

Strengthening the Conscience

The Peace Core Part 5

A Dialogue on Consciousness, Identity, and the Human Condition

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A continuation of the Peace Core Series

The Clean Hand

A Peace Core Essay on Strengthening the Conscience

If the first essay of this cycle asked how a man violates the law written on his heart — how attunement curdles into consecration of the Id, how the conscience is smothered until it no longer signals — this essay asks the opposite question. Not how conscience dies, but how it is built. Not atrophy, but exercise. Not the counter sacrament, but the discipline that answers it.

The two essays are a pair, and they should be read as one movement. Moral injury is what happens when the gate between Id and image is forced open and left open. Strengthening is what happens when a man returns to that gate, again and again, and holds it rightly. This is an essay about the second thing.

I. Being and Nothingness

To see why stopping at the void is a failure of descent, and not simply an honest man's report of what is actually there, the void itself has to be understood on its own rigorous terms first. Sartre did not arrive at nothingness carelessly. He argued his way there, and the argument deserves to be taken seriously before it is judged incomplete.

Being and Nothingness rests on a distinction between two kinds of being. The *en-soi* — being-in-itself — is the mode of a stone, a table, a tree. It simply is what it is, full and self-identical, with no gap between itself and its own existence. A stone does not fall short of being a stone. The *pour-soi* — being-for-itself — is the mode of consciousness, and it is structured entirely differently. Consciousness is never simply identical to itself the way the stone is. It is always consciousness of something, always reaching beyond its present state toward what it is not yet, always able to stand back from itself and ask what it is. Sartre's famous formula captures the strangeness of this: the for-itself *is what it is not, and is not what it is*. A man who is a waiter is never a waiter the way a stone is a stone; he can only play at being one, because consciousness cannot close the gap between itself and any fixed role without ceasing to be consciousness at all.

That gap is the nothingness of the title. It is not an absence somewhere out in the world; it is the very structure of a mind that can never coincide with itself, never rest in a finished identity, never simply be the way an object is. Because consciousness cannot close on itself, it also cannot close on any external law, essence, or nature that would tell it in advance what it is for. *Existence precedes essence*: there is

no blueprint a man is born to fulfill, the way a letter-opener is built to open letters. He exists first, as pure open possibility, and only makes an essence for himself, retroactively, through what he does. This is why Sartre can say there is no law written on the heart. A law would be a kind of essence — a content given in advance — and the for-itself, by its very structure, has no such content. It is condemned to freedom because it cannot be anything else.

This is also why anguish is not incidental to the system but built into its foundations. Facing a choice, a man discovers that nothing — not God, not nature, not his own past self — can make the choice for him or absorb the responsibility for it, because nothing external to his freedom has any authority over a consciousness that is, by definition, not identical to any fixed thing. *Bad faith* (*mauvaise foi*) is Sartre's name for the attempt to escape this by pretending otherwise — by treating oneself as an en-soi, a fixed object with a nature, a role, a settled conscience, in order to be relieved of the groundlessness that freedom actually is.

The reason this matters for a descent past the mirror is this: Sartre is not merely reporting a mood when he says the bottom is empty. He is describing what he takes to be the necessary structure of consciousness itself — the permanent, unclosable gap between a mind and any content, any law, any fixed self it might otherwise be. If that structural claim were the whole truth about what consciousness is, then stopping at the void would not be stopping early; it would be arriving, correctly, at bedrock, and everything this essay wants to say about the dissolution of the mirror would be one more piece of bad faith dressed in mystical language.

So the claim being made against Sartre has to be precise. It is not that he was insufficiently brave, or that he flinched from an abyss others have stared down longer. It is that the “nothingness” he found is real as far as it goes, but it is a description of the ego — the reflective, self-watching structure of ordinary consciousness — mistaken for a description of being as such. The for-itself's inability to coincide with itself is true of the mirror. It is not necessarily true of what remains once the mirror is no longer the thing doing the looking. Sartre never asked what happens if the watching itself falls away, because his whole method — phenomenological description of consciousness as consciousness — has no place to stand once consciousness stops watching itself. That is precisely the ground this essay now wants to walk onto.

