

**PSYCHOLOGY, FOLKLORE,  
CREATIVITY AND  
THE HUMAN DILEMMA**

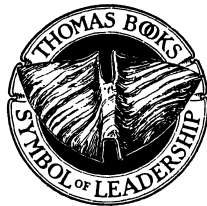


# PSYCHOLOGY, FOLKLORE, CREATIVITY AND THE HUMAN DILEMMA

*By*

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## PREFACE

*Was not the eye alike the sun  
The sun it never could behold  
Was not in us God's own force  
How could we cherish what is  
godly.*

*Waer' nicht das Auge snnenhaft,  
Die Sonne Koennt' es nie erblicken,  
Laeg nicht in uns des Gottes eigne Kraft  
Wie koennt' uns Goettliches  
entzuecken.*

J. W. Goethe (1963)

A preface must be friendly and kind in order to encourage us to read on and, at the same time, it has to prepare the reader for what comes beyond it. A welcoming and warm invitation to visit wider worlds—often expressed better with genuine humor than with stern exhortations—will hopefully entice the readers to open themselves up to ever new ideas. Such an invitation is likely to be far more effective if it reassures us that the prof-fered ideas or insights become valid only if and when we find their twins deeply hidden within our own heart. They then do not want to be loved and appreciated only for themselves, but they will also persistently and passion-ately ask for meaningful, generous, courageous, unselfish and yet unfamiliar actions.

With a few exceptions, I shall not mention the myths and fairy tales dis-cussed in my *Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales* (1973), nor shall I dwell on the origin and usefulness of these stories in psychotherapy. Instead, I will emphasize ultimate human concerns such as “meaning and meaninglessness”; “authenticity and inauthenticity”; “isolation, relatedness, and love”; “polar and paradoxical features in our earthly existence”; “confrontation with death”; and “the challenge of freedom.” In this endeavor, I borrowed some ideas from my book on *Existentialism and Folklore* (1994). In that book, I illustrated various basic “existential tenets” with stories taken from folklore, while at the same time, I used existential concepts to shed new light on the meaning of these stories. I expressed my concern with the dehumanizing influences of the “spirit” of technology, a concern that has kept on growing ever since. This concern is not so much with the actual achievements of tech-

nology itself, which perhaps (in addition to its more ominous results such as the atomic weapons) has brought us some very welcome gifts that need not be rejected or spurned. The concern is mainly with the blind, unnecessary, and unjustified, wholesale acceptance of the “spirit,” of the “philosophic presuppositions” of technology that is contributing to a progressive fragmentation of our psyche and to the devaluation, if not complete loss, of our subjectivity. With alarm, I now shift my focus towards several fundamental and eminently practical questions. I also endeavor to examine carefully and appreciate the beliefs or ideas contained in simple tales, as well as in sophisticated stories that are dealing with our deepest concerns, and to do so by avoiding all presuppositions as radically as possible.

Freeing oneself from presuppositions, however, does not imply any continuing, libertine, or agnostic detachment; it does not mean that one has to ever avoid committing oneself to any definite conclusions, or that one must never take a firm stand. Freedom consists far more in presenting impressions, ideas, and values in such a way that the reader or listener remains entirely independent, except for feeling challenged to find his or her own truth. Kierkegaard was always a passionate master in this. However, still fearful that he would not be understood in his endeavor to encourage his readers to find “*the truth that is truth for me*,” he somewhat humorously cautioned that there might come a sad day when some fine professor would ignorantly decide to give a course on “Kierkegaard’s teaching.” Indeed, truth is only what we must ultimately come to experience and affirm as a truth within ourselves.

Literature contains valuable and important information pertaining to the origin, the meaning, the usefulness, and the aims of folklore (including myths, epic poems, and fairy tales). Much of this information applies also to related modern literary products. These may be based on ancient themes, Tolkien’s (1979) *Lord of the Rings*, Wagner’s (Cross, 1952) *Ring of the Nibelungs*, or Hesse’s (1971) *Siddharta*; or these works may be entirely new creations, for example, *The Cloven Viscount* by Calvino (1999), Ibsen’s (1966) *Per Gynt*, *No Exit* by Sartre (1962), or Strindberg’s (1984) *Dream Play*. They may be existential novels that deal powerfully with various ultimate human concerns such as *The Trial* by Kafka (1964), *The Glass Bead Game* (1970) and *Steppenwolf* (1990) by Hesse, *The Stranger* and *La Plague* by Camus (1947), or *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* by Robert M. Riesig (1974). They may be movies or TV plays. The film *2001* captured some basic existential problems pertaining to human subjectivity; and the TV series of space ventures often deal with issues of science and human life, except that they usually aim more for the unusual and spectacular than for genuine existential questions.

