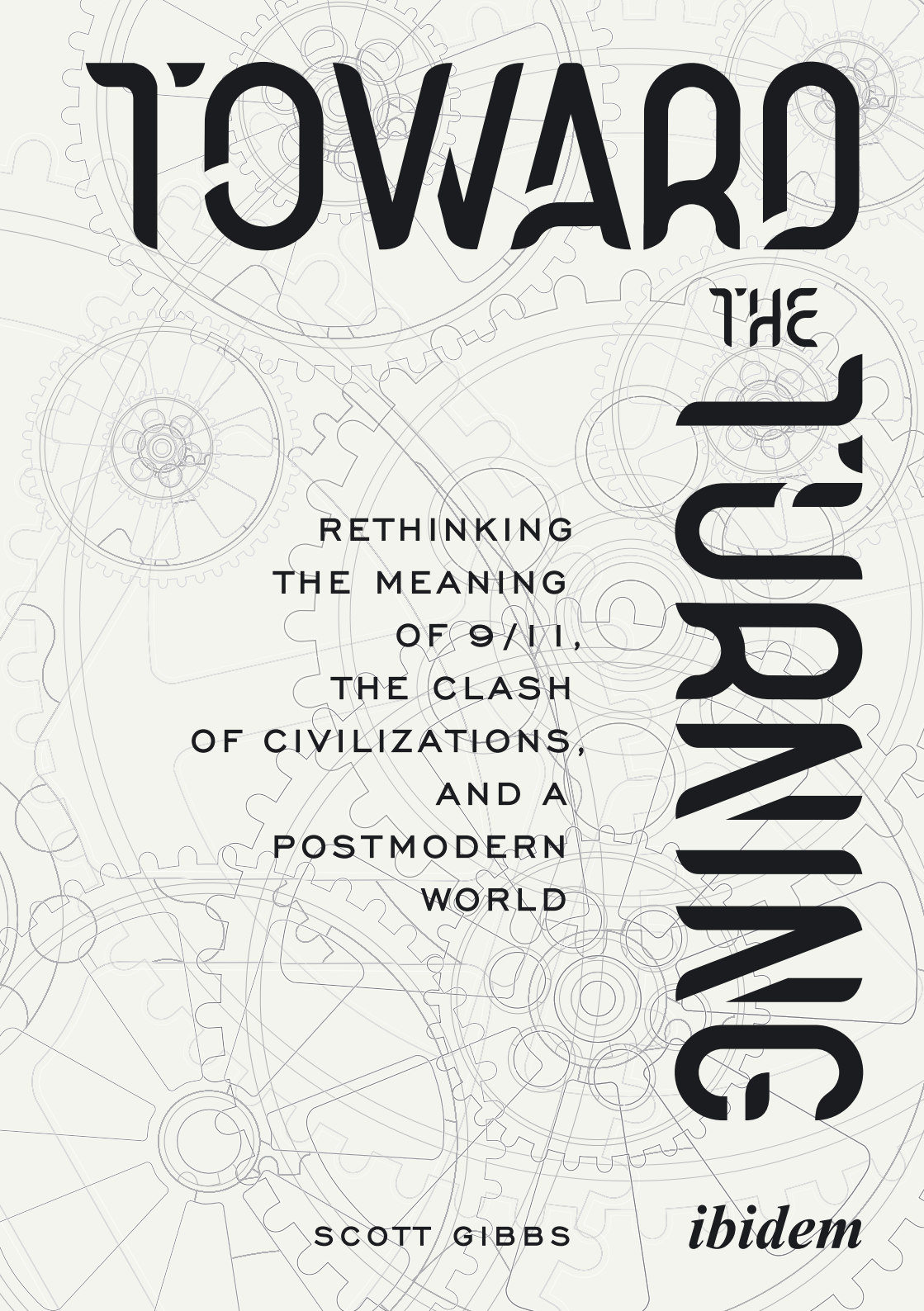


The background of the entire cover is a complex, overlapping pattern of various-sized gears. The gears are rendered in a light gray line-art style, creating a mechanical and intricate texture. Some gears are larger and more prominent, while others are smaller and partially obscured, giving a sense of depth and complexity.

TOWARD

THE

TURNING

RETHINKING
THE MEANING
OF 9/11,
THE CLASH
OF CIVILIZATIONS,
AND A
POSTMODERN
WORLD

SCOTT GIBBS

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Chapter One: A New Construct

The source of the better part of barbarism in human history is an apparition, spectacularly unrecognized and ignored. Tribalism and fanaticism are the conventional scapegoats, often in combination, used to explain group violence and cruelty – war and civil war, colonialism and empire, apartheid and genocide, tyranny, and enslavement. Unfortunately, this conclusion is shallow and, when used in dialogue, is often counterproductive, fueling the battle through blame and distracting from a deeper understanding. Nevertheless, tribalism and fanaticism expose what lies hidden within them and, thus, the source of the challenge. Group inhumanity repeatedly arises and is fed by the murmuration of group identification – the reciprocal relation of people and systems of interpretation – stylized semistructured ways of being or what it means to be. These styles are faiths, spiritual or secular (e.g., Muslim, American, Israeli). Paradoxically, unwitting identification, which participates in our quest to survive and thrive, also drives destruction and death. Worse, in the ultimate sad irony, our interpretation systems are contingent, having no logical necessity, making them constructed realities and identity an apparition – a conception dependent on the mind. Contingency makes the dark sides of our faiths heartbreakingly absurd. However, accepting reality offers some hope, as it de-escalates the once momentous and grave, and opens new perspectives and possibilities. Like any mirage, this one evaporates upon examination; like any specter, it disappears with acceptance despite fear in the light of disclosure.

Self-righteous contempt and hostility pervade group relations today. Examples inundate our lives: protest marches, riots, terrorist acts, insurrections, insurgencies, vigilantism, hate speech, profiling, targeted killings, walls, revolutions, civil wars, holy wars, imperialism, and so on. The best efforts at resolution are often relatively futile, and vexingly, natural responses tend to make matters worse. The nature of our group relations consistently devolves into no *relation* at all in a meaningful sense. It is instead competition. Rhetoric leveraged by participants – such as “fight for” or “struggle

against" — articulates the means of action, and language like "victory," "prevail," or "overcome" expresses the ends. Justification washes insensitivity and aggression clean. Spoken or unspoken, power is the commodity at issue. A battle for respect simultaneously bloodies the field in a relatively simple-minded disconnect between means and ends. Dichotomous thought frames the entire setting.

Modernity (and its extreme outcome, postmodernity) manifests this conflict in various ways, creating flux, fostering critique, and elevating identity and identification. As a reflection of our relationship to ourselves, fundamentalism — liberal or conservative, secular or spiritual — emerges and thrives. Conflict compulsively follows. The drama is utterly toxic, with flagrant and insidious consequences. In response, calls for peace and unity abound, but constructive efforts to remedy the situation are too often absent or fall on deaf ears. Curiously, incredulous surprise typically meets the failure of the calls for peace and unity — as if disconnect and division could be coerced away or overcome with a desperate plea. Moreover, there is no end in sight. The most beguiling outcome is the preliminary nature of solutions that participate in the drama and pick a side. The ongoing flare-up of drama exposes these solutions as ultimately hollow.

Deconstruction of the conflict discloses a self-reinforcing, repetitive pattern of reciprocal blame. The problem driving such tensions (e.g., unfairness or discordant values) and, critically, the problem driving much relational drama itself — disconnection — persists. Maybe more troublingly, pervasively and persistently trapped and disconnected in the drama, evidence points to a startling insight: we misunderstand our predicament to the point of being virtually oblivious. Not understanding, we are condemned to endless repetition. All human history speaks to this revelation. What is called for is a redefinition of the nature and relocation of the source of the struggles at hand. What is required is a new construct that is broadly applicable to our tangled state at home and abroad.

The tragic violence of September 11, 2001, followed by the decades-long "war on terror," is a high-profile expression of our predicament, offering an opportunity for a deeper understanding of

the way out. Tit-for-tat brought the demonic drama of group conflict full form to the world stage. Mired in the proliferating pattern, our post-9/11 world has become (and remains) a theater of the absurd. Tedious clashes supplanted reason, dialogue, and progress and fed vicious cycles of escalating, intolerant division and disconnection. Political policy expanded rather than contained drama, and authoritarian ideologies at once flourished from and fed the conflict. Steeped in this milieu, we struggle still in the blast wave of 9/11—which was itself the crescendo of decades of repetitive drama. We remain ensnared and disconnected, stuck in the suboptimal, susceptible to the tragic, and swimming still in the unresolved. Waste, gridlock, recklessness, intolerance, oppression, hostility, violence—the instruments of horror unleashed that September day—set the course for a kind of victory for “them.” Any attenuation of the conflict flows not from intention and transcendence but simply from sheer exhaustion, distraction, redirection, or simple luck. The unresolved drama lurks and festers.

Division and disconnection defined the context of the conflict implied in the 9/11 attack and the subsequent responses and counterresponses. The Muslim world knew blame and division intimately before the notorious attack. Across Northern Africa through large swaths of the Middle East, on to Pakistan and Afghanistan, *Dar al-Islam*, the “House of Islam” or “House of Peace” remains today anything but, both at and within its borders. The too often terribly bloody drama with Israel is the epitome of its external expression, while the proxy struggles between Shi’ism and Sunnism and the so-called struggle for “the soul of Islam” (i.e., moderation versus conservatism) speak to the internal tensions. At the same time, the 9/11 attack set the hook fully in the West, itself primed for division by decades of prior unsettling transformation. The subsequent incessant “Freedom” wars and the “Global War on Terrorism,” as well as the trauma of the global financial crisis of 2007–2008, followed by the COVID pandemic, fiercely pulled the line taut. Fraught with blame and division as intense at times as that during the Vietnam War, the United States drives the hook deeper still. Europe largely follows the same path. Much was insidiously inflamed by the onslaught of 9/11, and much has been fashioned in response.

