

When Man Meets Himself: Hillel's Existential Puzzle

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Hillel the Elder used to say, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?”¹ Had we not known that it was he who spoke these words, we might easily have attributed them to men of different, even opposing worldviews. In the days of Hillel himself, for example, these questions could easily have been voiced by Stoics, Epicureans, or Skeptics, without altering a single word. The essence of the “I,” its immediate concern for itself, and the concept of the present as the proper time for self-directed action—all these are subjects that preoccupied thinkers of that era. In fact, were this saying to surface in the writings of a Hellenistic philosopher instead of in the homilies of rabbis, we would not be surprised at all.

Aside from its various possible interpretations, what is so striking about this saying, and what makes it so interesting, is its object of reference. It does not discuss the relationship between men, the responsibility each man bears for the Other, or the moral and social obligations he must fulfill. Rather, it discusses only the relationship of man to *himself*: the obligations and

responsibilities he bears, or ought to bear, toward his own being. Moreover, it refers not to man as a social creature, but to man as he stands facing himself. This is not, then, that loneliness in which man finds himself when abandoned to his fate; nor is it a miserable, frightened kind of isolation, the sense of being severed from one's family or community. Neither, for that matter, is this the seclusion we sometimes crave when we wish to be far from the madding crowd. This is the solitude that is inherent in man's nature, and expresses his humanity.

This existential solitude, of the sort experienced by men everywhere, is nonetheless not the *same* among men everywhere: It is informed by the beliefs and opinions of each and every individual. In what follows, I will present three disparate readings of the words of Hillel the Elder. Each is grounded in the viewpoint of a different archetype: the God-fearing man, the pleasure-seeker, and the lover of wisdom. Each of these viewpoints is, in my eyes, worthy; each relates consistently to the world as it perceives it. However, I admit that the third approach—that of the lover of wisdom—is closest to my heart, and will thus be further elaborated upon than the other two.

Let us begin, then, with the viewpoint of the God-fearing man. His interpretation coheres closely with Hillel the Elder's original intent. In his world, man is subject to the laws and commandments of the God who created him. He lives under God's providence, anticipating divine reward and fearing divine punishment. In saying, "*If I am not for myself, who will be for me?*" he implies that only *he* can act for himself, not mediators, not advocates—only he, through his thoughts and actions, can direct God's judgment, can merit praise or blame. He stands always under God's watchful eye, and must give an account and a reckoning of all his deeds. As opposed to the religious approach by which the unworthy man pleads for God's undeserved grace, our God-fearer willingly submits to the recompense that shall befall him. It is to himself that he turns, of himself that he demands.

The God-fearer's attitude toward his God is, essentially, self-interested, a relationship of "give and take"—or more precisely, of "take and give." By virtue of his ability to distinguish right from wrong, the God-fearer chooses right, so that he may merit a reward for his compliance. He stands alone before God and stipulates: I will do what is demanded of me, and you will repay me fairly. But though he fears God, his deeds are not for the sake of heaven; they are, rather, for his own sake. In a paradoxical way, the freedom of man limits the freedom of God. Freedom of choice is given, first and foremost, to the individual, and God has no option but to respond in kind.

"And if I am only for myself, what am I?" According to the Jewish exegetical tradition, the words of the sages may be read in reference to one another. We may therefore find the answer to the question *"What am I?"* in the words of the sage Akavya ben Mahalalel:

Reflect on three things and you will avoid transgression: Know where you came from, where you are going, and before whom you will have to give an account and a reckoning. Where you came from—from a putrid drop. Where you are going—to a place of dust, worms, and maggots. And before whom you will have to give an account and a reckoning—before the King of Kings, the Holy One.²

Man comes from a putrid drop. He is made human by the will of God, who infuses him with the breath of life. The Lord grants him the ability to distinguish right from wrong, and urges him to choose right and refrain from wrong. Between his birth from a putrid drop and his return to a place of dust, worms, and maggots, man lives with the spirit that God breathed into him, with the obligation under which God placed him, with the free will God nevertheless granted him, and with the recompense from God that he anticipates. As a hybrid creature—i.e., a material body governed by a divine soul—man bears responsibility for his deeds, with regard to both himself and his God. In this sense, then, his existential solitude is not absolute: Although he is alone with himself, his God is forever with him.