A presuppositionless approach to the above writings demands that we step back temporarily from all habitual, religious, moral, social, and scientific

standards that could affect our comments and conclusions in regard to their origins, their meanings, their value, and their aims. Such an approach enables us to examine dispassionately the objections to, and justifications for, many current interpretations. It invites us to examine the stories' relationship to our current cultural situation. And it challenges us to explore their role in terms of maintaining and strengthening our identity as *human* beings. Coming from this kind of presuppositionless approach, we may hopefully discover an Archimedean point to which we then may want to hitch our existence, and which may show us what our stance must be, if we sincerely decide to become and be authentic human beings. If we look at the world with unselfish love and uncompromising honesty, we may discover exciting meanings and powerful support in the creative works I have chosen to include in this book. I believe they are profoundly interesting, esthetically pleasing, and most of all—if we allow them to do their work—helpful in enabling us to confront the horrendous dangers that currently face humanity, both outwardly and inwardly.

All of us who grew up in a Western world which prides itself in its rationality and achievements wish for a life of continued, undisturbed prosperity, peace, enjoyment, and happiness. Thus we are inclined to ignore any views, any warning of Cassandra that imply our existence is beset with extremely troublesome ambiguities and dangers. Like the Trojans, we are largely blind to these, even when we are faced daily with evidence of ever-increasing, unsolved global threats. Thus, in this preface, I want to remind the reader that while we human beings do indeed—and quite rightly—long for *happiness and pleasure*, we cannot achieve them passively, nor can we maintain them forcefully simply by legislating some big program. Appreciating and eagerly striving for happiness requires the simultaneous acceptance of life's unavoidable *paradoxes*. Dealing with them requires openness to *creativity*. Yet, we can only attain the ability to become open to creativity—whether actively or as receivers—in our *genuine, unselfish caring* for others. The depth and degree of such genuineness and unselfishness, however, is revealed only when we translate our valuable ideas or insights into *authentic, concrete actions*.

In this preface, I also hope to help the reader to recognize that the five steps: “genuine experiencing and enjoying,” “insightful openness to paradoxes,” “creating,” “unselfish caring,” and “commitment to action,” are intimately interwoven. Attempts to simplify our understanding of human life by ignoring any one of these five steps are doomed to failure. A very ascetic person may be inclined to view the healthy appreciation and enjoyment of “earthly” pleasures as far “inferior” to his or her ability to recognize the paradoxes of life, inferior to lofty creative endeavors, inferior to loving unselfishly, and inferior to acting courageously. Yet, ignorance and avoidance of the pleasures or joys available in our earthly existence will be as deadly to our

role as “whole” human beings as would be denying the paradoxes of life, as would be neglecting our own creativity, as would be ignoring our neighbor, and as would be refusing to stand up for what we believe in. Those who reject and depreciate all worldly pleasures in the quest for unselfish love and for an utopia-based reformation of the world, may find themselves just as disappointed as those who in a blind and frantic search for pleasure and happiness avoid the risks involved in genuine, caring, and committed actions. Both will eventually be as disillusioned as those who, after having gained the most wonderful and profound intellectual or creative insights, end up doing nothing to translate at least some of these insights into concrete deeds that affect positively our endangered earth and its inhabitants.

Focusing on any one of these five steps must, therefore, include a keen awareness of the nature and essential importance of each of the other four steps. Such a demand may, at first, seem excessive and frustrating. Yet, it is the only way of validating and furthering any truly genuine insight and meaningful “growth.” Please note that in this context, the term “growth” has a connotation that differs somewhat from today’s habitual usage. The latter can refer to increased knowledge, to greater wealth, to the augmentation of the gross national product, or to improved skills. In this context, however, growth does not refer to an accumulation of goods or qualities, but to getting ever closer to one’s authentic Self. Outward growth—whether evident in the ability to enjoy more things, in reaching deeper insights, in increased creativity, in profound caring for others, or in having an impact on the outside world—would then be, at best, secondary to the authenticity resulting from being closer to the Self.<sup>1</sup>

Understanding and enjoying literature that deals with basic human concerns is valuable activity. Achieving amazing psychological and philosophical insights into life’s paradoxes is enlightening. Being encouraged to further our own creative impulses and skills can be greatly enriching. Becoming aware of the needs and wants of other beings is enormously important. What we gain as a result of all this are ever-richer, esthetic experiences, finer feelings, new ideas, and a deeper awareness of our ultimate concerns. As a result of all this, we find ourselves reminded increasingly of the actions these experiences suggest, inspire, and demand. It is crucial that at this point, at this

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1. As a teenager, I read with awe and admiration the *Divine Comedy of Dante* (1833), and pictured in my mind the saved souls in Paradise sitting in nine enormously wide circles surrounding the Supreme Light, namely the Trinity. They sat there, not just for a three-hour show, not for a day, not for a month, not for a few years, not for trillions of years, but for *eternity* (which indeed seemed a fairly long time!!). Fortunately, I was not yet sufficiently programmed by my logical and rational social surroundings to ever question the perpetual beatitude of all these myriads of saved souls. My feeling was clearly that they were all blessed, happy, experiencing their unique identity, and that they would never suffer from boredom. Was this just my naive ignorance or was it innocent wisdom? Maybe it was a little bit of both.



very threshold, we do not hesitate or stop. We must not confine our new experiences, feelings, and insights within the borders of our everyday world. This is risky because translating these experiences into our concrete, everyday life would require breaking with some of the most ingrained or established attitudes, choices, and ways which are shared, approved, or accepted by our family, friends, and society. As a result, any of the radical changes required by such genuine insights can become very painful to the individual, not only because it is difficult to give up what is familiar, what has meant security, or what has been pleasurable, but also because such changes imply facing with love, patience, tolerance, courage, understanding, and perseverance the many bitter and angry objections and rejections we have to anticipate in our human environment.<sup>2</sup>