From academia and the popular media to the corridors of political power, a perpetrator-victim construct typically defines the nature and locates the cause of the relational struggles between Islamists and Western governments or, more generally, between *Dar al-Islam* and the West. In this construct (which defines much of modern group conflict), the perpetrator—the tyrant, the bully, the abuser, the oppressor, or the like—carries out an action that has a harmful effect. The victim—the oppressed, the bullied, the abused, and so on—is acted upon and negatively impacted, injured in some form or fashion. The perpetrator holds a position of superiority and power, while the victim is in a position of inferiority and weakness. Roles change depending upon identification and, thus, agenda. We need to look no further than the events of 9/11 themselves—perpetrator becomes victim and victim becomes perpetrator. Disconnected communication permeates the field, with blame and its minions—criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and so on—ultimately ruling the day. Sooner or later, victimhood becomes the perceived position, and hostility becomes the response.

More profoundly, the construct locates the cause of conflict: the perpetrator is responsible and, by extension, is bad, guilty, and even evil. The victim is passive, acted upon rather than responsible. As such, the victim is unaccountable, from entirely innocent or blameless (e.g., the innocent victim) to good or righteous (e.g., the righteously indignant). To acknowledge and accept (let alone validate) the perpetrator in some form or fashion is unjust and damnable. Placing any responsibility on the victim is to “blame the victim.” Notably, the “blame game” mirrors and feeds off our dichotomous mind, infested with victimhood and hostility. Similarly, the perpetrator-victim construct participates in the tangled relationship. Its counterproductive nature is essentially part of the problem. As a result, conflict repeats and even intensifies rather than resolves. Perpetrator-victim is the governing dynamic of this theater of the absurd.

A brief overview of modern-day Western-Muslim sociopolitical relations provides specific details of this dynamic and serves as a touchstone for later examination and understanding. Over the past century, Muslim perceptions of the United States, in particular, have increasingly shifted from being relatively innocuous to overt

hostility. Growing American power meant increasing interventionism worldwide, including in the Middle East and the Muslim world. The trend included increasing military intervention (e.g., Gulf Wars, Afghanistan) and troop presence (e.g., in Saudi Arabia). Muslim resentment was stoked by America's consistent support for Israel—including support for its initial settlement, national recognition, and ongoing military and economic aid—a perceived oppressor, occupier of Muslim lands, and displacer of Palestinian Arabs. This support comes in the wake of a period of European colonial rule that facilitated the settlement and creation of Israel in the first place (e.g., the Balfour Declaration, the British Mandate for Palestine). Longstanding American support for authoritarian regimes (e.g., the Shah of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt) in Muslim-majority countries—primarily driven by American interests (i.e., combating communism and securing oil)—also fanned the flames. The Muslim perspective of the West is now arguably defined by a sense of perceived disrespect and unfair treatment. The denigration of Western society and its perceived moral decadence suggests a move from resentment to contempt.

The Muslim world's struggles to establish prosperous, representative self-sovereignty after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the end of Western colonialism were the underlying fire fueled by American intervention. The West bears some responsibility in this struggle due to historical and colonial legacies (e.g., border formations and support for autocratic regimes). However, Muslim-majority countries also contend with challenges stemming from independent economic and social factors, such as economic uniformity (i.e., oil) and a history of authoritarian and religious rule rather than secular representative government. Internal strife and strongmen ran rampant, creating conditions ripe for political exploitation and instability and the proliferation of a mindset of persecuted suspicion, blame, and fixation on and opposition to external meddling, real or imagined. This tumultuous backdrop fed on and was fed by the rise of political Islam, marking a profound rejection of Western ideologies. At the same time, modernity (e.g., nationalism and capitalism) failed to offer solutions, often appearing as the root of the problem, and significantly challenged Islamic authorities, causing extremist responses. Blame and zealotry created

a nasty combination, expressing the warped mindset behind 9/11 and myriad horrors before and since (e.g., the Israel-Hamas War).

Western perceptions of Muslims have likewise undergone a notable transformation over the last century, shifting from relatively benign curiosity (e.g., exotic images) to an increasingly simplistic, hostile view (e.g., terrorists, oil sheiks). This transformation similarly correlates with the rise of American power and antagonism toward its increased use in the Muslim world, which is characterized by three interrelated yet often conflicting policy goals. First, America and select Western allies sought to contain or defeat perceived tyranny (e.g., Axis Powers, the USSR, and terrorism), sometimes leading to alliances of convenience with authoritarian rulers of Muslim lands. Second, America and the West generally sought to secure oil resources, vital (so it seemed) not only for Western stability and power but as fuel within a capitalist identity, again resulting in support for autocratic regimes, often at the expense of human rights. Finally, America provided unwavering support for Israel, driven by sentiment (e.g., Holocaust sympathy and religious commonality), strategic geopolitical interests, and domestic lobbying. Perceived secular and spiritual superiority also arguably generated a conflicted conscience often “reconciled” through unambiguous judgment. The convergence of self-interest, fear of terrorists, and rather unequivocal belief in uprightness bred a climate of fear, denial, and defensiveness (e.g., innocent victimhood and righteous indignation). In turn, sentiment and self-interest fueled ongoing interventions, the embrace of authoritarian regimes, and steadfast support for Israel, creating similar responses in a cycle of repetitive drama.

Israel occupies a central stage in the Western-Muslim drama, serving as both a symbol of oppressive unfairness, disregard, and disrespect on the one hand and a beacon or bastion of hope on the other. Several secular and religious forces have shaped (and continue to shape) the Jewish relationship with the Land. On a secular level, riding a modernity-fueled wave of identity and the championing of the rights of “peoples” and political self-sovereignty, early Zionism—coupled with the ongoing knowledge that minority status in foreign lands was a dangerous dead end—drove the settlement, foundation, and development of the Land. Simultaneously,

spiritual reasons rooted in a 2,500-year-plus history of a divinely sanctioned, diaspora-fueled connection between the Jewish people and a particular land have contributed to a sense of immovable entitlement that persists today. Set against a backdrop of millennia of, at times utterly horrific minority-status persecution (e.g., the Holocaust), fledgling state status, and ongoing Arab military invasions, terror attacks, and Palestinian uprisings ("*intifadas*"), Israeli (Jewish) attitudes about modern Arab hostility oscillated between combative suspicion and paranoia, giving rise to a mindset characterized by entitlement, hostility, and denial. This mindset fed division and polarization within and without. These complex dynamics continue to shape Israel's role within the larger Western-Muslim or Middle Eastern narrative. In this multifaceted saga, a shadowy notion looms large in the struggle for control over land and, more generally, within the tit-for-tat dynamic between Israel, the United States, and the Western world on one side, and Islamists, political Islam, and *Dar al-Islam* on the other: the enduring and complex interplay of identity, identification, and group interaction.



Two opposing configurations of the perpetrator-victim construct explain the struggles between the West and the Muslim world. In the first configuration, the perpetrator is typically a terrorist or a terrorist group, and, more broadly, an Islamist group or an Islamist state. The so-called West, generally, and the United States, in particular, are the victims, innocent and even virtuous. This configuration permeates policy discourse, is buttressed by select popular media narratives, and finds its clearest expression in the so-called Right in the West. In this case, causality lies first in the Islamist movement, in radical Islam or Islamic fundamentalism or extremism. Driven by its own set of extreme principles that fail to separate church and state and find their origin in radical ideologies advanced by writers like Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Sayyid Qutb, and so on, Islamism is seen as waging "holy struggle." It struggles against the "Near Enemy" of corrupt, dictatorial regimes or apostate (i.e., moderate) Islamic movements within *Dar al-Islam*, or the "Far Enemy" of the United States and the West generally.

In an extended form of the configuration, causality lies squarely within Islam, both in its history and in its teachings. Islam is seen as imperialistic and authoritarian, best exemplified by the circumstances of the birth of the religion, which rose via conversion through conquest and ruled through a dictatorial caliphate. At the same time, the doctrinal demand for submission to God's authority blankets the globe with a mission of crusade. Islam, then, is portrayed as continuing its centuries-old march of submission. Moreover, Islam is viewed as rigid and fixed, unable to adapt adequately in our complex, modern world (for instance, the doctrinal belief in the *Qur'an* as the infallible, literal Word of God creates a hurdle to adaptation). Islam wages war with itself in the form of a struggle for "the soul of Islam." This struggle takes shape in the creation and embrace of extreme doctrines and behaviors, fueled by internal societal decline left by the end of colonial rule or the failure of dictatorship (or both). The internal battle ultimately manifests in external struggle (i.e., terrorism). In the end, grounded in causality, the entire configuration explicitly or implicitly cries for Islamic change, from moderation to modernization: "they" need to change, not "us."