“And if not now, when?” The God-fearing man stands always before his God, and thus must give an account and a reckoning of his every moment. The time to fulfill God’s will is now: immediately, without delay. There are no set times for the worship of God, and no times free of this worship; no moments for the sacred and moments for the mundane. Every instant of the God-fearer’s life is sanctified for the worship of the Lord. All of his deeds, however minor, however seemingly trivial, must be done with God in mind. This is the life of the God-fearing man, who exists in the constant presence of, and in ongoing dialogue with, his Creator. He is the solitary man before the One God, one on One, one facing One.

The pleasure-seeker is not an obsessive hedonist, devoting all his time and energy to the gratification of his every desire. He is, in fact, every man who lives in a world without God, a world that runs as if by itself. The pleasure-seeker accepts this world as it is, and avoids any “philosophical” questions about its essence and the place of man within it. Except, perhaps, for a few special moments in his life, he does not reflect on himself, but rather allows life to flow around him, and himself with it. In contemporary terms, the seeker of pleasure is the common secular man, living without the burden of the yoke of heaven and without particular ideals he strives to realize, yet nonetheless abiding by his own moral and social obligations. In the eyes of God-fearing men of every persuasion, he is a *tinok shenishba* (literally, a “captured infant”), a person absent any particular beliefs or opinions, but full of desires and cravings. He must be saved from himself and set back onto the right path. In his own eyes, however, he is simply a man who seeks to live as it suits him, and according to the circumstances that prevail.

What we have, then, is a completely ordinary person, your average Joe. Like every normal creature, he prefers pleasure to pain. He enjoys not only satisfying the cravings of the flesh (eating, drinking, intercourse, etc.), but also loftier pursuits, such as family, friendship, art, education, and charity.

All the seeker of pleasure desires is to experience life at its finest—and who among us does not want this?

“If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” The pleasure-seeker knows that he is not alone in the world; he knows that he is a social being dependent on his fellow man, just as his fellow man is dependent upon him. But he is convinced that he alone knows best what is good and beneficial for him. He is, in this sense, an individual *par excellence*. He may, of course, be wrong at times; what seems to him good and beneficial might actually cause him harm. But even then, so long as he does not place his fate in the hands of another, he is the final arbiter of himself and his well-being. The statement “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” is a sort of declaration of independence, for which he is prepared to pay the price of an occasional error.

“And if I am only for myself, what am I?” The pleasure-seeker and the God-fearer have a similar view of their corporeal nature: The origin of a person lies in a putrid drop, his end—a place of dust, worms, and maggots. Yet what happens between these two poles, between the time of birth and the time of death, is the subject of profound disagreement between them. As far as the seeker of pleasure is concerned, life on earth is all he has, all he can ever expect; he must therefore make the most of every fleeting moment. He has, we have said, no fear of God—the rules and customs of society alone limit the caprice of his desires. He relates to his hunger for pleasure as a given, as something integral to his nature, and does not see it as a defect that must be controlled or overcome. On the contrary, he sees this hunger as a virtue that should be cultivated as much as possible. So long as he does not transgress the rules of society, he owes no one an account and a reckoning but himself. This is not a world in which “might makes right,” but it is certainly a world of self-interest, in which every act—even if undertaken for the good of another—finds its origin and its purpose in the gratification that the pleasure-seeker obtains from it.