Beginning to accept and appreciate the meaningful interactions between (1) the need to experience and affirm the pleasurable aspects of life, (2) learning to recognize and accept the many pervasive paradoxical aspects in our human existence, (3) endeavoring to be creative and to care unselfishly, and (4) committing ourselves to genuine attitudes and actions, all this requires far more than following a few established rules. It requires the persistent willingness to progressively discard blinding presuppositions or prejudices; and it demands becoming creatively open to ever new, not yet clearly identifiable, potential meanings which hopefully will provide our existence with more meaning.

Any serious critical questioning of the presuppositions that have shaped one's views of the world, and on which one's current, dominant self-image is built, is likely to result in a great amount of uncertainty, resistance, dread, and even despair; yet, eventually, it may also be a person's only true salvation. The story of *Peer Gynt* may serve as an example (Ibsen 1966):

Returning home after many very questionably worthwhile adventures, old and utterly alone, Peer begins to compare himself with an onion he happens to hold in his hand. As he tries to find out who he, Peer, really is, he peels, looks at, and discards one leaf of the onion after the other; each leaf reminds him of a former assumed role which he now recognizes as having been phony or meaningless. Eventually his hands are empty. He ends up with **nothing!** In utter despair he must now first face and deal with the approaching Devil who disdains to take him. Then he meets the "Button Molder" who wants to melt him down into an indifferent mass made up of innumerable other melted peo-

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2. This divergence between esthetic insight and committed action was repeatedly, keenly and passionately noted by Kierkegaard (1962) who approved and admired his Bishop's, Mynster's, fine weekly sermons, but who remarked that those acting on Monday in accordance with the sermon they heard on Sunday would undoubtedly be arrested. He thus suggested to the bishop, a good friend of his family, to continue his fine sermons, but to declare publicly that it had nothing to do with genuine Christian life.

ple whom neither the Devil nor anyone else wanted. Yet Peer's radical, honest discarding of every layer or role that at one time he thought of as being his Self, and facing the resulting awesome "nothingness," turns out to be the very stance that enables him to hear and recognize the voice of Solveig. Solveig is the woman he had begun to love a long time ago, from whom he had fled, but who had kept her unconditional love for him throughout all the years.—At this point Ibsen's play of "Peer Gynt" ends. It is the point at which an entirely different, genuine self begins to emerge. What is most admirable in the elderly Peer Gynt, is his radically and courageously proceeding directly toward the very—albeit lacking—core of the onion, and his recognizing himself as nothing; yet, nevertheless—or maybe just because of having discarded all the prior, false "personas"—he is now able to stand up to the devil and, far more significantly, to the rather horrendous Button Molder.

Are therefore the ephemeral joys and sorrows of the involvement in our everyday life, and are the many questionable, vain, but busily pursued goals in this our world, all of which we blindly accept, are they indeed but useless, silly aberrations that we might as well have avoided to start with? This turns out to be a rather foolish question, inasmuch as nobody ever offers us a clear option at the beginning of our journey. Moreover, this question overlooks the fact that all our accumulated experiences and deeds, regardless how thoughtless, mediocre, or empty they may appear in retrospect, may turn into necessary, unavoidable obstacles. It is the overcoming of these that can then lead to the emergence of our true Self.

Peer Gynt is "saved," or at least begins his salvation, because he never accepted any achievement as truly satisfying; and eventually he is willing to reject any enduring credit for any of them. Indeed, his journey resembles somewhat that of Goethe's Faust. After many enterprises, adventures and struggles, all of somewhat questionable value, Faust meets again Gretchen, whom he had badly wronged, in a realm beyond death. Faust is saved—or rather "redeemed"—because he never stopped striving. This does not imply that he accumulated "points" for his various, sometimes morally rather questionable, achievements. He is redeemed solely because he never agreed to settle down in a comfortable situation and to rest, self-satisfied, on a "lazy-bed." Not unlike Peer Gynt, he eventually returns to the woman he had loved and abandoned, but never entirely forgotten. Gretchen reappears to him and now guides him towards a more meaningful existence.

Both Peer Gynt's as well as Faust's journey thus remains open-ended. Most of us, probably, never quite arrive. Kierkegaard's "Knight of Faith of Infinite Perfection" represents an ideal rather than a goal that we must fully reach. Indeed, even the truly "holy" person never appears to feel quite "whole" or complete. Thus, the dying Kierkegaard, viewing himself as being at best a "Knight of Infinite Resignation," asked God on his deathbed not to let him

die in despair. In like fashion, Francis of Assisi, when an admirer addressed him as a Saint who will certainly go straight to heaven, admonished him in a most kindly manner not to say any such thing, since he knew all too well that he might still end up breaking his vows of chastity. Let us, therefore, neither despair nor be satisfied, but always persist in our own, individual journey!