In the second configuration, the roles are reversed: the perpetrator is the United States or, more broadly, the West; the victim is the Islamic world. This configuration permeates academic discourse, is likewise buttressed by a select media narrative, and influences and expresses itself, to varying degrees, in the West through the so-called Left in various forms. It feeds and flows in the modern floodwaters of identity politics, with its philosophical wellsprings starting with Hegel, through Marx to Foucault, and a rather simple-minded, competitive, power-struggle interpretation of relations. Explicitly or implicitly, this configuration first centers on perceived Western policies of exploitation and domination—specifically, the West seeks to exploit non-Western lands economically, particularly the Muslim world. Such exploitation is made possible by the decline of Muslim political power. It has existed for centuries (i.e., colonialism), with the modern-day demand for oil and other commodities just the latest assault. In turn, the determination to economically exploit drives domination policies, from the rise of Euro-

pean colonialism and covert backing for coups or unmitigated support for dictators or the state of Israel, to periodic attacks or invasions of Muslim lands, spurred more generally by the so-called “war on terror.” These policies are viewed as inherently unjust and violent. They are seen as harmful, feeding anger and resentment. The Western mindset, with its emphasis on the secular and the individual, coupled with the embrace of basic instincts, is a corrupting force. It fuels a degenerate culture of loose sexual mores, greed, and self-centeredness that corrupts the Muslim world, threatening family structure, educational systems, religious piety, the social (political) contract, and traditional Islamic social values and standards.

Whether witnessed in policy or cultural proliferation, the West and its proxies are seen as self-centered, selfish, uncaring, empty, and hypocritical. Western ideas and values are believed to breed egotism, which fosters selfishness, hubris, and depravity. Greed is at the heart of this selfishness, as the desire for money feeds the fire of callous and cold-blooded immorality, where relations are mere calculations. It is part of a larger, empty worldview grounded in the secular. At its worst, the West is a wanton, depraved tyrant, a view arguably central to Islamist teaching; at best, the West is a hollow, misguided addict or glutton. In all cases, it is hypocritical, espousing ideals of freedom and equality while pursuing ends that run counter to such ideals. “They” are unfair, unjust hypocrites, while Muslims are victims, responding to internal fragility and the exploitation and various forms of violence flowing from Western weaknesses and avarice. Islamic fundamentalism, in particular, is one of these responses. Regarding the West generally and the United States in particular, it exemplifies such well-worn truisms as “you reap what you sow” and “the chickens always come home to roost.” In the end, the West is to blame: it is hubristic, materialistic, and either misguided or evil, while the Muslim world is more or less blameless—an innocent, even righteous victim and pawn in the game played between local dictators and “the Great Satan.”

“The trump card” of debate for either configuration shines the bright light of disclosure. At one end, Orientalism defends against

the notion of Islam as a perpetrator and the West as a victim. Orientalism is condescending bigotry, if not racism, manifest in different images but always with the West seen as superior and the Islamic world as backward (Said 1978). This view, in turn, fuels and is fueled by institutional power as its concrete manifestation, from academia to the corridors of state power. In the view of Edward Said,

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (Said 1978, 3)

Orientalism fuels and is fueled ultimately by the quest for domination, where the West is the “real” perpetrator, and Islam is the “real” victim. Orientalism makes the argument-ending argument; it plays its “trump” or “race card.”

At the other end of the spectrum, Occidentalism defends against the latter configuration, namely, the West as the perpetrator and *Dar al-Islam* as the victim. Like Orientalism, Occidentalism is likewise complicit in dehumanizing bigotry, in this case, a viewpoint that sees the West as “soulless, decadent, money-grubbing, rootless, faithless, unfeeling parasites” (Buruma and Margalit 2004, 10). The Western mind is secular and scientific, abstract, artificial, and mechanistic, driven by calculating rationality. It is, therefore, ignorant, uninspired, empty, arrogant, and unempathetic, with a questionable moral compass that ultimately leads it to be barbarous. And just like before, playing “the race card” reconfigures: this time, the “real” victim is the West, with the Islamic world to blame. In these two labels, Orientalism and Occidentalism, the perpetrator-victim construct remains inescapable, and we stay stuck in an endless, negative cycle of reciprocal reproach.



Modernity is a critical driving force at the heart of our present-day divisions and conflicts. The revolutionary modern viewpoint, the modern mind, began with a change in our cognitive relation to the world. Empiricism and inductive reasoning supplanted revelation

and deduction, while questioning and intellectual courage emerged to overcome compliance and resignation. The transformation reoriented our approach to understanding and thus our knowledge and interpretation of ourselves and the world. In particular, the idea of progress displaced the embrace of stagnant, hierarchical order and harmony grounded in tradition. At the same time, individualism generally assailed traditional forms of conformity and communal ideas and ideals. As a result, modern thought and thinking transformed our understanding of everything from the universe to human nature.

Modernity gives rise to and propels new faiths and attacks existing ones, creating conditions ripe for discord. Traditional religious beliefs, monarchical rule, and mercantilist ideas were critical casualties of modernity. New secular religions (e.g., nationalism, capitalism) also arose and took hold with the dawn of modernity. The periodic institutional failures of these new, modern faiths, coupled with the erosion of the traditional, create instability and uncertainty that threaten chaos and helplessness. At the same time, the institutional “success” of new, modern faiths also has a shadow side, such as negative externalities, unequal outcomes, and xenophobia. While offering profound benefits, modernity is messy. The success of modernity and its consequent shortcomings form and fuel an environment of decay and destruction, emergence and advance, and foster a revolutionary power that threatens to drive movements of totalitarian entrenchment in reaction. The environment creates a cauldron of flux ripe for friction. The degree of proliferation and intensity of the response arguably correlates to the level of perceived vulnerability.

Modernity often gives rise to a totalitarian fringe in both modern and traditional domains. The propagation of social trauma or turmoil, perceived or actual, coupled with an apparent, inadequate political response or political failure, repeatedly takes the fringe and propels it toward, if not becoming the overwhelming popular viewpoint, then a commanding faction that steamrolls the ill-fated and sweeps along the complicit or even just passive. Modern faiths then create fear in traditional certainty. However, they also respond excessively to tradition or modernity itself (e.g., communism, na-

tionalism). In each case, the totalitarian reaction becomes the obsessive attempt to bring order and control and compulsively dominate or exploit a corrupt, abasing, and ultimately dangerous world. The totalitarian extremes reflect a common totalitarian mind: a rigid, dichotomous inner world that directs and entices toward reduction, centralization, domination, and elevation—that excels at self-deception and misperception in pursuit of security and gratification. The modern and the traditional, independently and in relation, feed the vortices of self-reinforcing polarization, cognitively and emotionally, internally and externally. At best, we find an equilibrium of distaste, maybe disdain. At worst, we spiral toward hatred, violence, and war.

More sinisterly, modernity assaults our traditional way of thinking. It demands the relocation of authority from the given to the experienced and from the transcendent to the immanent. It requires an endless examination and discarding, discounting, or altering of the given. It demands embracing the uncertainty and ambiguity inherent in perpetual flux and requires embracing improvement in progress rather than the status quo or restoration. It insists upon a profound relocation of agency from external to internal, thus demanding a potentially crushing responsibility. It implicitly calls on us to bear the anxiety of these adaptations and accountabilities, bidding us to restrain, contain, manage, and accept. Overall, modernity creates conditions ripe for friction in our relations with the world and others, but, more profoundly, in our relationships with ourselves in our reactions. We struggle to be responsive to ourselves, thereby making it difficult to be open and responsive to others.

A perceived demon lurks relatively hidden in the depths of modernity: nihilism. The uneasy end of the examination of the modern is the death not only of God but also of all gods and the apparent breakdown of the authority of all interpretation systems. A nihilistic faith—to the extent that is not an oxymoron—is a faith based on paradox. Still, the mindset is a powerful weapon for overturning—until it levels all. The weapon risks feeding despair and pointlessness, threatening unbridled uncertainty, ambiguity, and unconquerable imperfection. It exposes the mind to the abyss of nothingness. Socially, it threatens the breakdown of societal values

and norms to a groundless ground (i.e., moral relativism). It likewise risks justifying fringe, revolutionary behavior. Nonetheless, nihilism waits for our contemplative arrival—to apparently terrible, potentially tremendous possibilities. In the meantime, it pokes and prods.

Globalization exacerbates the discord generated by modern thought. Driven in particular by modern technologies (e.g., digital communication, air, land, and sea transport), globalization accelerates global social contact, interconnection, and integration. The heightened relations in globalization, the resulting impacts and responses, and any ensuing transformations occur more extensively, intensely, and rapidly than in the premodern world. Similarly, they occur in the context of a lack of structure or containment, and of a lack of sensitivity in an encounter. Globalization, driven by and driving modernization, exacerbates conditions already rife with friction. One of the great ironies of the modern age then arises and comes into view: the pervasive detachment and disconnection in our so-called interconnected global world.

Religious tradition, in particular, struggles with modernity and modernization, both of which are propelled by globalization. The spiritual response ranges along a continuum: from adoption to rejection of the modern, from reform to amplification of the traditional. Traditional religion faces the impossible task of assimilating the new into the old, not simply in the thought but in the way of thinking. It also frantically attempts to alter the old to incorporate the new, often with curious consequences. Alteration of the existing is the path of reform, to varying degrees, while an inability to integrate or an unwillingness to alter the traditional leaves only rejection. Religious fundamentalism is the closing of ranks around rejection. The modern then responds in turn, not least by redoubling efforts and by further questioning and critiquing.

Modernity and globalization also impact established forms of secular human culture. Equality, rights, and consent took center stage in the political sphere with the rise of modernity and the individual. Institutional governance became a trust of “the people” and their corresponding ends and aims. Group affiliations then found powerful justification as the basis for politically oriented communities, from nation or class (i.e., communism) to gender,

race, sexual orientation, etc. If modernity and its political theory did not exactly elevate identity, they brought it from the background to the fore and infused it with a tricky entitlement. Perfectionistic, compulsively controlling, narcissistic, and even paranoid nationalism rose in turn. The contact between political and religious fundamentalisms so often intensifies and extends each, in a vicious cycle of caustic encounters.

