

Seeking Truth from the Outside In, not from the Inside Out

By

Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof

November 9, 2025

I'm sorry to begin by bringing up Donald Trump. We get enough of him every time we turn on the news these days. But his political opponents have had such a good week, maybe we can better deal with mentioning him today because he's such a good example of the bad thinking I want to talk about. In fact, Trump himself might be pleased to hear that he's great at bad thinking. Although he'd probably correct me by claiming he's, "the greatest at bad thinking there's ever been, there's never been anyone as great." Believing what I do about his psychological state, I'm not entirely joking. I believe, for example, that presiding over the longest government shutdown in history is a badge of honor for him. "It's the greatest shutdown that's ever been, there's never been one as great."

But there's no sense digressing so far from my topic after so few sentences. I reference Trump, rather, because he seldom offers any facts, data, or details about anything. He speaks in generalities, referring to millions and millions, billions and billions, trillions and trillions, "unlike anyone has ever seen before," but never mentions precise numbers or any proof of his hyperbolic assertions. The same is true of just about anything he says. He prattles on, making bombastic claims without saying anything that can be verified or that indicates there's any evidence that he knows what he's talking about. He's even blowing up small Venezuelan boats, claiming they're smuggling drugs, without evidence or due process, which, at the very best, means he's engaging in unlawful, inhumane, and immoral extrajudicial killings.

Even when attempting to say nice things about others, from his own family members to diplomats and foreign leaders, it's always in reference to something physical about them that he can quickly observe on the spot, then articulate, like talking about how hot his own daughter is, how tall his son is, what nice hair Kamala Harris has, calling the Syrian Prince a "young, attractive guy," routinely complimenting accents that he can't understand, and recently, in an awkward moment for everyone but himself, telling Italian Prime Minister Meloni that she's a "beautiful young woman" as he was speaking about signing his Gaza peace plan that he's called, "one of the greatest days ever in civilization" and the "greatest deal of them all."

If, as hundreds of psychologists have claimed, Trump is a malignant narcissist, it makes sense that he can only connect with others superficially and by dominating them, either by requiring their utter and unquestioning devotion to him, or by reassuring himself of his power over them by creating circumstances in which they experience fear, anxiety, and suffering, which he's done to the entire world. I imagine, but do not know, that during much of his life he's been surrounded by wimpy admirers and "yes" men and women who are too afraid to contradict him, giving him a false sense of his own genius; a feeling that whatever he feels and says in the moment must be true, even if it contradicts what he's said before. Thus, he doesn't need to present the world with facts, nor even to know any, nor to read,

study, or question what his “gut” and emotions are telling him. If anyone questions him, he simply demonizes them and has them removed from his awareness, creating a protective echo chamber in which to shield himself from his own inadequacies and ignorance. The end result is that Trump lives much of his life as if he were on a psychiatrist’s couch, eagerly and unabashedly expressing his disturbing stream of consciousness before the entire world at every opportunity.

Trump, in my opinion, is such an extreme example of an unconscious and emotional thinker that we can easily grasp how bad his wild and unsubstantiated “they’re eating our pets,” “only I can prevent WWII,” “it would never have happened had I been President,” “there will be nuclear holocaust if I’m not elected,” extreme and unfounded claims are. Yet, all of us are subject to such thinking much of the time. This is why, as many know, I am a strong advocate of logic and reason. To some, this automatically suggests that I’m emotionally challenged. I am, but only inasmuch as, like everyone, I’m challenged to keep them from governing me and the decisions I make. We are all fundamentally emotional thinkers because the emotional structures in our brains and bodies are far more ancient and autonomic than the thinking part of our brains, which is named the neocortex precisely because it is neo, “new.”

Thinking thoughts about our thoughts—reasoning—is neither instinctive nor autonomic, and doing so consumes a lot of energy. So, we tend to rely on heuristics—shortcuts to thinking well—that don’t require us to reflect upon the truth-value or logic of our ideas. These “shortcuts” may be rules of thumb, cliches, groupthink, religious beliefs, party lines, or other forms of popular thinking we refer to as “common sense,” even if they are really common nonsense. But some such heuristics come from within, based on our unprocessed feelings; on what we want or desire. We may then fashion thoughts that justify or excuse our emotionally based wishes, but this isn’t reasoning, it’s rationalization. You can tell the difference because rationalization only confirms what we already think we know. Reason can lead us to discount our own ideas and discover new and better substantiated ideas precisely because they are based on reasons. Reasons are what logic calls the premises that support our conclusions. Unlike Trump and other emotional thinkers who merely rationalize their every whim, reason requires us to read and study and discover facts and data so we can feel more confident about the beliefs we rely upon (which remain beliefs, not certainties).