The seven parts of this book, made up of 23 chapters, are concerned with the five above-mentioned, closely interlaced topics. They focus on the stages in human development and on the ultimate human concerns (Part I); on the presence, function, and results of the paradoxes or polarities in human existence (Part II); on selfless love or Agape (Part III); on human creativity (Part IV); on the contemporary views pertaining to the human condition (Part V); on authentic commitment to action (Part VI); and on the progressive psychological fragmentation and loss of subjectivity in our times (Part VII). Each one of these seven topics is vital or effective only in its intimate, ongoing, active, relationship with all the others. Listening with other people to a charming, beautiful fairy tale without genuinely caring about the others, without freely interacting with the content of the story so that one's openness can discover ever new hidden meanings, and without feeling the challenge to translate new insights awakened by the tale into one's future, concrete, everyday actions would be an incomplete experience. The listener would miss the richest and most profound meaning to the tale. I, of course, first address this admonition to myself. Then quickly, I invite you, the reader, to open your heart to the beauty, depth, and meaning of all the fairy tales, myths and stories from which I shall quote. When this stirs in you a growing desire to care unselfishly for your fellow human beings, your own creativity will be further enhanced. And when these tales reveal to you some of their deepest, inherent meanings or challenges, the determination to transform your own life in keeping with these new, genuine insights will be strengthened.

A pervading thought and aim in this book is to discuss the human individuals' quest for meanings that transcend any immediate daily need for their own and for their immediate offsprings' survival. From the very moment in which Eve was no longer satisfied with dwelling ignorantly in the pleasant but rather boring garden of Eden—and thus became eager and ready to know about good and evil—all the way to our twenty-first century, when we dwell, more puzzled than ever, on this minuscule globe lost in an ever expanding universe—all the time the question of *meaning*, the wish to know, has remained a positive driving force. Again and again, myths, epic poems, fairy tales, and related modern writings have attempted to keep alive within us the awareness that our existence is more than just an accidental happening or error, that being resigned to live indefinitely, meaninglessly, and igno-

rantly in the Garden of Eden—as Adam might have done if it were not for good Eve—is a “cop-out.” The stories chosen for this book provide us with profound insights and challenges that inspire us with the hope that there *is* meaning. But is this hope mainly and only a desperate attempt to ease the pain of being lost in an utterly uncaring universe? This question will be addressed in the introduction.

The book begins by showing how even the simplest of the well-known fairy tales can provide us with insights into the crucial problems and challenges of a human being’s gradual development into an adult, responsible person. Usually, only gradually, as we become adults (or “would-be adults”) do we come fully and reflectively face-to-face with our basic, ultimate human concerns. We shall turn to some tales, myth, and existential novels that deal with these concerns.

Even in our times, the need or desire to address and illustrate our most urgent human problems is often expressed by referring to mythic themes. Thus, Kierkegaard (1970) saw Abraham as the true “knight of faith,” the authentic human being; Wagner (Cross 1952) returned to the medieval epics (Parsifal, Tristan, and Siegfried) to deal in words and music with the challenges of human individuation and authenticity; Ibsen (1966) invited us into a world of trolls in order to portray Peer Gynt’s intense struggle and quest for authenticity; and Tolkien (1979) guides us through the phantasmagoric world of the *Lord of the Rings* in which good and evil confront and struggle with each other. Sartre’s (1962) world in *No Exit*, as well as Hesse’s worlds of Magister Ludi (1970), of *Siddharta* (1971) and of *Steppenwolf* (1990) are quite germane to the atmosphere of myths and fairy tales. Even Kafka’s novels such as *The Trial* (1956) and *The Castle* (1974) are easily experienced as related to the same, puzzling realms. Not unlike the finest ancient myths and the most beautiful fairy tales, these modern authors challenge us to step beyond the threshold of our everyday existence. The question, then, remains, whether what is offered to us as something beyond this threshold is but an empty human, maybe all too human, effort to provide meaning in a basically meaningless existence destined to be soon universally and eternally forgotten, or whether it refers to something deeply meaningful beyond our prosaic, everyday, physical reality. Old myths and epic poems, as well as most fairy tales, do not seem to question in any way the existence of these meaningful realms. And the fine modern works I just mentioned do not appear to provide us with new, more convincing answers. However, they make us increasingly aware of the narrowness of our everyday horizon, and of what it can mean to be genuine, to be caring, to love unselfishly, and to act authentically. Thus, both the ancient epic poems and the modern epic creations, “existential” novels and plays continue to touch on the ultimate concerns of human beings, concerns that are all too easily ignored or repressed. Only by allow-

ing ourselves to become increasingly aware of their messages are we in a position to take on more responsible attitudes towards the future of our troubled, beautiful, but severely injured world.

Our present world, differs radically from any worlds that were experienced in the past, inasmuch as for the very first time its very future is at stake; not because of the inexorable evolution of the universe, but on account of the actions of its human inhabitants. The true heroes of the past excelled by saving their countries, their friends, their people: be it Achilles who killed Hector, Leonidas who saved Greece from the Persians, David who slew Goliath, Beowulf who came to the aid of Denmark, Parsifal who was willing to confront Klingsor, or Winkelried who sacrificed himself in the defense of Switzerland. The modern hero, however, is the one who becomes aware that what is at stake is the survival of humanity itself, and who is ready to act on the basis of this awareness. The modern hero is willing to sacrifice him- or herself even when the prospects seem bleak, and even when most people might view his endeavors as futile, irrational, or useless.