Simultaneously, the individual moved to the center of the modern economic universe. Individual self-interest and free choice (e.g., *laissez-faire*) powered the free market's "invisible hand" and, subsequently, the explosion of capitalism. The idea of progress, articulated in terms of success or happiness, for instance, opened the field vertically, bringing to light concepts such as upward mobility and meritocracy. Modernity may not have invented free-market capitalism, but it unleashed it as a faith. Dark elements of the globalized free market include unequal outcomes and market disruption, leading to labor-market volatility and employment uncertainty. Darker aspects still include economic exploitation and potentially catastrophic externalities (e.g., global warming). Socialism in the political sphere is a modern response to these dark elements, with communism as its fundamentalist expression. As with its religious, fanatical cousin, communism fueled extreme reactions, possibly seen most profoundly in Nazi Germany. Fundamentalisms, one with another, create and exacerbate each other in a vicious vortex of interrelation.



A controversial theory of modern international relations put forward by the noted political scientist Samuel Huntington (1996) — the "clash of civilizations" — provides a reference point for changing course and deepening our understanding of, so as to transcend, the mental shackles of the perpetrator-victim dichotomy. He argues that cultural identity, at the highest level, civilizational identity, is the central force shaping patterns of harmony and struggle in the post-Cold War world:

[Civilization] is thus the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes

humans from other species. It is defined both by common objective elements, such as language, history, religion, customs, institutions, and by the subjective self-identification of people ... The civilization to which he belongs is the broadest level of identification with which he strongly identifies. Civilizations are the biggest "we" within which we feel culturally at home as distinguished from all the other "thems" out there ... (43)

As the argument goes, differences among cultural identities are substantial and fundamental. They are rather uncompromising, making the avoidance and resolution of conflict challenging. Tensions flow from irreconcilable differences and the rigid, resistant nature of civilizational identity. Modernization and globalization complicate matters, creating an environment conducive to argument and hostility. Modernization threatens identity, and globalization is the wildfire that spreads the threat. As civilizations come into more significant contact, traditional identities are under pressure and in flux. The threat of change compels identities to return to their roots, further amplifying boundaries and differences. At the same time, the West's hegemony is receding, creating a vacuum of instability.

The "clash of civilizations" thesis is a Pandora's Box. The theory raises the seemingly inescapable issue of identity, which begins to unsettle our denial about the nature and causation of conflict. Huntington (1996) discusses the conflict between the "new cultural identities" (19) of the civilizational world order. These new identities imply the "old identities" of the Cold War period, driven mainly by political ideology. However, one of the two Cold War identities remains alive and well, and is central to Western civilization. In America, national identity and political ideology continue to overlap significantly. Being American is almost meaningless without a particular political ideology (e.g., "government of the people, by the people, for the people"). In the same vein, the political ideology of the Soviet Union, its allies, and affiliated states was the stifling belief system central to Communist Bloc identity. "Communist" was the answer to the question "Who am I?" — if not overpowering all competitors, then certainly inundating and thereby restricting them while competing with them for allegiance. Therefore, the root of both the Civilizational Clash and the Cold War conflict constructs lies ultimately in identity and the question of identification with what, how, and why.

Even critics of the “clash of civilizations” construct cannot escape identity and the self. One line of criticism of Huntington’s argument is that states and state self-interest matter more than civilizational issues. However, at the very least, identity informs these interests and often defines them. Many of the most dictatorial rulers, who drive entire nations, are significantly propelled by national identity and its correlates. More importantly, and to the point, the ability of leaders to move people, ride massive waves of power, and control dissent typically depends on identity and on a ruler’s ability to tap into and even manufacture desires and fears through group-centered systems of interpretation. These waves generate mass movements of revolution, genocide, conquest, crusade, colonization, and occupation. The ins and outs of identity rule the day, and if authoritarian rule cracks or wavers, the success of any form of government that steps into the power vacuum rests in no small part on the ability to tap into existing identities or manufacture new ones. Even if you accept that states matter more than civilizations, the importance of identity remains central to understanding conflict between groups. Therefore, the criticism around the idea of the “clash of civilizations” misses the forest for the trees: we have lived, do live, and will live in a world of identity systems that come into contact and conflict with one another.

Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations* aims to understand global conflict in the contemporary world. Its agenda, however, leaves the promising door of identity itself unopened. Identity refers to our sense of self. It is a self-concept or interpretation—with social identity, vital to our purposes—formed from cultural systems such as nationality, religion, and language. The self-interpretation provides degrees of understanding of the self, the world, and others. It categorizes belonging and exclusion, furnishes standards of judgment and possibilities, determines authorities, and so on. The understanding then shapes what, and even how, we see, driving at times the perceptual tyranny of what is as it is. Identity likewise influences experience, notably emotion, even often offering a point of view on emotion as such. It directs and fuels motivation, the push and pull of our being, what is desirable or fearsome, what matters, and what does not. It shows us how to be, guiding but also coercing us in our behavior, avoidance, and pursuit, ranging from altruism to hostility. Overall, identity serves us in living, protecting, and promoting ourselves.

Identity arises in identification, a process of making clear and uniting. In this case, clarifying involves understanding something as something and distinguishing it from something else in a network of meanings. The making clear of identity develops through socialization, a process of teaching, whether active or not, and learning. The sea we swim in, our social environment, is our teacher. As students, we learn or acquire, thereby forming a union of the self with a world (e.g., the Western world) and of humanity with identity systems or faiths. The union is participation, creating a mental and emotional bond of association or attachment of varying strength (i.e., importance). The bond involves possession, as in adoption or ownership, but also, notably, as being possessed. The result is a model of identity based on a way of being and, in relation to the world, a structured, dynamic, self-world system. The nature of the union suggests that identity itself is a process in which our way of being and our understanding are unified.

It is worth observing that a threat to the process endangers the self. Threats arise in various contexts, undermining understanding and value through perceptions of challenge, questioning, invalidation, and related experiences. Threat exploits the union in identity and, in so doing, assaults the individual. The ultimate threat is puncturing the container (façade) of identity as such, disclosing nothingness and psychological death. All manner of protection “out there” and “in here” meets these threats, and in some cases, protections become ends in themselves, overtly independent of the threats they are meant to address (e.g., greed). The world responds to protection with more protection, ironically turning our fears into reality and conjuring the monster only first imagined. At the extremes of fundamentalism, the hardening of identity is a notable guardian, as we spontaneously hold on more tightly “inside” while often simultaneously seeking to conform our environment to mirror our controlled mind. Polarization reigns, and mistrust and vicious cycles surface. The curtain rises again on the long-running theater of the absurd.



With this understanding in place, the “clash of civilizations” opens the door to a holistic new description—a new construct to view

large swaths of intergroup conflict. It is a dialectic, an ongoing, dynamic, and intricate interchange evolving through actions and reactions embedded in the fabric of identities, fueled by the interplay of differences (e.g., beliefs, values, perspectives, interests), and ultimately motivated by a universal concern for our being and ways of being. Informally, it is a dance, albeit a deadly dance, an iterative series or pattern of behaviors, each a response to what came before, guided by the underlying music of thought and feeling played by our identifications in association with ourselves alone and in encounters across time, from moments to millennia across and notably within civilizations. The dance turns to the tune of a universal, understandable self-world care or concern, itself a reframing of the meaning of fear and anxiety, and a corresponding endeavor to persist and prosper expressed through participation in group identity—in other words, through an interpretation system or faith. These systems unconsciously highlight and blind. They shape how we interpret and appraise threats and support, thereby influencing how we feel and what we do. Today, our dance occurs among system-bearing groups and within ourselves. Significantly, the beliefs and values of identities and, by extension, civilizations are the fountainhead of much stubborn conflict. In the process, we dance with each other and ourselves.

Yet, in understanding conflict this way, a new construct offers a different perspective on its resolution. Hidden concerns lurk in behavior, and behavior is the attempt to convey and gain a response to those concerns. Behavior is then unspoken communication, and the messages often have hidden meanings waiting to be unearthed. Conflicts are not, first and foremost, nor notably only, an issue of perpetrator-victim, external blame, contempt, and defensiveness. Instead, they are conversations, crying principally for interpretation of what they mean and what is being said (including in what is not said). They involve impulse, triggering, regulation, choice, and responsibility. They are not an inevitable clash born of conflicting values and beliefs. Hostility is a choice. Stating it as inevitable or inherently necessary (e.g., class struggle) justifies it, making it more likely, almost inescapable. Instead, conflicts are occasions for problem-solving, openness, and flexibility in dialogue: accepting, navigating, negotiating, and transcending the incompatible and understanding and solving the reconcilable. In these encounters, trust

and trustworthiness, commitment and integrity, and internal and external understanding are all at issue.

This new construct thus offers a new perspective on our fractured contemporary world. In particular, redefinition first names our presently unnamed, compulsive condition. The “deadly dance” between the West and the Islamic World expresses unleashed and, at times, unhinged resentment born of perceived injustice fed by perceived powerlessness and wounded pride, triggering defensiveness in response, expressed as innocent victimhood and righteous indignation. Protest and defensiveness, fear and anger stimulate vicious cycles of reciprocal blame, fueling rage and contempt. Redefinition from perpetrator-victim to an identity-driven dance does not participate in the “blame game.” Subsequently, it offers the opportunity to rethink what is happening, including our part in the dance. It offers the opportunity to move from contemptuous drama to problem-solving and provides guidance on where to look, what to ask, and what to do.

