

# **The Idolatry of Emotions**

## **Objectifying our Own Subjective Experiences**

**By**

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Just three months into their forty-year journey through the wilderness, the Hebrew people received their marching orders, so to speak. That's when the story says Moses received the Ten Commandments while on a mountain in the Desert of Sinai. The very first command, the starting point of the religion of a people who were also at the very start of their journey, is stated as follows:

I am the Lord your God. You shall not have strange gods before me. You shall not make to thyself any graven thing; nor the likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, nor of those things that are in the waters under the earth. You shall not adore them nor serve them.<sup>1</sup>

The very first commandment is a warning against idolatry, the crafting and worship of fabricated images. Given what the story tells reveals about this entity thus far, it makes sense that it doesn't want them worshipping objects. As Exodus says:

By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night.<sup>2</sup>

This is astonishing imagery, that the god the Hebrews are following is nebulous and ever-changing. That's what clouds are, nebulas—always morphing, shapeless things with no clear beginnings or ends. And fire changes so quickly it became the element Heraclitus chose to represent his philosophy of constant change. You may recall this shapeless entity first appears to Moses in the form of a burning bush and, later, as proof it is actually speaking to Moses, tells him, "I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you."<sup>3</sup>

So we can understand how such a nameless, nebulous, ever-changing entity might not wish to be objectified and would warn those who wish to follow its guidance not to worship the well-defined objects and images crafted by their own hands and minds. This is why the very next commandment, step two, is, "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain."<sup>4</sup> The concept of god is so nebulous that it is considered wrong to speak as if we understand it and egregious to claim we know its mind and will. This is why, when Moses first asks for its name as proof he has actually spoken to it, the entity says, "I AM WHO I AM ... This is what you shall say ... I AM has sent me to you."<sup>5</sup> The better translation of the original Hebrew is not "I AM," but, "I WILL BE WHATEVER I WISH TO BE," or, simply, "I AM BECOMING." This is a being that refuses to be put into a box, to be confined by definition, to be turned into a graven image.

This is a very different idea of God than the one at the heart of many religions, this shapeless changing god that doesn't wish to be defined, named, or even spoken of. The opposite of this is idolatry, the erection of false gods constructed by our own hands and minds, be they constructed

images, theological dogmas and creeds, or just the things and beliefs we craft for ourselves in everyday life then cling to them as if they are the objective truth. For truth, in reality, is like the entity guiding the Hebrews through the uncertainty of the desert—nameless, shapeless, changing, with boundaries so soft and shifty that we cannot tell where it begins or ends.

But when we forget who this command is coming from and obey only its first line, “Have no other gods before me,” then we justify our idolatrous thinking, the opposite of the very first step it says is necessary for our spiritual journey. Alas, when we begin this way, when religion and life are based on idolatry, that is, upon the false certainty that our ideas are right and our ways are right, and that we know what is true, we know the mind and will and word God, its name, shape, and unchanging ways, then we can justify a life and religion of intolerance, self-righteousness, and self-delusion.

There’s another story in the Hebrew scriptures about a man named Micah who was obsessed with silver, so much so that he stole 11-hundred shekels of it from his own mother. When she discovers his betrayal, Micah returns the silver, which his mother then consecrates to Yahweh by having some of it refined into a graven image. Micah worships the idol she fashions, makes a shrine for it in his own home, then hires a priest to oversee his self-constructed religion, which pleases him to no end. Until one day when 600 soldiers from another clan pass through and take everything, the idol, the scriptures Micah has carved into stone, the priest’s clothes, and even the priest. Upon discovering what has happened, distraught Micah convinces as many of his friends and neighbors as possible to go out in pursuit of the soldiers, hoping to retrieve his idol. When he catches up with them, they ask what the matter is. Micah says, “You have taken my gods which I made, and the priest, and have gone away; what more do I have? So how can you say to me, ‘What is *the matter* with you?’”<sup>6</sup> But Micah and his friends are vastly outnumbered and once threatened with violence, they must return home with nothing.

I believe most, if not all of us have at times been like Micah, constructed an idol or two in our hearths, our hearts, our minds that we worshipped and felt compelled to protect, enough to go to battle over, convinced of our holy right to hold on to the subjective opinion that we have objectified as ultimate truth—that we have turned, that is, into an idol. These are not always grand idols, either. They may be no more than the objectification of a whim, a momentary feeling, a flight of fancy that we feel compelled to make real by forcing others to acknowledge and accept it. If not, we feel threatened by and angry at them for not agreeing with us. We are right, and therefore righteous, and by not acknowledging the hard and certain reality of our idols, they have wronged us and must be forced or manipulated into seeing things our way, which our idolatry deludes us into believing is really God’s way, the Way, the Truth.