II. The Mirror

Begin where the honest atheist begins. Sartre looked inward for a native law and did not find one. What he found instead was pour-soi — consciousness as lack, as a hole in being, standing over an abyss with nothing beneath it but freedom. No essence precedes existence. No law is written on the heart; there is

only the anguish of a man condemned to invent his own values with no court of appeal. Conscience, on this reading, is not a compass. It is the vertigo of a man on a ledge who realizes nothing stops him from jumping except his own unsupported choice.

Judge a philosophy, as we should, by what it produces in men. Sartre did not intend Cambodia. But young men in Paris who called themselves his children took the abyss seriously, concluded that nothing was forbidden because nothing was written, and emptied a country to prove it. That is a fair indictment even by the “misreading” defense — a philosophy that can be so readily weaponized toward the killing fields reveals something true about where its own logic, unchecked, wants to go. The void, taken as final, is not a stable place to stand. Someone will fill it, and not always with something gentle.

But here is the correction that matters more than the indictment: Sartre's void is real, and it is also incomplete. What he encountered was genuine. He simply stopped too soon. What he was looking at was not being itself — it was the mirror. The endless self-reflective loop of the ego, watching itself watch itself, finding no floor beneath the watching. That is a real place. It is just not the last place.

III. Two Ways of Naming What Is Beneath

Two answers present themselves to the man who does not stop at Sartre's ledge.

The naturalist says conscience is self-domestication — a species that punished cheaters and rewarded reciprocity long enough that guilt, shame, and empathy became load-bearing parts of the psyche. Real, useful, evolved. But constructed, and therefore revisable, and therefore — in the wrong hands, under the wrong ideology — discardable. This is conscience as adaptation. It explains a great deal. It does not, by itself, explain why the adaptation feels like an accusation rather than a preference.

The other answer is Spinoza's, and Einstein's after him: that moral order is woven into the fabric of things the way the laws of motion are woven into the fabric of things. Not commanded by a person standing outside the universe, but necessary the way geometry is necessary. To live rightly, on this account, is to understand the order you are already inside of, and stop fighting it. This is a colder God than the God of Calvary, but it is not a false one. It is close enough to Romans 2:15 — the law written on the heart, the conscience that bears witness even to those who never received a code — that a man can stand in that text and mean something recognizable to Spinoza without meaning something reducible to him.

Both answers are offered from in front of the mirror. Both are reasonable, defensible, and, on their own, unfinished. They describe the mechanism or the order. Neither one, by itself, produces the thing this essay is actually about: a conscience strong enough to hold.

IV. What Is on the Other Side

There is a further movement, and it is not argued into; it is descended into. Not a better theory about the void, but the dissolution of the very apparatus that was staring into it. The mirror itself gives way.

What is found there is not emptiness. It is — to use the plainest words available — a dancing whorl of energy. Alive, not static. Ordered, not chaotic. Whether that whorl is ultimately spirit in the fullest theological sense, or “merely” the chemistry of a living body arranged for a time into consciousness, the descent does not require settling that question first. What it produces is not in dispute either way: to actually see it is to receive a new gnosis of being, and that gnosis does not arrive neutral. It arrives with a demand. It transmits, to the one who sees it, a need to live by clean hands.

This is the decisive difference from Sartre. Sartre's freedom, once it reaches the bottom, finds nothing there and so must invent everything, including whatever restrains it. The deeper descent finds something there, and that something restrains by its own gravity — not because a rule has been imposed from outside, but because the vision itself reorders the one who receives it. Finding nothing at the bottom of the descent is not the discovery of a hard truth Sartre alone was honest enough to name. It is, more often, a failure of the descent — a man who stopped at the mirror and called the mirror the floor.

V. The Two Pulls

Once the mirror is gone, a man discovers he is still pulled in two directions, and the discipline of a strengthened conscience consists entirely in how those two pulls are held.

The first is the Id — Freud's word for what is oldest in us: hunger, aggression, the drive to survive and to propagate. It is not evil. It is not to be denied or shamed into silence, because a species that successfully suppressed it would not survive its own suppression. The Id is necessary. It is fuel.