With this construct in mind, the purpose of this work is not to participate in the toxic pattern of “us” and “them” perpetrator-victim talk as historically manifested. It is not an attempt to pick a side or win a war of words. That dead horse has been beaten with ferocity. The effort makes perpetrators and victims of those attempting it, and the results speak for themselves. At that same time, our purpose is not to save or rescue the victim from persecution or the perpetrator from themselves. That, too, plays into and thus perpetuates the cycle. The immediate end of this work is both less and more ambitious. First and foremost, it is simply to disclose and draw attention to our universal participation in faiths and the hidden commonality in and dialectical nature of such participation—critically, between or among faiths. Self-evident recognition opens and offers potential. To a degree, another end is simply to draw attention to our participation in the drama at hand (and by inference, most all divisive drama)—our responsibility, dare we say guilt, and our oblivious identification and superficial self-relation as culprits. This process helps move us from simple participation to participant observation and, potentially, openness. The quest for openness suggests this work’s surely quixotic why: to generate human connection and accord.

The method employed to these ends is, by and large, examination and interpretation, turned on the ideas and ideals of our present-day spiritual and secular faiths. Examination entails looking closely to assess, inquire, and question. Interpretation entails giving meaning and illuminating the unknown. The common thread throughout our analysis is to see and connect, seeking the unseen and saying the unsaid, and critically, the unsayable. It is to bring to light what is in darkness, the hidden and not yet understood. The work of examination and interpretation begins with the development of a lens, a tool of investigation and connection. In pursuit of a universal ground, that lens is existential. The training of the lens turns first on the great Abrahamic traditions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, understanding that each stands at the center, tacitly or overtly, of relevant cultures and plays a role, even in echo, in forming “who we are” now and, directly or indirectly, how we dance. It then focuses on the ideas and ideals grounding and governing modernity, including secular faiths central to American identity, understanding that these systems, with modernity as the fountainhead, form or exert pressure on, as the case may be, “who we are,” and thus play a role in our present-day relations.

The manner of examination and interpretation involves taking a particular position defined by a set of roles. The first is that of the observer, focusing attention, looking carefully, noticing, and seeing. Metaphorically, it is to listen and hear. The role demands curiosity turned not only toward the explicit but also the implied. Interest calls perceptiveness, the capacity to dive, drive, and grasp. The second role is as a translator. This role necessitates expressing meaning, not to prescribe but to describe, most notably what is seen and what is unseen. The overt and the covert, the said and the unsaid, exist in different forms and thus, in a sense, speak differing languages. An interpretation is therefore a translation. Translation importantly presumes an intention of faithfulness, which solicits presence yet separation in interest. Faithfulness notwithstanding, the nature and manner of interpretation, as well as the present subject matter, carry risks to accuracy. Still, examination calls for a desire to inquire, grasp, state, and extend rather than defend and win. It requires that we stand open to what discloses itself. That mindset is the way we undertake our work.

Chapter Two: Existential Lens

We so often stand in a hapless fog, locked in a destructive pattern of reciprocal blame. The pattern fosters a lack of trust, openness, and responsiveness, and it feeds pervasive disconnection and division. It drives drama rather than problem-solving. Without transcending insight, fundamental transformation—not the change born of new policies or coercion, but an adaptable, sustainable revolution—is improbable, maybe even impossible. However, with understanding comes possibility. The proper examination lens facilitates this understanding and connective insight. It offers revelatory power. Several lenses are possible (e.g., Freudian, Marxist), but many are inadequate or unsuitable for the task, lacking universality or foundational appeal. To achieve the widest application, our lens should instead be existential, constructed not to observe the far-off or reveal the small, but to disclose the unknown and connect the dispersed, facilitating direction and focus toward grasping the dynamics that color and fuel our current predicaments.

A particular attitude, at once both a way and a state of being, shapes our existential lens. The essence of the outlook is self-consciousness, a profound, invading, even violating, stripped-away awareness of the self, the world, and their relation. As a way of being, it begins with an ambitious, almost addictive curiosity, an uneasy unwillingness to accept the complacency of the given. This way of being demands courage—firmness of mind in a penetrating, frequently troubling, and sometimes even mind-bending process. It calls for repudiating denial in favor of acceptance.

Once discovered, self-consciousness is a mindset of no return. It becomes a state of being—a state that “robs the world of its authority, its given values, and ... robs consciousness of its innocence” (Solomon 1974, xvi). In this sense, the attitude is notably postmodern. Denial of the contingency of our interpretation systems does not make it so; however, turning toward anxiety in self-conscious acceptance relieves and transforms. Therefore, the state of self-consciousness opens the door to congruent and accurate self- and interpersonal relations. The ideas drawn upon to construct our lens—

answers to challenging, anxiety-provoking questions—represent this particular outlook's concrete expression.

SELF AND WORLD

The self is the locus of human action. It is also a node in the vast network of human civilization. Still, the self does not exist without a world, a matrix of shared understandings and practices in a dwelling space. Interpretation systems stand at the center of this sense of the world, each grounded in implied covenants. The self is the bearer of these systems, where bearing means giving life to a way or style of being. At the same time, however, the self is critically and curiously a world begetter. The self, or more accurately, a group of selves, makes a world possible. The self and the world exist and persist in concert. In this context, the “clash of civilizations” is an encounter of worlds, understood as styles of being (e.g., “the Muslim world” or “the Western world”). It is a deadly dance within and across civilizations, composed of individuals and groups who bear faith. The structure of the self and its relation to the world becomes the focal point of our lens.

Inescapable polarities define the self-world relationship, shaping human existence, individual identity, and social engagement (Tillich 1951). The self is first individuated or self-integrated, yet participates in a larger, participatory context of belonging, such as an environment or a world. It is also dynamic or self-creative, yet always within existing forms or structures (e.g., self-schemes or personality) that provide continuity over time. Finally, it is self-determining and self-transcending. It can pause, listen, reflect, choose, and creatively develop not simply toward more, but toward higher or more meaningful outcomes. However, that freedom is not unlimited; it unfolds within and is constrained by a matrix of givenness—biological, historical, cultural, etc. Thus, the self reveals itself not as something separate from, standing above a world, but as a living, creative, self-transcending process constrained and limited by its relations, existing structures, and the conditions it is born into and chooses.

Social worlds emerge and are shaped by the same ontological tensions, thereby manifesting them. Our worlds are, first and foremost, participatory in nature, with commonality or connection

formed through the interrelations among individuals embedded in shared, interdependent contexts. Collective life is also structured by inherited forms — traditions, norms, roles, values, institutions — that provide continuity and coherence. However, these forms are never fixed; they develop, evolve, and adapt as individuals and communities respond and create. Finally, our worlds express a destiny — not a predetermined fate, but the givenness of historical, cultural, and environmental conditions that provide context and frame possibilities. Within these bounds, individuals act with intention, sometimes exerting a powerful transformative influence, becoming begetters of worlds and opening new, higher paths for a community. In this way, civilizations emerge, thrive, or decline through inescapable tension, negotiating the polarities of unity and individuality, continuity and progress, and givenness and transcendence.

Personal and collective polarization arise when these polarities are dishonored. The tensions become unbalanced, and constructive engagement fractures into exaggerated, self-reinforcing extremes. Polarization manifests either as isolation, alienation, self-obsession, and the erosion of communal bonds, or as the suppression of individuality and the loss of personal distinctiveness — with atomization and collectivism as opposing poles. It also appears as unchecked disruption and instability with the loss of continuity and tradition, or, conversely, as rigidity, stagnation, repression, and the foreclosure of innovation and growth. Anarchy and authoritarianism thus reflect the collapse of polarity, whether through excessive dynamism or rigid form. Finally, polarization manifests as profanization: the loss of depth, significance, and ultimacy, issuing either in despair or in fanatical zeal, false ultimacy, and the absolutization of the concrete. Honoring these polarities in creative tension — balancing individuality and community, change and structure, and transcendence with humility and courage — reduces the risk of polarization. Vulnerability, at base anxiety, remains the great polarizer.

These polarities are not theoretical; they are lived and mediated. They form through the self and its relation to the world. As such, an examination of the self's constitution and its relation to the world offers clarity into how these principles are navigated or dis-

torted, providing essential material for our existential lens. This effort requires shifting to an exploration of two foundational worldviews: the first, a dualistic Cartesian outlook, is pervasively embedded in modern life; the latter, a holistic Heideggerian approach, remains emergent. Each view offers a distinct account of how the self knows, relates, acts, and ultimately is in the world.

Having established the frame, our lens continues to take shape through an exploration of the dualistic Cartesian tradition. The dualistic analysis characterizes the self as an actively aware, responsible subject (“I”) and a constructed, interpreted object (“Me”), together a “thinking thing,” highlighting capacities such as consciousness, reflexivity, agency, and reason. This “thinking thing” relates to the world as a separate, objective realm to be observed, represented, and mastered through reason. The viewpoint serves as the central perspective of modernity, unleashing the power of the human capacity for rational control, mastery, and shaping of self and world.

The self itself fits within the dualistic framework of subject and object, specifically as *I* and *me*. As the noted psychologist William James ([1892] 1913) states,

Whatever I may be thinking of, I am always at the same time more or less aware of myself, of my personal existence. At the same time it is I who am aware; so that the total self of me, being as it were duplex, partly known and partly knower, partly object and partly subject, must have two aspects discriminate in it, of which for shortness we may call one the Me and the other the I. (176)

The *I* has the capacity of awareness. Awareness, in turn, is an activity that enlightens or discloses; it is always the awareness of or about something (Sartre [1943] 1984). At any given moment, consciousness may be aware of any number of objects, some of which may be objects it calls me (James [1892] 1913). Feelings and thoughts are central objects of consciousness.