Fortunately and unfortunately, an overwhelming array of events, diversions, entertainments, information, activities, discoveries, and options have become available to most of us so-called “civilized” people of the “first world.” They help us ignore the ecological dilemma. They also make it all too easy to be distracted from the otherwise unavoidable “dread” that arises when we come face-to-face with the ultimate concerns that both folklore and existential literature can awaken in us. This dread evoked by confrontations with our ultimate concerns can be a most healthy experience. Distracted by the hectic activities of the daytime, we may manage to avoid it, but it often starts to haunt us at night, especially in our dreams that challenge us not to keep turning our backs on what *really* matters. The willingness to face such disturbing dreams and to open ourselves to the messages contained in folklore, in some modern plays and in existential novels, renders a retreat into inauthentic postures more and more difficult. Having faced this dread, we may be more willing to accept some radical changes in our lives—changes that renew the hope that our existence does indeed matter. And the dread will also help us acknowledge again and again how far we still are from a truly authentic stance.

Let me add that the existential themes contained in myths, epic poems, and fairy tales, in sagas, nursery rhymes, and jokes are not necessarily superior to or more effective than those expressed much later and with more sophistication and complexity in philosophic and psychological texts, in novels, poetry, dramas, and operas, or in modern music and art. All are only “openings,” “clearings” that allow unprejudiced persons to see and experience some things that their everyday world tends to veil. Indeed, what I just pointed out in regard to the importance of some myths and fairy tales for the

problematic of our modern world, applies with only a few modifications to all forms of genuine creative endeavors, all of which allow us to transgress the limits of our accustomed, conventional world. If I like to focus fairly heavily on folklore, it is not only because folklore happens to have drawn my keen love and interest for many years, but also because it provides a very pleasant, comprehensible and immediate access to these ultimate human concerns.

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Allow me to add that at the time of writing the book titled the *The Psychiatric Meaning of Myths and Fairy Tales* (Heuscher 1973), I was confident that everything that contributes to a genuine understanding of our world's meaningfulness would eventually encourage people sufficiently to be willing to make and accept the required changes in their "view of the world" and in their way of "being in the world." It seemed that this could healthily correct the most ominous and dangerous aspects of an increasingly technological society that had grown far too proud of its often undeniably enormous and beneficial achievements in the natural sciences. I was not alone in seeing in folk fairy tales, myths, and epic poems, as well as in modern poetry, in novels and in plays dealing with existential topics, the portrayals of significant realms and problems that had become increasingly hidden and ignored in most people's outwardly seemingly successful everyday lives. These portrayals revealed the growing despair, loneliness, and emptiness in human life, and they alluded to what should and could be truly meaningful. The main insights that were stressed in this former book, I believe, are still valid.

Since that time, however, I have become increasingly preoccupied with the crucial question pertaining to the *quality or degree of reality* of the fine moral, characterological, and spiritual values portrayed and exalted in all the most remarkable artistic creations. Disturbing questions began to hound me: To what extent do these impressively portrayed values reflect *actually existing* new realms beyond our ordinary, narrow, "down-to-earth," everyday life; and to what extent might they possibly be nothing but illusory, beautiful, practically convenient distractions, consolations, and essentially empty promises that came into being only to hide an ultimately meaningless, empty, and futureless existence. And, to what extent does this creation of transcendental values and realms often only end up justifying our prejudicial and often utterly inhuman stance towards "others" who seem to threaten our territories and views. Much of the introduction to this book will thus focus on this very disturbing, crucial, and complex question.

However, these considerations pertaining to the "objective" reality of values and beliefs transcending our everyday life have led also to an entirely different preoccupation. What comes to mind is the question of the relationship

between fundamental insights into the finest, essential, individual and universal human values on the one hand, and the manifest difficulty of actively, adequately, and persistently doing something to preserve and give substance to these insights on the other hand. This, in turn, made me increasingly aware—in myself and in people around me—of the stubborn, intense, defensiveness against translating wholeheartedly, courageously and radically such genuine and seemingly convincing insights into concrete actions aimed at helping and healing our utterly fragmented human world. This problem of translating seemingly genuine insights into actions thus became a crucial concern.

This book portrays ways in which ancient folklore, myths, old and new fairy tales, as well as modern literary works can make us increasingly aware of our human condition and of the enormous challenges that we have to meet right now and in the future. It addresses both some of the evident psychological problems that cause people to seek help from experts, as well as far more hidden, far more common, and often far more dangerous pathologies that must be addressed in order to prevent any collective human catastrophes. The book attempts to do so by starting out from a few insights that folklore furnishes in regard to human development and in regard to our main ultimate existential concerns. It proceeds with the illustration of paradoxical conflicts that human beings must live with, and it then focuses on the nature and meaning of unselfish love that can transcend everything. It ends by emphasizing the extremely difficult yet essential, all-important challenge of translating our deep insights into constructive, radical changes.

