilligan they begin to sacrifice their own needs to care for others. Whether or not this is truly innate to the feminine psyche, or if it too is the result of a patriarchal society that requires its women to sacrifice their own needs and desires, I do not know. What I do know is that in our culture women, in particular, are rewarded most if they become caretakers, putting the needs of others first.

Practically speaking, then, this second stage becomes a form of social security for women. If they want to move beyond mere survival mode, they can receive the benefits of society so long as they accept their proper roll as caretakers and second-class citizens. And for a lot of us, male or female, sacrificing ourselves for a little social security seems a fair trade. This is why I choose to call this second stage *self-sacrificing*, because all of us, regardless of our gender, become willing to give up much of our own authenticity and power in order to receive the benefits of society. The morality of the self-sacrificing stage is collective. It is a social morality, a bandwagon morality. Right and wrong are considered in terms of what everyone else thinks and does. The self-sacrificing stage discourages individuality, uniqueness, and innovation. It is a horde mentality, that Kohlberg called the *conventional* stage because those at this level adhere strictly to social conventions. He also described it as the law and order stage, meaning the height of morality is considered being a good law abiding citizen. This might sound good at the outset, but what is one to do in light of unjust laws that legalize slavery, segregation, and inequality against minorities, women, and gays? What about those who engage in Civil Disobedience? Are they wrong because they violate such laws? Are others right because they don’t?

⁵ Gilligan, Carol, *In a Different Voice*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1982, p. 74.

Obviously, then, the self-sacrificing stage largely benefits society and the status quo, and it behooves the greater culture to instill this mindset and morality in its citizenry. Bandwagon ethics is the glue that holds most societies together. This is probably why the dominant religion in our culture reveres a child who is willing to sacrifice his very life for his patriarch. Kierkegaard called it the *ethical* stage, because those at this level ascribe to social ethics, customs, and mores. Buddha went so far as to call it the *ascetic* stage because one denies oneself of every comfort and pleasure.

But, again, I like to call it *self-sacrificing* because it better connotes the idea that those at this stage, in stark contrast to the selfish stage, end up giving up their own authentic thoughts, feelings, and desires in favor of the what the wider culture expects them to think, feel, and desire. In our culture, we are taught such sacrifice is noble and good, and we are often made to feel guilty for seeking our own interests. It is a codependent stage in which we lose ourselves in everyone around us. Thus, Kegan refers to it as the *Interpersonal Self*, because one is defined by the others in ones group, be it a gang, peer group, nation, religion, ethnicity, or so on.

Yet psychology tells us there is a higher stage of development that is neither *selfish* nor *self-sacrificing*. In fact, Buddha referred to it as the *Middle Way*, meaning it is neither over-indulgent, nor ascetic renunciation, but a combination of both. It neither seeks to fulfill its own desires at the cost of everyone and everything else, nor does it sacrifice its own needs for the sake of everyone else. This is so because at this highest stage, all selves are valued, including one's own. Kohlberg called it the *post-conventional* stage because it transcends cultural values and laws in favor of principles, like justice and equality, that must be universally applied to everyone. Thus, Carol Gilligan defines it as a *relational stage* because, in her words, it "focuses on the dynamics of relationships and dissipates the tension between selfishness and responsibility through a new understanding of the interconnection between other and self."⁶ And Robert Kegan, quite profoundly, calls it the *Interindividual Self* because one at this stage of development understands, quite literally, the worth and dignity of every person. It recognizes that certain rights are universal, not personal; that I deserve to have my basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, security, and freedom met, not because I am special, but because I am human, and so does every other human being, if not every other being. It also understands that it is immoral for me to meet my own needs at the expense of others, and that if I have my needs met, I must strive to make certain every other person has her needs met too. Thus, I choose, without further need for explanation, to call this highest stage of development, *self-realization*, the stage when we realize the value of every self, and of Selfhood itself.

And so this brings us back to Martin Buber's *I and You*, the notion that every time we think or say *I*, we either objectify others, or recognize our relationship to them, our interdependence with all beings and Being, with all others and Other.

⁶ Ibid.

Love becomes, as he said, “responsibility of an I for a You,” of a Self for a Self. The fictional Addams family accomplishes this by including the Itts and Things of the world into their hearts and hearth. But there is another family, a real family that also does this—the Unitarian Universalist family. In our family, we include everyone, no matter their personal beliefs, background, or lifestyle. They are welcomed merely because they are persons, persons of worth and dignity, persons who are part of our interdependent web of existence. In our family of misfits, we never say *I* at the sake of *You*. We understand equity in human relations; that my needs and your needs are of equal importance. Unitarian Universalism is a faith based upon the very principles Martin Buber laid out in *I and You*, and demonstrates the kind of relationships, morality, and love, religious founders like Jesus and Buddha, Philosophers like Kierkegaard, and a slew of developmental psychologists all say humanity looks like when at its best. Unitarian Universalism is a gift. It is our gift. But it is also the gift we must give to the world, it is the gift *I* must give to *You*, if we are to transform it into a true human family wherein every person and every being is treated with equity, justice, compassion, and dignity. It is the gift that can transform our world from an *It* into a *You*.