“And if not now, when?” The pleasure-seeker prefers to live a good life, a pleasant life, and prefers to do so *now*; he does not wish to postpone the

fulfillment of his desires to the future, as there is no knowing what said future will bring. The safest, closest, and most real enjoyment is the one that we may experience in the present. It should not be understood from this that the pleasure-seeker is a fool who lacks the understanding that not all satisfaction is immediately attainable. But as a rule, he tends not to delay indulgence—unless, of course, the expectation itself gives him pleasure. As Horace wrote, “As we talk, grudging time will have run on: Pluck the day, trusting as little as possible in tomorrow.”³ The common pleasure-seeker is not overeager; he does not charge full force at any casual thrill, because he does not always feel the breath of death on his neck. But the direction is one and the same: now, as much as possible. And if we must tarry, it is in expectation of the pleasure to come.

The lover of wisdom, much like the pleasure-seeker, lives in a world that is entirely natural, without fear of God, with no expectation of posthumous reward or punishment. Like the pleasure-seeker, the lover of wisdom seeks enjoyment and rejects pain. Both do their best to obey the laws of the society in which they live, and accept upon themselves their moral obligations and civic duties. Both live approximately the same lifestyle, subject to the personality, needs, and urges of each. It seems, therefore, that there is essentially no significant difference between them. Both would be viewed by the God-fearer as the common secular man, whose life is governed by his desires.

Nevertheless, the lover of wisdom *is* different from the pleasure-seeker; at a certain point in their lives, their paths diverge. This is the result not of some revolutionary step, or absolute change in lifestyle, but rather of the lover of wisdom’s directing his gaze at himself. True, each of us becomes lost now and again in thoughts about ourselves and our place in the world. For the most part, these thoughts are focused on our interpersonal relationships: with family, friends, enemies. They are also preoccupied with our successes, failures, ambitions, fears, and everything else that provides the

occasion for either pleasure or pain. Only in rare cases are we able to disengage from these things—from our feelings, experiences, and selfishness—and look only at ourselves, at the existential solitude that is intrinsic to us, at the fact that each of us is a person unto himself.

In the course of these self-reflections we do not turn away from our fellow man. We do not ignore him, nor do we tower above him. Rather, we pit ourselves against ourselves and ask, as did Hillel the Elder, “What am I?” Not, what am I in relation to my fellow man, but what am I in relation to *myself*? The lover of wisdom lives with his questions and his doubts. For him, wisdom is complete self-awareness. He strives to attain this state, but can never be sure that he has succeeded. In this sense, the lover of wisdom is always on a journey, and never rests on the laurels of any type of orthodoxy.

It is clear, then, that the lover of wisdom treats Hillel the Elder’s provocative question with the utmost seriousness: “*If I am not for myself, who will be for me?*” First, the lover of wisdom will ask, what is the meaning of the phrase “I am for myself”? In what sense can it be said that a person is for himself? And he will answer, I am for myself when I show concern for myself; I am for myself when I am worthy of myself; I am for myself when I respect myself. I show concern for myself when I labor to improve myself; I am worthy of myself when I align what is found in me with what is worthy of me; I respect myself when I relate to myself as is fitting for me—without contempt, but also without arrogance.

I am for myself when I show concern for myself. The God-fearer and the pleasure-seeker both show concern for themselves—the God-fearer when he faithfully and meticulously fulfills the commandments of God, and the pleasure-seeker when he adjusts his actions to increase his enjoyment and to minimize his pain. The lover of wisdom, by contrast, shows concern for himself in a different manner. He does not expect his deeds to merit compensation from some external authority. The reward for his actions is—his actions. He also shows concern for himself when he does *not* succumb to every desire for pleasure and every fear of pain, but rather calculates the

pleasure and the pain according to what is fitting for him and what accords him respect. Showing concern for himself means being faithful to himself—a person who lives and acts according to values that he chooses, and who fulfills his expectations of himself.