Awareness provides the potential for self-awareness or reflexivity. Reflexivity drives the experience and, thus, knowledge of the *I* as the self—as subjectivity (i.e., “witness consciousness”). It culminates in the understanding of the *I* as consciousness itself. When experienced, the knowledge is beyond doubt. However, on the other hand, the *I* cannot be found; it does not exist like other objects.

As Sartre (1943/1984) reminds us, it is transcendent and, strictly speaking, nothing or, more particularly, nothingness. This form of reflexive realization led to the profound Buddhist teaching, over two thousand years before Sartre, of *śūnyatā*, meaning “emptiness” or “void,” and ultimately *anatman* (meaning “non-self”).

Reflexivity also reveals agency. The *I* is the ultimate arbiter of decisions. It likewise causes, affecting through command. Significantly, the *I* maintains the power to pause, to inhibit, which opens possibilities. As the existential psychologist Rollo May (1981) aptly summarized, the power of the *I* as agency entails “the capacity to pause in the midst of stimuli from all directions, and in the pause to throw our weight toward this response rather than that one” (163). Notably, acting and choosing are inseparable. Every decision involves action, acted upon or not, and every effort consists of a decision, intentional or implied.

The knowledge of agency enlightens responsibility.

... man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world ... We are taking the word ‘responsibility’ in its ordinary sense as ‘consciousness (of) being the incontestable author of an event or of an object.’ ... [T]he responsibility of the for-itself [conscious being] is overwhelming ... (Sartre [1943] 1984, 707)

Utilizing the term freedom for agency, Paul Tillich (1951) further explains the threat of responsibility:

[T]he obligation of the person who has freedom to respond if he is questioned ... He cannot ask anyone else to answer for him. He alone must respond ... Each of us is responsible for what has happened through the center of his self, the seat and organ of his freedom. (184)

The capacity to question and judge oneself completes the system of responsibility. Agency and responsibility are inseparable, flowing from the same source and, thus, exploding into being simultaneously.

Reflexivity likewise discloses the capacity of reason. In an idiomatic sense, reason is the cognitive capacity to grasp and shape our world. As the theologian Paul Tillich (1951) explains, “‘Grasping,’ in this context, has the connotation of penetrating into the depth, into the essential nature of a thing or an event, of under-

standing and expressing it" (76). In grasping, the meaning of something makes sense. It is known. A bridge or transaction occurs. We have it: how it is, how it works, how to do it, or the like. Knowing makes it part of us. René Descartes (1998 version) famously articulated *the* contextually relevant grasping experience of "I am":

Thus, after everything has been most carefully weighed, it must finally be established that this pronouncement "I am, I exist" is necessarily true every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind. (64)

Even in denial, the self is grasped:

... while I wanted thus to think that everything was false, it necessarily had to be the case that I, who was thinking this, was something. ... "*I think, therefore I am*" — was so firm and so assured that all the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics were incapable of shaking it ... (18)

On the other hand, shaping the world after grasping it entails changing it by arranging or organizing, making, molding, forming, constructing, and the like. Tillich again points the way: "'Shaping,' in this context, has the connotation of transforming a given material into a Gestalt, a living structure which has the power of being" (Tillich 1951, 76). Through shaping, something comes into existence, with intention, which is to say, shaped toward some purpose or aim. Shaping leverages various cognitive functions, for instance, the ability 1) to abstract and extend and thus to deduce or infer; 2) to compare, contrast, differentiate, categorize, imagine, and compute; 3) to assess or judge as good or bad, right or wrong, righteous or evil; and 4) to interpret, which is to say, to give meaning. In grasping and shaping, the *I* cocreates its inner and outer world in a dynamic, dialectical engagement.

If the *I* is the knower, the *me*, on the other hand, is the known (James [1892] 1913). It is the content of the self, a cognitive construct, my identity, gathered as a set of interpretations that answer the question: "Who am I?" This understanding is self-known. With time, it becomes part of memory, which gives the self continuity. Aspects of the *me* are objectively given, so to speak (e.g., physical traits). Still, interpretation defines this givenness, and other aspects of the *me* are subjectively given, constructed and acquired in the

relation of self and world. Identification with interpretation systems (e.g., I am Muslim, American, a lawyer) comprises the heart of the subjectively given. Notably, there is a blurred distinction between me and mine, between being and belonging. "Belonging to me" then extends to "me belonging to it." As such, as goes mine, so goes *me* (James [1890] 1950). The objectively given and subjectively given, together the objects of the "me," make up the mask of the self, the known *me*.

The relationship between the *I* and the *me* is obscure. Søren Kierkegaard ([1849] 1983) offers a powerful though obscure-sounding construct of disclosure: "The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self ..." (13). To interpret this articulation, the self is a relation, hence the descriptor self-relation. It exists as a connection and, conversely, as shown in anxiety, is at risk in the absence of a connection. As a relation, the self connects, attaches, or, maybe better, merges in the association. More specifically, the self relates itself (*I*) to its self (*me*). Each belongs to the other and is part of the same system, working together to form a whole. The *I* infuses subjective associations (e.g., I am American) with subjectivity. One of the most potent associations is simply a name ("... a rose by any other name would smell as sweet"). The *I* lingers embedded in the *me*, at once possessing and, as embedded, being possessed. The *me* rises and flourishes. Importantly, this relational dynamic is consistent with ideas articulated in Buddhist teachings for millennia, described in terms such as attachment, clinging, illusion, or ignorance. The self of *I* and *me* discloses itself as a holistic, self-aware, first-person system linked by common belongingness. The common belongingness is my self — *I* and *me*.

The *me* includes the unconscious, that is, the as-yet-undisclosed or unrevealed aspects of me. Freud ([1900] 1994) surmised that inexplicable behavioral gaps could not be explained without recourse to unconscious psychological processes. Unconscious then became an adjective describing a type of mental process or content. Rollo May (1983) defines this understanding as "... those potentialities for knowing and experiencing which the individual cannot or will not actualize" (18). "Cannot" means that an object is too threatening to the self, but also arguably means "an issue of conception," the material being (presently) incomprehensible. "Cannot" notably

stokes the debate of “will not” — the unconscious describing a holistic phenomenon, a place where mental processes occur and content lies. Carl Jung (1976) and Viktor Frankl ([1948] 2000) extended this conception to the “collective unconscious” (Jung) and “spiritual unconscious” (Frankl).

Finally, the self exists in fundamental separation from the world, an external, objective realm composed of measurable matter. The world, effectively an “extended thing” or “extended substance,” is governed by comprehensible laws and is available for rational observation and manipulation. It is machine-like, not imbued with inherent meaning, but becomes intelligible and purposeful through the self’s cognitive activity. The “thinking thing” relates to this world through representation or depiction, constructing models of its structure to understand, predict, and ultimately master it. In this framework, the world is a field of objects to be grasped and shaped by the autonomous agent’s reason and will. As such, the self stands apart from and above what it knows, assuming responsibility for organizing and imposing meaning onto a passive, external reality.

As we shall see, the dualistic worldview is central to the dominant modern perspective, emphasizing individuality, progress, and freedom. The premodern worldview favored their counterparts: participation over individuation, form over change, and destiny over transcendence, expressed in communalism, hierarchical order, and fatalism. In response to perceived constraints of the premodern, the dualistic expression emerged as a form of liberation, but at a cost over time. It privileges the individual, undermining interconnectedness and threatening alienation, isolation, and the erosion of shared meaning. It favors dynamic, creative progress, elevating change and innovation while discounting continuity, structure, and tradition, thus threatening instability and ultimately anarchy. It elevates freedom and asserts agency, but does so in a preoccupation with the secular. In disrupting the relative harmony and hope of the premodern mind, the empowering dualistic view disrupted social balance and fractured inherited, participatory structures, threatening to empty life of meaning. Consequently, it generated reactive opposition, contributing to cycles of polarization

through both its assertions and the reactions it provoked. A different interpretation of the self, the world, and their relation that honors their tensions offers new possibilities.

The construction of our lens now calls for a holistic, phenomenological, “Heideggerian” interpretation of the self-world relation—an ontology that uncovers the underlying conditions that make the familiar dualism between self and world possible and, as such, derivative. In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger ([1927] 1962) reopens the question of the meaning of being by distinguishing between being and beings, between the ongoing activity of existing and the entities that merely occur. Human beings, he argues, have a distinctive manner of being—a *way of being* (Dreyfus 1991)—that cannot be reduced to the kind of existence exhibited by other entities. Heidegger’s project, then, aims to reveal what usually remains hidden: the structural conditions or characteristics that make our capacity “to be” possible at all. His most important contribution is arguably the disclosure of this hidden ground and, with it, the possibility of a revolutionary shift in how we understand ourselves and our relation to the world.

Heidegger ([1927] 1962) grounds his analysis of being in the phenomena of human existence, i.e., our way of being, which he terms *Dasein* (“being-there”). *Dasein* is the entity for whom the “happening” of being matters, as he says, “is itself an issue” (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 458). That is, we are the kind of beings who must always live out and answer the question of our own existence through our actions, consciously or not. For this reason, Heidegger defines *Dasein*’s essential way of being as care. Our being has a hold of us, in a manner of speaking. It is always important, of consequence, and, therefore, fundamentally matters to us. Care ties to the fact that *Dasein*’s being is always “mine”; it is personal and non-transferable. Furthermore, care expresses itself through three mutually integrated, temporally structured characteristics: being already situated in a given world (past), engaging in constant involvement and concern with that world (present), and actively projecting possibilities as the shape life may take (future). Because my “being-there” is defined by care and concretely my own, the question of my being becomes an inescapable, individual task and responsibility that I must take up in living my existence.