But I don’t wish to sharpen the false dichotomy between thinking and feeling. All of us think and feel and most of us use our thoughts to justify our feelings and desires, probably more often than not, because we’ve evolved to do so. Feelings don’t cancel our thoughts, nor do our thoughts cancel our feelings. Feelings express themselves as ideas and beliefs, and thoughts and ideas move us to feel things about them, like devotion or disgust. They are two expressions of the same process. More importantly, I don’t think the greatest problem of humanity today is that we think too much and feel too little, but that we feel too much

and think too little. We don't realize, that is, that our thoughts are generated by our emotions, whims, and desires, merely to justify what we're feeling, not to rationally consider our circumstances. The problem is that we too often fly by the seat of our pants even when we "think" we're in complete control. We rationalize our instincts yet believe that we are being perfectly reasonable. We think we are in control of our emotions when they are in control of us. We think our thoughts belong to us when we belong to them. We are neither logical nor emotionally intelligent. We are mostly unconscious, and seldom as self-aware or as aware of the world as I wish we were. This is so, I believe, not because the world reasons too much and feels too little, but because we naturally feel too much and reason too little.

In other words, as my title suggests, too many of us think from the inside out rather than from the outside in. This is to say, we are reluctant, if not unconsciously fearful, to let the world, by which I mean empirical reality—facts, data, reason, science, and the like—impress itself upon us. Too many of us don't develop our beliefs and ideas from the outside in. We are not *in*-formed enough by letting external realities shape how we understand and engage with the world.

My understanding of Freud's concepts of id, ego, and superego has led me to believe the solution to this state is to develop a healthy ego, by which I mean an ego that serves its proper function. This is so although many people use this term derogatively, saying things like "so and so has big ego," or "don't let your ego get in the way," or "what an ego," and so forth. Self-help guru Wayne Dyer once said the ego must be "destroyed," and that it "denies our original invisible reality, so it must be removed and completely banished from our awareness."¹ I agree, the ego denies our original invisible reality and that's what it's for, to tell us, "no, you can't always get what you want because doing so might harm others or damage the world." As Freud put it, "The ego seeks to bring the influence of the external world to bear upon the id and its tendencies, and endeavors to substitute the reality principle for the pleasure principle which reigns unrestrictedly in the id ... The ego represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to the id, which contains the passions."²

Hence, we should not use the term ego synonymously with selfishness. A healthy ego is the opposite of selfishness. It harnesses our senses to interface with the world beyond our skin so we can become conscious of more than just ourselves, to "think of somebody besides ourselves," as we sometimes say. "The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego," Freud said, "it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself a projection of a surface."³ I take this to mean, again, that the ego exists between us and the world. It is the outermost part of our individual existence that allows the world and reality to impress itself upon us. It allows the light of the world to get in and shine itself upon the dim shadows on the cave walls we mistook for reality.

When we refer to the ego negatively, I believe we are really speaking of the superego, which is a projection of the id's wishes and desires into the outside world. The superego, that is, justifies the selfish desires and passions of the id by projecting them as external truths and morality, presented in the form of religious doctrines, state decrees, common sense, popular beliefs, and the status quo. Thus, we can feel justified in exploiting, ignoring, and even killing others to get what we want because what we want, we think, just so happens to be what God wants, or what the Church wants, or what our dead ancestors and parents wanted. Again, as Freud said, the superego "retains the character of the father;"⁴ and "[gives] permanent expression to the influence of the parents."⁵ Rather than telling the id "no," the superego (the projected id) tells the ego "no" by refusing to accept its rebuke of that selfish part of us that wants immediate gratification, which is what I believe Wayne Dyer meant by the "original invisible reality;" his high-minded term for living an unconscious life under the guise of spirituality or enlightenment—no thank you, not for me! I agree, rather, with Freud who stated explicitly, "Whereas the ego is essentially the representative of the external world, the super-ego stands in contrast to it as the representative of the internal world, of the id."⁶

I must admit, I have heard some psychologists, more educated about Freud than me, disagree with my interpretation of his writings, but, to me, what he says is clear, "The ego is essentially the representative of the external world, the super-ego is the representative of the internal world, of the id." And if attributing this insight to him is incorrect, then I'm happy to claim it as my own because it makes such good sense. It explains why so many are compelled to disparage the ego; because it reminds us there are consequences for our actions and that we have a responsibility for the welfare of others and the world in which we live. It reminds us we can't always get or take what we want. But to understand this, we must let the world and its reality impress itself upon us. That's my ego talking.