I am for myself when I am worthy of myself. The lover of wisdom is worthy of himself when his thoughts and actions are in harmony with what is desirable for him. Who establishes what is desirable for him, and based on what criteria? In the framework of the world that is entirely natural, what is desirable for me—that is, the values that I deem worthy of my adherence—does not stem from a divine directive, or a superhuman source. That which is desirable for me came into being through a continual, generations-long process of refinement that spanned different human cultures, and eventually resulted in a set of values that I deem acceptable, in accordance with my opinions and beliefs. From the point of view of the lover of wisdom, that which is desirable for him is an image of a man that corresponds to the values according to which he believes he should live.

I am for myself when I respect myself. Self-respect marks the person's relationship with himself as he is. So accustomed are we to speaking about the respect due to our fellow man, we often forget that we must first respect ourselves. The respect one feels for another person, for his beliefs, his opinions, his values, his deeds, and his lifestyle, is dependent on the respect he feels for *himself*: his beliefs, opinions, values, deeds, and lifestyle. A person respects himself when he is at peace with himself, with his opinions and beliefs, and when he is willing to fight for them. In our day, there is a prevalent tendency to regard man as a flawed creature who must compensate for his shortcomings; who must quiet his anxieties; who must satisfy his desires. In contrast to this approach, which emphasizes deficiencies, the lover of wisdom adopts an approach of wholeness, of integrity, and of recognizing his self-worth. A person who does not feel worthy of himself cannot respect himself. I am for myself when I respect myself, and I respect myself when I feel worthy of myself.

I am not for myself. How can a person not be for himself? The simple fact that he lives means that he is for himself, as he does not prevent himself from being himself. The phrase “I am not for myself” must then point to the possibility that the person is not for himself as he should be for himself. This can happen in two different ways. First, a person is liable not to be for himself when his actions do not correspond to his true nature; when they are not worthy of him, do not express self-respect, embarrass him, demean him, distort his essence. Second, a person is liable not to be for himself when he places his fate in the hands of another, such as mentors, guides, and authority figures. Then he ceases to be himself, and becomes instead a humanlike automaton, neither in control of himself nor responsible for himself.

“*If I am not for myself, who will be for me?*” If a person wants to be for himself, to take care of himself, to be worthy of himself, to respect himself, and not to subordinate himself to the wishes of others, he must first comprehend that no one can take his place; no one can act for him, or compensate for the deficiencies he senses in himself. Only he himself can do for himself. Of course, he is not alone in the world: He is surrounded by people, by groups, by cultures, by nature animate and inanimate, and other things without which life is not life. Nonetheless, after having assimilated all of these, he is left alone with himself, with his thoughts, feelings, passions, doubts, and decisions. And even if the source of all these is in large part external to him, he and only he is for himself; ultimately only he stands before himself, and is responsible for himself. It is true that he is not entirely transparent to himself; large parts of his inner self are hidden from him. But this should not prevent him from confronting himself, from attempting to access his inner self as much as possible, and from determining what is worthy of him, and what demonstrates self-respect.

It is easy to blame fate, society, the Other. It is easy to live steeped in bitterness on account of injustices—real or imagined—suffered. But the moment comes in every person’s life in which he must transcend himself; he must rise above complaints and excuses. In that moment, man must assess

his situation honestly, and decide how to proceed on his own. True, he is not alone in the world; even if he were to try, he could not disconnect himself from those around him. Nevertheless, he must attempt to stand on his own. He cannot transfer his burden to a guru, a rabbi, or any other spiritual guide. Only *he* can withdraw into himself and mine the ore of self-knowledge—as much as this is possible, of course. This does not mean that he must reject all offers of help, and do what is required without support. On the contrary, effective aid is desirable and welcome. Ultimately, however, man remains alone with himself, and owes only himself an accounting and a reckoning. Only he himself can access himself; only he can be *for himself*.