Heidegger ([1927] 1962) argues that *Dasein's* existence is inseparable from the world it inhabits, emerging together in a unified phenomenon. Our most basic way of existing, therefore, is not detached self-reflection but practical, absorbed involvement in the world. We do not stand over against a world as an inner subject facing an external realm. Instead, we dwell in the world as a fish inhabits the water that sustains it. From the outset, we are already engaged with a world – moving within its possibilities, responding to its demands, and expressing ourselves in terms of it. In this sense, we are inseparable from the world we inhabit: “If the ‘cogito sum’ is to serve as the point of departure ... the ‘sum’ [I am] is then asserted first, and indeed in the sense that ‘I am in a world’” (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 254). Thus, what we ordinarily divide into “self” and “world” is in fact two inseparable aspects of a unified phenomenon, what Heidegger calls “being-in-the-world” (65), the foundational structure of all later distinctions.

“The world” is the structured context of significance, not a spatial container holding entities, but the meaningful within which *Dasein* always already exists and dwells. In ordinary usage, “world” can mean the spatial totality of “stuff,” for instance, the universe. However, Heidegger ([1927] 1962) principally uses “world” in the context of being. In this sense, it means the historically and culturally shaped nexus of referential involvements (e.g., practices and understandings) within which entities appear as anything and possibilities appear as possible. These involvements gather as a cascade of “wherefores” (e.g., swinging a hammer to drive a nail to build a house for shelter in the service of our possibilities) that express what matters. Individual worlds, such as “the business world,” “the sports world,” or, for our purposes, “the Western world” or “the Muslim world,” are concrete regional configurations of this nexus that express a style of being.

Entities in the world appear in different modes of encounter, and these modes illuminate the mutual dependence of *Dasein* and the world. On the one hand, entities that are there are “present-at-hand”; they are “occurrent” (Dreyfus 1991), like a rock or cloud. Our mode of relating is wonder, curiosity, observation, and the like. On the other hand, most entities are “ready-to-hand,” available as tools *writ large* within a larger, unified equipment totality. Our

mode of relating to them is use. Tools appear as the ready-to-hand when functioning smoothly in practical activity and become noticeable as such when they break, resist use, or fail to fulfill their task. The contrast between occurrent objects and ready-to-hand equipment marks the difference between reflective presence and absorbed, unreflective involvement. Crucially, it is *Dasein's* concerned activity that “frees” entities to show up in these modes. Through its participation, *Dasein* lets them become what they can be. The world, then, is not simply a collection of things but the meaningful structure that arises through *Dasein's* involvement: each becomes intelligible only through the other.

Dasein is from the outset in a shared world. Our involvement with the world necessitates participation with others. The world is a “with-world” (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 155). *Dasein*, therefore, always finds itself grounded in and expressed through shared forms of involvement, what Heidegger ([1927] 1962) calls *das Man*, translated as “the They” or “the One” (as in “this is what one does, says, thinks, etc.”). “The One” is our shared world, including its normativity, the mostly unarticulated, public styles or ways of being, the normalcy of a culture or civilization. To that end, civilization is everywhere, yet nowhere in particular; it is everyone, but no one specifically. Every society interprets what it means to be in that world, and every *Dasein* grows up and lives within these interpretations.

“Being-with” then grounds *Dasein's* everyday “who,” since *Dasein* inherits its self-understanding from the shared interpretations of its world. The shared world, like *Dasein*, functions as an opening in which meaning and possibility unfold, taking shape through the practices and interpretations that communally bind us together. Because of the world’s existence, *Dasein* comes into being, and through this existence, its possibilities are disclosed and structured.

... *Dasein* has grown up both into and in a traditional way of interpreting itself: in terms of this it understands itself proximally and, within a certain range, constantly. By this understanding, the possibilities of its Being are disclosed and regulated. Its own past – and this always means the past of its ‘generation’ – is not something which follows along after *Dasein*, but something which already goes ahead of it. (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 41)

Having “grown up into and in” and belonging to a world, *Dasein*’s commonplace self (“who”) is then “the One-self”:

The Self of everyday *Dasein* is the *they-[one]-self*. ... Proximally, it is not “I”, in the sense of my own Self, that “am,” but rather the Others, whose way is that of the “they.” In terms of the “they,” and as the “they,” I am “given” proximally to “myself.” (167)

“The One-self” is our typical manifestation of identity (e.g., nationality, ethnicity or race, religion, socioeconomic class, gender), the inherited interpretations through which we understand who we are.

Heidegger ([1927] 1962) subsequently turns to the structure that makes “the who,” “worldhood,” and any encounter intelligible in the first place: “being-in” as such and the constitution of *Dasein*’s “there.” *Dasein* is not merely located in a world but is the clearing in which being and beings can appear at all. In explicating Being-in, Heidegger shows that *Dasein*’s “there” names this structural openness through which entities can show up as present, absent, significant, or concealed. Said differently, we make the world intelligible by being us, the openness through which things can show up. Heidegger describes this openness figuratively as a *lumen naturale*: *Dasein* is “illuminated” in itself, not by something (e.g., consciousness) but because its very being (i.e., way of being) is a clearing. The world, as the shared context of the “with-world,” arises through this clearing. Heidegger’s next task is to articulate the existential constitution of the “there” — the structures that make the disclosedness of both self and world possible.

Facticity refers to the condition of finding ourselves “being-already-in” (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 293) conditions that, at root, we did not choose. The condition corresponds to the past. “Thrownness” names the condition of already being delivered into these circumstances and of finding ourselves in them, having to live them out. We find ourselves in a particular place, already engaged with a world and situated in circumstances, some chosen but many not, that shape and constrain us. Attunement refers to our openness and responsiveness in such conditions. Our “state of mind” reflects how we find ourselves, i.e., how attunement, mostly prereflectively,

manifests in each moment of our lives. Moods are not private feelings but particular manifestations of the unified phenomenon of being, disclosing how we find ourselves and, in relation, our relation to circumstances. More deeply, moods reveal our situatedness within circumstances, our “thrownness” or “being-already-in” as such, and our responsibility for how we live them. Anxiety, the most revealing mood for Heidegger, occurs in the removal of familiar meanings and shows our bare condition of being. In anxiety, we recognize that care is the foundation of our involvement in the world and that our life is ours to take up.

Existentiality names *Dasein*’s condition of being “ahead-of-itself” (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 293), always already projecting into possibilities that matter for its life. It corresponds to the future. Understanding is the basic way this projection takes place—in the first place, a primordial know-how that reveals some possibilities as meaningful and others as unavailable. In everyday involvement, understanding manifests as the implicit grasp of what makes sense to do and how to navigate within a situation. Interpretation arises from this know-how and becomes the seeing of “something as something” (89), the articulation of the world’s significance as it is encountered. Through interpretation, things (e.g., tools, threats) appear as meaningful, allowing *Dasein* to navigate a world structured by significance. Moreover, interpretation occurs within a constant, circular process: we understand the situation from the details, and those details make sense only in light of the whole. In its most explicit form, interpretation becomes assertion, presenting something as something in a communicable way. These structures ultimately reveal how *Dasein* is responsible for taking up its possibilities and shaping what its being will become.

Fallenness refers to *Dasein*’s tendency to be absorbed in an everyday world, defined by its constant “being alongside” (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 293) entities in the world. It corresponds to the present. The term names *Dasein*’s tendency “to fall” into what occupies it, to be “worldly” in a manner of speaking, and to lose sight of itself as the being whose way of being is at issue. In this condition, *Dasein* is pulled along by distractions, routines, and the like that seem to arise naturally. It adopts patterns and interpreta-

tions already circulating in the public world, often without recognizing how they shape what matters and what recedes into the background. Distraction with the world, such as preoccupation with common assumptions, social politeness, or commonplace novelties, expresses this drift by encouraging *Dasein* to conform, “levelling down” (165) to only what is familiar and expected. Everyday distraction obscures *Dasein*’s capacity to understand itself and to take up its existence as its own. The phenomenon of “the One” shows this most clearly, since it presents shared norms as predetermined possibilities. Fallenness names *Dasein* as being lost in the world and lost to itself. Yet it can also regain itself, owning its way of being as authenticity. This possibility of both loss and retrieval suggests that care encompasses not only the tendency to drift away from ourselves but also the capacity to return and claim ourselves.

In contrast to the divided structure of dualism, the holistic Heideggerian orientation reframes the self-world relation toward an interwoven phenomenon. While the Cartesian view drives to individuation and assertion of autonomy and independence, the Heideggerian orientation reminds us of our participation, illuminating relational embeddedness and interdependence. The holistic view offers a path toward a mode of relation that reintegrates what modernity has “torn asunder” in reaction to premodernity’s oppressive belonging—toward honoring tension expressed as individualized participation, progressive identity, and rooted transcendence—and, in doing so, potentially adapts the modern mind. Reintegration awakens sensitivity to interconnectedness, impermanence, and imperfection, along with their generative counterparts, reciprocity, transformation, and emergence. It also heightens awareness of internal tensions between and within these principles (individuation-participation, dynamics-form, freedom-destiny) and the associated risks of polarization and reactionary collapse. It gestures toward a possibility beyond polarization and conflict: not a return to or a reenvisioning of the premodern or a reassertion of atomized autonomy, but a way of being rooted and responsive, attuned to what is, and dwelling in care as part of a broader style of encountering and stewarding.