As liberals, this ought to be a way of life for us. Sadly, having been around many liberals in my life, I must admit we can act just as selfishly and unconsciously as anyone else, and often do, perhaps more often than not, including by projecting our beliefs and desires onto the outer world and assuming they are objectively true and right; further allowing our superego to justify our selfishness and self-righteousness.

Nevertheless, liberalism is itself a sign of healthy ego and can strengthen our ego precisely because it is an ideology rooted in a devotion to external reality, including to reason, science, and to the welfare of others and Other. Liberalism was born, as I often explain, during the time of the early Greek philosophers who were the first thinkers we know of who tried to explain the world in natural rather than supernatural terms. For a time, they drew humanity out of its unconscious existence by turning to the reality outside themselves to understand the world. Instead of assuming it was all created by the projected id, that is, the superego disguised as mythical figures and gods, these early thinkers, whom Aristotle later called *phusikoi*, "the physicists," studied what they could experience using their senses,

transcending the unconscious that can only understand it with moods and myths and fantasies and unrestrained desires.

These early thinkers and most of their writings were forgotten during the Dark Ages, but are what were rediscovered hundreds of years later during the Renaissance, which is what the very word Renaissance refers to, a “renewed” interest in the findings of these early philosophers. The principles that became known during the Renaissance soon flourished during the Enlightenment and are the essence of what’s come to be called “liberalism.” As liberals, so long as we adhere to these principles, which I summarize as human dignity, reason, freedom, and tolerance, we are well prepared to live as modern day *phusikoi*, allowing the world and its reality to impress itself upon us, to *inform* us, to acknowledge our responsibility for the welfare of others and the world in which we live, and, no matter how harsh or bitter it sometimes is, to seek truth from the outside in, rather than from the inside out.

Let’s take a break and listen to an AI generated song I’ve produced about these remarkable figures who were the first to poke their heads outside humanity’s collective unconscious. It’s called, *The First to Wonder*.

Under the olive’s silver shade
They’d sit and spin their thread
No gods to strike the thunder
No wrath to fear
They said
The earth
The air
The fire
The wave—what shapes the sky above?
They asked with only reason
And answered with their love

Oh, the first to wonder
The first to see
The world as it might simply be
No myths
No chains
No fateful decree
Just the mind’s bright spark and the open sea

Thales watched the water flow
Heraclitus too
Flux and change the only law—nothing still
Nothing new
Anaximander drew the boundless
A cradle for the stars

And Pythagoras heard the music strummed in
numbers on his bars

No temple stone
No altar flame
Just questions whispered soft as rain

Oh, the first to wonder
The first to see
The world as it might simply be
No myths
No chains
No fateful decree
Just the mind’s bright spark and the open sea

They trusted in the goodness
The reason in the heart
Believed in human agency
That we all play a part
They lit a lamp in darkness
Though shadows pressed so near
And the echoes of their courage still ring
sharp and clear

Oh, the first to wonder
The first to see

Seeking Truth from the Outside In, not from the Inside Out

The world as it might simply be
No myths
No chains
No fateful decree

Just the mind's bright spark and the open sea
Just the mind's bright spark and the open sea

Let us live as the first to wonder did—open to the world, curious, humble before truth, and courageous enough to see and cope with things as they are. Only then can we truly become who we are meant to be. For, to be liberal in spirit is to let the world teach us—to be formed by facts, tempered by reason, and guided by compassion. May we continue in this tradition, seeking truth not in what we wish were real, but in what is real—and, in doing so, find the freedom that only such honesty can bring.

¹ Dyer, Wayne W., *Inspiration*, Hay House, Inc., Carlsbad, CA, 2006, p. 33.

² Freud, Sigmund, *The Ego and the Id*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, NY1923, 1960, p. 15.

³ Ibid., p. 16.

⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

⁵ Ibid., p. 25.

⁶ Ibid., p. 26.