The second is the pull toward the image we are made in — imago Dei, if the older language is wanted, or simply the recognition of a self capable of standing back from its own hunger and choosing in light of something more than the hunger's satisfaction. This is the higher pull. It does not erase the Id. It governs it.

The whole of moral life, on this account, is the relationship between those two pulls — and specifically, whose hand the Id is held in. “He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart” is the old Psalm's answer to the question of who may ascend at all. The clean hand is not a hand with nothing in it. It is a hand that holds the necessary hunger without being ruled by it — need, acknowledged, but carried rather than obeyed.

VI. Clean Hands as a Daily Choosing

Here the essay must resist the temptation every essay on virtue is tempted toward: the temptation to describe clean hands as an achievement, a state arrived at and then possessed. It is not that. It is a daily choosing. A balance struck new each day, and lost, and struck again.

This matters because the Id does not retire once the gnosis has been received. It pulls constantly, and a man who has seen the dancing whorl of energy will still, on any given afternoon, fail to hold his hunger rightly. The question this essay is actually trying to answer is not “how does a man achieve purity” — that question has no honest answer — but “what happens to the conscience of a man who keeps trying, and keeps falling short, and keeps returning to the trying.”

The answer is that he does not devolve downward. He evolves upward. Every return to the choosing, made in weakness rather than in strength, is not a wasted repetition of the same failure. It is the exercise that builds the very organ that is doing the choosing. This is the central claim of the whole essay, and it should be stated plainly: *the conscience is a muscle, and it is strengthened by the effort of right choosing, especially the effort made in weakness and after failure — not by the absence of failure.*

This is why the metaphor of balance matters more than the metaphor of purity. Purity suggests a static condition, ruined by a single lapse. Balance suggests a dynamic act, renewed by every return to center. A tightrope walker does not stay upright by never leaning; he stays upright by continuously correcting the lean. The conscience, held daily between the necessary hunger of the Id and the higher pull of the image, works the same way. It is not damaged by the leaning. It is trained by the correcting.

VII. Jung's Confirmation

Jung's individuation names the same process from another angle and confirms rather than complicates it. The Shadow is the Id under another word — the instinctual, the repressed, the parts of the self a man would rather not own. Individuation does not ask a man to destroy his Shadow. It asks him to integrate it, to bring it into conscious relationship rather than leaving it to rule from the basement. The Self, in Jung's architecture, is the deeper organizing center that the ego serves when it stops mistaking itself for the whole person — and it is frequently glimpsed, in the testimony of those who have touched it, as something ordered, luminous, and in motion. A whorl, if you like, though Jung would not have used that word.

Where Sartre stayed with the ego's confrontation with the void and called that confrontation final, Jung insisted on going through it — through the dark night, through the Shadow's demands, toward a Self that reorganizes the whole psyche around something larger than appetite. That is the same descent this

essay has been describing, arrived at from clinical psychology rather than contemplative experience. The convergence is not proof, but it is corroboration, and corroboration from an unrelated direction is worth having.

VIII. The Muscle of the Higher Image

So: conscience is not, finally, a fixed inscription that a man either reads correctly or fails to read — the picture Sartre was right to reject as too simple, and right to find missing when he went looking for it in that form. Nor is it merely an evolved convenience, revisable at the pleasure of whichever ideology next needs it out of the way. It is a living capacity, native to whatever lies on the other side of the dissolved mirror, and it grows exactly the way any capacity grows: through use, through resistance, through the repeated, unglamorous, often-failed effort of holding the Id in a clean hand and choosing, again, today, to carry the hunger rather than be carried by it.

This is the answer to the first essay's warning. If conscience can be smothered — consecrated over, betrayed, worn down until the man no longer feels the violation he is committing — it can also be the opposite. It can be exercised until it holds more, signals more clearly, and grows harder to override. The window that essay warned was closing is not closed by standing still and hoping the violation stops. It is kept open by the daily choosing this essay describes: the balance struck, lost, and struck again, each recovery a rep in the same slow, unglamorous, lifelong exercise of becoming, by inches, more fully what the image was always meant to be.

Clean Hands generate Gravity. And that momentum saves us in so many ways.

Leads us not into temptation. Keeps us in a safe harbor.

That is a Blessing.