The story of Micah’s idol reminds me how ready we are to abandon democracy itself to maintain our idols and the way of life we have centered around them. Donald Trump and those who still deny that he lost the election, based entirely upon the idolization of Trump and his unsubstantiated claims, against the empirical facts, is like Micah and his neighbors running out to do battle against an army. The votes are against them. They are outnumbered. At least Micah

finally realizes the reality of the situation. Trump and some of his most extreme devotees are still in denial that their idol has been removed from their house, in this case the White House, and will not be returned.

But, in 23 years of ministry in a liberal religion, I have seen this same phenomenon often recur in our own communities, which, by definition, are supposed to be devoted to democratic principles. Still, one or two individuals, maybe a handful, don't necessarily agree with the outcome of a community's decision, or of the decisions the community has authorized individuals, like a Board of Trustees or a minister to make, and they claim the decision is not democratic. Democracy is not perfect precisely because some are almost certain to be dissatisfied with its outcome. But, as Churchill said, "Democracy is the worst form of government—except for all the others." Sometimes people disagree with us. Sometimes we don't get our way. But a failure to our way is not always a moral crisis.

When enchanted by the things and truths we create for ourselves, our tendency is to project them outwardly into the world, as if they are substantive and real. That's what idols are, an attempt to make real what exists only in our own hearts and heads. They are distorted attempts to resolve life's perennial problems, its questions of truth, the desire for certainty and the avoidance of doubt, the wish to know the difference between good and evil, to fully grasp the underlying nature of reality, and to know for sure the meaning and purposes of our own lives. They are our attempt to feel certain in an uncertain world. But these perennial problems are like the nebulous entity guiding the Hebrew children through the wilderness: nameless, shapeless, shifting, indiscernible. Few can bear living life in such a fog of unknowing, as mystics in the mist and mystery of our existence. It's more comfortable to delude ourselves and to reenforce our delusions by forcing others to revere our idols just as much as we do.

Many of us, like Micah, succumb to such pressure. Remember, Micah started off taking his mother's silver, perhaps to fashion his own image of the world. But, in the end, she makes the idol for him, and he dutifully accepts it, brings it into his home, and makes a religion out of it. How many of our own ideas, the beliefs we hold most sacred and are most convinced of, were fashioned for us by somebody else?

One of the most profound statements I've ever heard is at the beginning of William James's classic book, *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Although it was first published in 1902, *Varieties* is still considered the seminal source for understanding religious experience. Imagine how astonishing it is, then, to read at the very start of his 400-page, 10-point-font book about religious experience, that the only time he will mention the world's major religions is when saying he won't be mentioning them. "I speak not now of your ordinary religious believer who follows the conventional observances of his country, whether it be Buddhist, Christian, or Mohammedan. His religion has been made for him by others, communicated to him by tradition, determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit."<sup>7</sup>

“Fixed forms” is just another term for idol, which is why James refers to a life based on them as a “second-hand religious life,” because it does not represent one’s own authentic experience. So, in one sweeping sentence, in his seminal work about religious experience, James dismisses all the world’s religions because, he says, “it would profit us little to study [them].”<sup>8</sup> For James, most religions are an idolatrous attempt to turn another person’s subjective experiences into an objective reality that can be re-experienced by anyone, through “imitation” and “habit,” be it the religious experience of Jesus, or Buddha, or Mohammad, or anyone else, then to mass produce it and sell it to others.

But I’m not talking strictly about religious beliefs here. I’m talking about how many of us instinctively react to the world in our everyday lives. Here’s the process. It begins, like everything else, with stimulus and response. Just as photons caused minute responses from our photosensitive single-celled ancestors, any sort of experience causes a response from us, although ours can be very complicated responses. This is what Kierkegaard meant when famously claiming, “Truth is subjectivity.” Not that there isn’t an objective truth, or, at least, an empirical reality outside our heads, but it is not possible for us to fully understand it outside our own subjective experiences of it. Over the centuries we have developed a few mechanisms for helping our subjective understanding of the world give a bit more with its objective reality—science, logic, empiricism—but even then, whatever we experience is subject to our limited understanding, our psychological state, and our emotional and ideological biases.

This is why it’s better to let the mystery be, to learn to wander about the wilderness with a mindset of awe and wonder, walking humbly with our nameless, shapeless, shifting god, than making hard idols of our own beliefs just so we can feel safe, secure, and certain in a sometimes unsafe, insecure, and always uncertain world. But, again, this isn’t only about grand religious or philosophical ideas. It’s about the ordinary tendency to have a subjective experience, to then objectify it by making an idol of it through projection, and, finally, to moralize our opinion. Subjectify > Objectify > Moralize: this is the process. The example I often use is when two friends come out of a movie. While inside the theater, each has had their own subjective experience of the film. Outside, one says, “That was a great movie,” to which the other responds, “Are you nuts? It was terrible!” As the conversation continues, their disagreement worsens to the point that they end up angry with each other.