In the first part of this book, the focus will thus be on the role of myths and fairy tales in revealing the fundamental steps, problems, dangers, and joys in healthy human development (Chapters I and II). The discussion will then turn to our deepest human concerns (Chapter III), to the need to face death in an authentic manner (Chapters IV and V), to the decision of remaining absolutely true to oneself (Chapter VI), and to unselfish caring (Chapter VII). Fairy tales will serve largely to describe each of these developmental steps and fundamental concerns.

In the second part, we will explore the pervasive, polar-paradoxical features of human life. Two fairy tales, a tale by Hans Christian Andersen and a modern story by Italo Calvino, will provide a lively illustration for this aspect of human existence (Chapters VIII-XI).

In the third part, the focus will shift in more detail towards human relationships and, quite especially, towards the meaning of genuine, caring, unselfish love, or *Agape*. *Agape* is seen as the ultimate ground of our true Self and as the source of any creative activity. In this endeavor we will be assisted not only by various vignettes from folklore, but, even more so, by quotations from humanistic, philosophical, religious, and psychological authors, as

well as by some insights into the life of these authors (Chapters XII and XIII). In doing this, we are primarily focused on the ethical substratum of human existence and on the impact of our authentic and inauthentic attitudes on our fellow human beings.

In the fourth part, various aspects of creativity and its intimate rootedness in Agape will be discussed and illustrated by several literary examples. Creativity's role in helping overcome "impossible" obstacles in folklore (Chapter XIV) and in dreams (Chapter XV), creativity's relationship to love (Chapter XVI) and to humor (Chapter XVII), and creativity's ability to reveal and to deal with the paradoxical and multifaceted aspects of human existence will be the main topics. Quotes from literature, from philosophical writings and from folklore will hopefully provide a vivid illustration of ideas that otherwise could remain somewhat ephemeral or abstract. The discussion of James Thurber's (1977) wonderful tale of *The 13 Clocks* (Chapter XVIII) will serve well to conclude this fourth part.

The fifth part focuses on a few powerful and beautiful modern works that deal with the previously discussed subjects, problems, and insights from a contemporary vantage point (Chapters XIX and XX).

The sixth part deals with the demand to become maximally challenged to appreciate the beauty and pleasures of this our world, while enhancing our ability to care for others to the point where such caring extends well beyond our self-interests (Chapter XXI). It deals with increasing the creative abilities to transcend the conventional, established limits of our everyday existence, and, most importantly, with applying our new insights and experiences, each and every day, as we confront the many, increasingly ominous situations of our current world. The challenge that may still save our earth for future generations, consists in doing so courageously, even when we know all too well that we lack an adequate, comprehensive guideline, an acceptable new "paradigm" that will support our actions. We are challenged to do so while fully aware of many powerful outward forces that will try hard to discourage us from applying our true insights, and while also experiencing many stubborn inward resistances within our own self against following these insights.

The seventh and last part mentions the current great danger of losing increasingly our subjectivity (Chapter XXII), and the desperate need not only to widen and deepen our insight into our world's predicaments, but also to translate these insights into actions.

The ideas expressed and illustrated in the seven parts of this book reflect also a personal development over many years. I chose many of the tales, themes, and ideas from talks, manuscripts, papers, scattered notes, and three



previously published books<sup>3</sup> I intend them to be a portrayal of what I believe to be the greatest challenge we face; to save and preserve our humanity. I hope that you will enjoy the stories, that you will be led by them to care ever more strongly for both your fellow human beings and for our ailing earth, that you will become aware of your own ability to creatively widen your view of human existence, and that you will courageously keep translating the compelling insights you develop within yourself into effective attitudes and actions.

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3. The folkloric and other literary examples chosen amongst many familiar, and many more items unfamiliar to me make no claim of being superior. Such a claim would be spurious because all of them can present new openings into realms beyond the limits of ordinary, everyday existence. Each individual will see somewhat different aspects of variegated realms beyond these limits, the wealth of what is revealed depending not only on the quality of the story, but also on the orientation and receptiveness of the viewer.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It occurred to me at one odd time in my life to write a paper, or even a book, without ever offering any references and without acknowledging any sources, but including quite innocently ideas and data gathered from papers or books, and from lectures or conversations with knowledgeable friends. Doing so, I believed, would be either flagrant, unkind plagiarism, *or* it could reflect a sincere albeit somewhat naive effort to be radically authentic. The idea was probably inspired by Kierkegaard (here, note!, I *do* already acknowledge an author!) whom I remember remarking humorously that there might come a day when some professors would decide to teach “Kierkegaard’s ideas,” in spite of his having again and again pleaded that the only valid truth is that which is experienced by an individual—absolutely independently of anyone else’s authority. This is the truth that is found and recognized within one’s innermost being. Authentic writing of or about anything without any references or acknowledgments would then require a constant, thorough self-examination as to whether each and every idea, each and every insight one sets down on paper is experienced as true and meaningful, whether one heard such ideas from someone else or not. And, if one had indeed first heard these ideas mentioned by another person, then authentic writing would require that these ideas would continue to be experienced as true even if this other person had radically changed his or her mind and had refuted them.