SELF-AFFIRMATION AND ANXIETY

While the Cartesian perspective remains analytically useful, the explanatory power and transformative potential of the holistic Heideggerian understanding compels us to keep it close at hand during our inquiry. From that vantage point, the self does not exist in isolation but arises within a world, a network of shared understandings and practices in a space. It is both shaped by this world and capable of shaping it. Being-in-the-world is not passive. It does not merely inhabit; it lives, itself notably part and parcel of, or a microcosm of, what is (Tillich 1951). To uncover the motivational structure that drives human existence is to better understand living and, more to the point for our purposes, conflict. What matters to us, what we care about—ultimately, our being as such—is the engine of our action and, tragically, suffering. Beneath the surface of conflict lies the restlessness of a self compelled to affirm itself in a threatening, yet bountiful, awe-inspiring world. In caring, then, lies both our possibility and our vulnerability. To understand self-affirmation and anxiety is to set the stage to understand the actions that shape how we clash.

As the impulse of action, motivation then takes center stage. What do we seek, and what do we seek to avoid? What do we need or desire, and what do we fear? Motivation compels action, not aimlessly but purposefully. It urges through desire, points in a direction, and manifests as “yes” or “no.” Risk marks danger to avoid, while reward stimulates pursuit. Fulfillment, relief, and satiation are the ultimate ends. Drives define the innate expression of motivation, while motives articulate the interpreted construction. Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation represent the poles of the self-world relation. However, each form depends upon opposing poles to manifest—internal impulse and external end. Overall, understanding motivation is about giving reasons to action. Reasons explain and make intelligible and, thus, shape and deepen understanding. Grasping cause, in turn, offers the possibility of shaping an alternative response. It provides the potential for growth and transcendence, moving beyond mindless repetition toward problem-solving and progress.

Anxiety facilitates understanding of motivation. Søren Kierkegaard ([1844] 1980) distinguished fear from anxiety: fear has a determinate object – we are afraid *of* something – whereas anxiety is anticipatory and, in a sense, objectless – we are anxious *about* something. Anticipation thus becomes ultimate anticipation, the threatened breakdown of being-in-the-world, of being-there. As Heidegger ([1927] 1962) writes, in anxiety, “*Dasein* finds itself face-to-face with the ‘nothing’ of the possible impossibility of its existence” (310). This anticipatory quality underlies fear itself. Fear is anxiety rendered concrete, with anxiety always beneath it (May 1977). In anxiety, the self confronts its finitude and nonbeing: “finitude in awareness is anxiety” (191); it is “the state in which a being is aware of its possible nonbeing” (Tillich 1952, 35). Faced with nothingness and inexplicability, being-there flees (Heidegger [1927] 1962). It compulsively restores itself, working to maintain, retune, and preserve its existence. The transformation of anxiety into fear objectifies the threat, attempting to maintain the self before the face-to-face encounter with nothingness (Tillich 1952). Anxiety thus functions as the barbed wire of motivation, both constraining and driving action.

Anxiety reveals “being an issue,” or care, what might be called “the will to be,” as the motivation of motivation. Mattering is what being an issue means in interpretation. Holistically, the self or, more broadly, being-there matters to itself. It is self-referentially, inherently valuable, of consequence, or of significance to itself. Sociality extends mattering in space, while generationality extends it in time. Both create tension and complexity in the expression of care. Mattering makes values and the valuation of values possible, while values themselves point to mattering. Whether self- or social-focused, protective or promotional, values serve as a rubric for evaluation, orienting practice within life’s masterclass of individualized care. Valuation itself enables orientation in evaluation absolutely, that is, ultimately. Mattering similarly gives value to ends and goals, relatively and absolutely. Whether happiness, anger, fear, despair, or disgust, emotions present as evaluations that are, ultimately, relative to matters of concern. Each emotion denotes liking or disliking and spurs behavior. Despair, in particular, is the loss of care in hopelessness, rendering anxiety more or less impotent, as

evidenced by suicide. Emotions associate with each other and become motivations themselves. Ultimately, being an issue serves maintenance toward continuation in the face of nothingness. Consequently, mattering is the governing dynamic of motive.

Mattering and anxiety manifest in self-affirmation, an elusive term often conflated with narcissism. Instead, self-affirmation is the endeavor to persist, to continue in existence (Tillich 1952). Endeavor implies impulse and signifies process, while persistence defines standards and aims. Self-affirmation is then both process and purpose, an end in itself. As a series of acts, self-affirmation is a purposeful process over time, whether conscious or unconscious, authentic or inauthentic, constructive or destructive—a way of living in a constant attempt to preserve (at a minimum) and realize (at best) in a dynamic, fluid encounter with the world. Notably, selfishness and selflessness are each evidence of the endeavor to persist, corresponding to self-world poles. Self-affirmation unites humanity in universal equality: we all care about our thrown possibility and endeavor to persist in the face of nonbeing. This unity recontextualizes behavior, opens relational possibilities, and offers a universal standard of evaluation.

Affirmation encompasses both protective and promotional functions, exercised independently and in mutual service. The protective defends, shores up, strengthens, solidifies, etc. It directly addresses vulnerability and anxiety. The promotional nurtures, fosters, realizes, achieves, and so on. Affirmation predisposes us toward what validates, confirms, or ensures our being and way of being. It predisposes us away from that which invalidates, contradicts, or refutes the same. The former is typically experienced as pleasurable and labeled good; the latter is painful and marked as bad or evil. Emotions correspond to states that inform and are informed by understanding, and that link the self to the world through affirmation. Defenses serve persistence. Self-affirmation then risks an imbalance when encountering the world. So-called neurotic thinking and behavior are expressions of this imbalance. Restriction, rigidity, and impermeability give rise to all manner of dysfunctional and destructive acts and, importantly for our purposes, neurotic behavioral expressions by groups (e.g., inquisitions, “witch hunts,” crusades, fascisms).

A categorization of self-affirmation lies at the heart of our lens, specifically ontic, moral, and spiritual affirmation (Tillich 1952). For Tillich, ontic affirmation is effectively corporeal affirmation, meaning mind and body in their basic being, life and death. Moral affirmation flows from the demand of our being, felt in issues of self-evaluation. Spiritual affirmation arises from the gift of our being, experienced as purpose, significance, and fulfillment. Associated anxieties correspond to these affirmation categories: 1) the (ontic) anxiety of fate and death, 2) the (moral) anxiety of guilt and condemnation, and 3) the (spiritual) anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness. The first element in each category represents a preliminary threat to self-affirmation, while the second is the boundary threat to being-in-the-world. With that in mind, let us define each relation in detail.

ONTIC SELF-AFFIRMATION

Our most basic affirmation is ontic self-affirmation with the corresponding anxiety of fate and death. Ontic means our physical and mental being *in toto*—the latter arguably grounded in, emerging from, and thus highly dependent on the former. As the fundamental aim in the endeavor to persist, ontic affirmation fuels a drive for security (Tillich 1952). Security means freedom from physical harm. Our basic instincts (e.g., survival) and needs (e.g., food, water, shelter) are essential for ensuring safety. Security thus encompasses physical health, even vitality. But security also means freedom from psychological distress. The survival instinct manifests psychologically in a drive to maintain a stable, coherent, and unified sense of self, seeking to form, coordinate, monitor, and unite mental and biological processes vying for capacity and control. Pain and suffering attune us to the world relative to physical and mental safety. Pleasure is the central principle in the pursuit of security, whereas power and degrees of control are primary means of protection. Understanding and prediction become motivations in the name of empowerment. More troublingly, the quest for power and pleasure often appears as an end in itself.

Our ontic self-affirmation is threatened in two forms: relatively by fate and absolutely by death (Tillich 1952). Fate is the symbolic name for the determining cause by which unexplainable

things or events come to be. However, the determining cause of fate has no ultimate necessity. It is given and, at its core, irrational. Therefore, we realize we exist in a contingent reality, subject to chance or whim. Fate is essentially, in a manner of speaking, tyrannical. In so many ways, life is incomprehensible, unpredictable, and uncontrollable. The Greek Fates and God's Will (e.g., the story of Job) are attempts to interpret fate. Thrownness (Heidegger [1927] 1962) expresses the lack of understanding and control. An involuntary birth and unavoidable death bookend a life subject to the unexplainable whim of fate. Helplessness and incomprehensibility are the pillars of that threat.

Lurking behind the anxiety of fate is the anxiety of death – the anxiety of having to die. Without the threat of death, the anxiety of fate loses power (Tillich 1951). Death is personal, belonging to each of us. It is also inescapable, an ever-present potentiality and a fatalistic, indefinite certainty. Death is then humanity's ultimate possibility (Heidegger [1927] 1962). Worse, life is temporal, disappearing before us in a drive through time of continual change toward the loss of all space (Tillich 1951). We live dying and, thus, are ever reminded of this. The foundational threat of death is the threat of an inexplicable abyss of nothingness, lurking and lying in wait, spurring and restricting our way of being. Nothingness is the ground of all threats. It shows in the breakdown of self-world interpretation. It is what death means.

MORAL SELF-AFFIRMATION

Moral affirmation is the drive to be valued and valuable – to matter. Life is not only given; life asks, even demands (Tillich 1951). It is not merely an opportunity; it is an obligation, accompanied by self-imposed expectations. The experience of this demand is "ought to be" and, more specifically, as an imperative "to become actually what one is essentially and therefore potentially" (Tillich 1963, 20). Always in a "with-world," the expectation arises explicitly in our social relations, but is understood personally. Moral affirmation is expressed primarily in our desire to fulfill these expectations in action. It speaks in the actualization of our "ought self." For Tillich (1951), it arises from our estrangement – that is, metaphysically