Notice that neither begins by describing their subjective responses to the film and leaving it at that. They don’t say, “I didn’t enjoy it,” or, “I enjoyed it.” Instead, they immediately describe their subjective experience in objective terms, as if their feelings reflects something objectively true about the movie. “It was great!” Or “It was terrible!” That is a very simple example of idolatry, of making an idol out of an idea, emotion, or experience, and it is usual. When we speak of our subjective experiences, our internal responses to external stimuli, we tend to immediately objectify them by speaking as if what we are feeling indicates something empirically true about the world.

*That movie is terrible. Brussel sprouts are gross. Star Wars is better than Star Trek (when we all know it's the other way around). I am right. You are wrong. I am righteous. You are a heretic, an infidel, a traitor, dangerous.* And it is this moralization of our projected subjective experiences and beliefs that makes idolatry such a negative force in the world. It is the idolaters who make life miserable for the rest of us as they work to codify their subjective feelings by manipulating or forcing others to recognize them as true. And, in the age of social media, the ability to make idols of our lived experience is easier than ever, by allowing millions of individuals to share every random thought and personal feeling they have with people who are actually referred to as their “followers.” Those with lots of followers are called “influencers.”

In his recent *Atlantic* article, “After Babel: How Social Media Dissolved the Mortar of Society and Made America Stupid,” social psychologist Jonathan Haidt explains that initially these social platforms were relatively harmless, “But gradually, social-media users became more comfortable sharing intimate details of their lives with strangers and corporations.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, millions of us are now willing and able to easily project some of our most personal feelings, beliefs, and experiences outwardly into the world. The more “likes” and “shares” we get from others, the more real and, therefore, true, they become for us. The empirical or logical quality of our experiences and opinions isn’t even a consideration, only how many others seem to like what we share.

Subjectify > Objectify > Moralize. This, I believe, is how we go about fashioning idols out of our emotions. We have a personal feeling in response to external stimuli, like a movie. We then objectify the feeling by articulating it as external truth— “It is a terrible movie.” And then we attempt to force our new objective truth, our dogma, onto others by moralizing our opinion— “Since you disagree, you can find your own ride home.” *Since you disagree with me, you aren’t democratic. Since the results aren’t what I wanted, the system is rigged. Since our candidate lost, the election was stolen.*

But I’m not giving this sermon to rebuke election deniers, but to help each of us understand how quickly, easily, and thoughtlessly we can fashion idols out of our own emotional responses to the world, to mistake them as truth, and then to make the lives of others miserable by forcing or manipulating them to accept as objective truth what is merely our own subjective emotional responses to the world around us.

In the process we also delude ourselves, living an inauthentic life, be it a second-hand religious life revering idols fashioned for us by others, or simply because we would rather deceive ourselves than to face life on its own terms.

Worst of all, in choosing an idolatrous life of deception, we miss the best part of existence itself, its mystery, its awe and wonder, its novelty, its mountaintop experiences, the wonderment of wandering through its wilderness, its wildness, and its mouth-dropping astonishments that occur only when we let go of our need to feel certain and to be in control. Think about the most transformative experiences you’ve ever had: Did they happen when you were in control, or when

you finally let go? The joy of letting go, the calm of letting be, the relief of letting others, the pleasure of letting them enjoy it their way, the love, the kindness, the peace—these are the emotions I most enjoy, emotions that I cannot idolize, or cling to, or control, or force, or create. But I know where I am most apt to find them; out there, in the mist, the mystery, the great cloud of unknowing beckoning us to follow it and let it guide use through the wilderness of life.

Look, and it can't be seen.  
Listen, and it can't be heard.  
Reach, and it can't be grasped.

Above, it isn't bright.  
Below, it isn't dark.  
Seamless, unnamable,  
it returns to the realm of nothing.  
Form that includes all forms,  
image without an image,  
subtle, beyond all conception.

Approach it and there is no beginning;  
follow it and there is no end.  
You can't know it, but you can be it,  
at ease in your own life.  
Just realize where you come from:  
this is the essence of wisdom.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 20:2-4

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 13:21

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 19:9

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 20:7

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 3:14

<sup>6</sup> Judges 18:24

<sup>7</sup> James, William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, forward by Jacques Barzun, A Mentor Book, New American Library, New York, NY, 1958, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Haidt, Jonathan, "After Babel: How Social Media Dissolved the Mortar of Society and Made America Stupid," *Atlantic*, May 2022, p. 57.

<sup>10</sup> *Tao te Ching*, #14 (Stephen Mitchell, trans.)