I have resisted the temptation to do so, not only because it would break with an accepted and honored custom and because my very kind publisher might disapprove of it. I have not done so also because such an endeavor would require an extraordinarily difficult, ongoing examination of my own convictions which, considering that they often tend to remain somewhat ambiguous, would be most difficult and time-consuming. I nevertheless endeavor to present only insights and ideas that have fairly much been appropriated as my very own. At the same time, I gratefully acknowledge that almost all my finer insights, feelings, thoughts, and convictions have only become possible as a result of meaningful relationships. Such relation-

ships extend all the way back to my early childhood and include not only significant people I have met or lived with, but also reformers, writers, and composers, a few of whom became as close and personal “friends” as did the physically present persons who influenced my thoughts and feelings.

Thus, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Søren Kierkegaard, Francis of Assisi, and Giacomo Leopardi became so much a part of my everyday life that I experienced and experience them as very real people present to me, as friends profoundly affecting my life. I’m equally grateful to my free-thinking mother for her great love of fairy tales; to my stepfather, Samuel Lourie, whose passionate erudition awakened my earliest interest in Schiller, Goethe, and Nietzsche; to “padre” Giovanni, my teacher of Italian literature at the Collegio Papio in Ascona for so kindly and lovingly introducing me to Dante and Leopardi; to my very beloved aunt Mary who took me at the end of my teens to the marvelous town of Assisi where I became acquainted with Francis; to my friend, Peter Koestenbaum, for introducing me to Husserl and Kierkegaard; and to a saleslady in a tiny, crowded book store in Ascona who suggested rather recently that I read Italo Calvino’s charming books.

In the process of gaining ever deeper familiarity with myths and fairy tales that explore our ultimate human concerns, and during my efforts of illustrating some of the main thoughts of existential thinkers by seeing these thoughts clothed in some of the images and themes taken from folklore, I have also become deeply indebted to all the bards who jealously preserved the original language and ideas of the tales handed down to them through many, many previous generations.

And quite especially, I want to acknowledge warmly also my wife and my two sons who keep challenging me in my work in many ways, the psychiatric residents whom I had the privilege to supervise or who participated actively in several seminars dealing with existential psychotherapy, and professor Irvin Yalom at Stanford University who in most captivating ways has written about and taught about our ultimate human concerns. Most of all probably, I am indebted to the many patients who allowed me to look into their private worlds, discovering unexpected things that again and again helped me to revise and widen my own world. Clearly, this list that spans many, many years should become much, much longer, but most readers would get understandably impatient.

The fact, therefore, is that I owe everything to all the many people and authors, to all the beings and things of this incredible past and present world that I had the opportunity to come in contact with, whether they were and are—as most frequently—beautiful, friendly and delightful, or—as less frequently—offensive, challenging, unkind and disconcerting. I came to agree fully with Ortega y Gasset that “I am myself and my circumstances!” Thus, I want to thank all of them deeply, gracefully, and gratefully while taking full

responsibility for whatever, responding to them and their ideas, I have made of them. Whatever I am able to present here is in response to all that my environment has so generously provided; but it is also a response to all the challenging internal and external obstacles that have helped the examining, and shaping of my own feelings, of my own thoughts and of my own commitments. While expressing my deep gratitude, I also want to take full responsibility for whatever thoughts, insights, conclusions, or suggestions are expressed in this book.

Last but not least, I want to acknowledge the great kindness and help of my publisher, Mr. Michael Payne Thomas, who has encouraged me to write this book at a time when I began to feel increasingly called upon to emphasize several dominant ideas that concern the challenging situations of our current, greatly troubled, but fascinating world.



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**PSYCHOLOGY, FOLKLORE,  
CREATIVITY AND  
THE HUMAN DILEMMA**



## INTRODUCTION

*The most secure warranty or proof of our spiritual origins is rooted in our ability to ennoble everything that affects our senses, and to give life to even the deadest matter by wedding it to its spiritual idea. As much as we are attracted and bound by the thousands and thousands of appearances of this earth, we nevertheless are again and again compelled, by a deep-seated longing, to lift up our eyes towards the heavens, because an inexplicable, profound feeling provides us with the conviction that we are citizens of those worlds shining so mysteriously above us, and that one day we shall return to them.*

Johann Wolfgang Goethe

### PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS ABOUT CREATIVITY, MEANING, AND SPIRITUALITY

**I**n responding to ideas, images, or experiences contained in ancient myths, in folklore, in contemporary imaginative stories, and in existential novels—all of which aim to carry us beyond the immediate confines of our common, daily, tangible, “real” existence—we are hounded by a most challenging question: Do these wonderful tales that we encounter or that encounter us, do these beautiful images, these seemingly profound spiritual beliefs, these deeply felt intuitions, or these puzzling, absurd scenarios, do they represent a degree of reality that is, at the very least, equivalent to that of the objects, data, or events in this our concrete everyday world that we can see, touch, taste, smell and hear, measure and weigh, and that we must face and deal with each and every day in order to physically survive? Or are all of them maybe nothing but weird figments and ultimately worthless products of our own imagination? Could they therefore be but entertaining playthings, or could they be unusually clever creations that compassionately intend to console us just because we find ourselves utterly lost in a rather dreary, forlorn, painful, empty, cruel, meaningless, and hopeless world?

In our myths and in various religions, we are inclined to portray our ulti-

mate goal or destiny as recognizing the illusory nature of our earthly existence and then dissolving blissfully in Nirvana; or promising ourselves to return, ever again, to future—hopefully better—incarnations; or picturing some kind of eternal, wise, caring, and infinitely fair Being watching over us at all time, keeping a meticulous account, and assuring us of an eventual, commensurate, permanent existence (be it in hell, in limbo, in heaven, or anywhere else)?

Are we—maybe—motivated to embrace and nourish any such portrayals mainly because of a vague, hidden, dreaded, intolerable, unacceptable awareness of the factual meaninglessness of human existence, and because of the simultaneous anticipation that the pain of this meaninglessness is further enhanced by the cruel fact that all hopes, all aspirations, and even all our most beautiful memories will forever be wiped out by death? Wiped out by our own, inevitable death of which we unfortunately become cognizant very early in life, along with our becoming keenly aware of good and evil? Is it, therefore, the desperate need to fight off, ever and ever again, this persistent, intolerable horror of meaninglessness and of losing everything through death that has led human beings in all parts of our earth to create, in manifold ways, ever more intricate, appealing and rich stories aimed at veiling the cold, bitter truth? And could it be that these stories and their wonderful imagery—because they never manage to be permanently and completely successful in hiding this bitter truth—must gradually become increasingly elaborate in order to remain sufficiently convincing? Is this, then, the compassionate cradle and source of all human creativity, of a kind of creativity that eventually transcends its main, initial goal of consoling us, and that gradually expands into and affects all the various aspects of our life? Thus, for example, the image of Phoebus' wagon with its shining sun wheels, traveling across the sky initially portrayed the benign god's concern for us human beings. Is it this image that eventually influenced people to create their first wagon wheels? The translation of a mythological image into utilitarian creativity would then progress, over innumerable steps, all the way to our genetic engineering, all the way to inventing supersonic airplanes, and all the way to finding water on Mars or building "better" atomic bombs? This unleashed creativity has led to the appearance of tools and machines that both enormously improve and disturbingly complicate our lives. And while the inundation by time-saving technological achievements keeps us busier than ever, it also has the additional, secondary, and often desired effect of distracting us from facing the basic, deepest, and most disturbing concerns of our human existence! It could then be argued that the accelerating, spectacular, technological, creative achievements can also, not quite unlike all the mythological or transcendental portrayals of human existence, be helpful in keeping us from facing the hidden, utter meaninglessness of our true condition.

Was—and is—religion, therefore, but an “opium for the masses”; are beliefs in an afterlife but a way of reducing anxiety; are the epic songs about the glorious deeds of heroes nothing but ways of hiding the intense greed and ruthless selfishness of all the violent exploits of the powerful; are the magnificent Gothic cathedrals with their spectacular stained windows but veils covering the naked, harsh truth of our futile human existence? Do myths, folklore, and religious texts reveal profound meanings that widen our everyday horizons, or do they only hide the cold fact that life is ultimately meaningless.

Each one of us must eventually independently explore, discover, and decide within him- or herself the answers to all this. What can hardly be denied, however, is that even if all the past “transcendent” views should turn out to be nothing but idle illusions, these illusions are nevertheless wonderful ones, bringing joy and a sense of purpose into our lives. These views can be cherished as such, and they are further enhanced by our continuing, caring attention and interest for them. Far more difficult is the question, whether there would ever have arisen a need for these myths, these fairy tales, these fantastic novels, these beautiful icons, etc., if their essential contents consisting of our highest aspirations and values, of our unselfish sacrifices, of our deep caring, and of our search for meanings extending beyond our earthly life, had indeed no real, intrinsic objective values whatsoever. The skeptics’ questions in this regard are most important, for they challenge us to courageously reexamine our convictions and to rid these convictions of the many admittedly adulterating, distorting features that serve mostly some primitive, selfish, shortsighted goals, and that obfuscate any spiritual realities they might indeed hide. As a matter of fact, most religions, as well as their denominations and ideologies, have sooner or later become radically distorted on account of such narrow, selfish interests that manage to completely ignore, distort, or hide the very essence of their original messages or meanings.<sup>1</sup> Concerns with the “reality” or “unreality” of the “spiritual” events and beings in our religions and other beliefs, however, overlook easily the fact that the primary, immediate, miraculous “spiritual” phenomenon is our consciousness: the miracle of the transition from physical-chemical processes into the *awareness* of feelings of anger, of love, and of joy, including even the awareness of being aware, of this transition which has remained entirely unexplained.

While the natural sciences recently succeeded in decoding our entire genome and now promise to eventually keep us free from all conflicts and illnesses, there are still many people who, basing their convictions on a liter-

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1. The Old Testament teaches “Do not kill!”; and the New Testament’s paramount messages are: “Love thy enemy!”; “Turn the other cheek!”; “Forgive your enemies!”; “Do not condemn!” Kierkegaard had the open-mindedness and courage to recognize that the “Christendom” in Denmark had nothing to do with being a true Christian.