Man is alone with himself, facing himself. In his solitude—which is intrinsic to him—he establishes himself. Especially for the lover of wisdom, this solitude is not a miserable condition that makes one yearn for the din of distraction. On the contrary, it revives, reinforces, empowers, builds. The revelation of this loneliness in ourselves is in truth a constitutive moment for our conception of self. Through it, we learn to live with ourselves, to listen to ourselves, to be faithful to ourselves. Each of us, though he is not alone in the world, is alone with himself, and through his relationship with himself, builds himself. Understanding this existential state and its correct use requires effort, and even a certain degree of maturity. But the effort is worthwhile: At the end, we discover our fundamental freedom. Solitude thus becomes a source of joy. In it, I encounter myself in my world, and this encounter breathes into me a great vitality.

While God-fearing is related to instruction and obedience, and pleasure-seeking to feeling and passion, wisdom is related to joy. While instruction and feeling originate in the external world, joy springs from our inner selves. By “joy,” I do not mean that kind of emotion that overwhelms a person. Joy as I understand it does not wash over us and sweep us away; on the contrary, it is by its very nature quiet, calm, serious, restrained. It expresses a sense of wholeness, of harmony and fullness, an accord between the self and the self, the self and its world. Joy is a condition of *harmony*, in which the person experiencing it is at peace with himself, affirms himself, loves

himself. Happy with his lot, he does not surrender to the necessity of reality, but instead accepts himself. To the lover of wisdom, this is the pinnacle of human existence. Joy is what directs his actions, and even if he is unsure that he can attain it, it is clear to him that it is a worthwhile objective. Joy awaits us, and we must go toward it.

“And if I am only for myself, what am I?” Even if the lover of wisdom succeeds in being for himself, taking care of himself, being worthy of himself, respecting himself, the question is, for whom—or, more precisely, for *what*—is all this effort made? For man is, after all, a creature that came from a putrid drop, and returns to a place of dust, worms, and maggots. Is it really worthwhile to labor for this type of being, corporeal and transient? Would it not be better for the lover of wisdom to permit himself to live according to his cravings and caprices? At this stage of self-examination, the lover of wisdom encounters the unnaturalness of his behavior and expectations. The natural man desires pleasure and rejects pain; knowing his time on earth is limited, he expects no reward, and fears no punishment. Why should the lover of wisdom rise above these expectations? Why should he rise above himself? The only answer that I can offer to these vital and pressing questions is that this is the way the lover of wisdom wants to live his life. This is the way of life he believes most worthy, this is the kind of life he believes is good. He is like Baron Münchhausen, pulling himself by his own tuft of hair from the swamp into which he does not wish to sink.

“What am I?” After shedding his outer layers, layers that are an inseparable part of his selfhood—the social layer, the familial layer, the gendered layer—the lover of wisdom penetrates the kernel of his humanity, and finds in it self-awareness, understanding, will. He senses that, with these foundations, it is within his ability to create and to organize himself and his world. And then he asks himself: Who am I? Who am I in my world? What must I do? How must I live? What may I expect—and is all of the effort I demand of myself worthwhile? Through these questions it becomes clear that *he* alone is the judge of himself, and that, ultimately, he owes only himself an accounting and reckoning. Furthermore, he realizes that the criteria upon

which he judges himself are not necessarily ethical, but aesthetic: The question is not only whether he is good in his own eyes, but also whether he is *beautiful* in his own eyes. In relating to his life as a play being staged before him, he must determine if it is a sublime, distasteful, or altogether bland business; whether it gives him enjoyment, or arouses in him disgust and shame.

“And if not now, when?” Now, without delay, the lover of wisdom must direct his deeds and thoughts toward the realization of his destiny. This “now” is not an undefined point in time, but a rich, dense, complex present, one that contains the memory of the past and the hopes for the future. The lover of wisdom must try to exhaust every moment of his life, to experience it as if it expressed the full reality of his being: living fully in the here and now, not in fear or wantonness, but in a brave and honest quest for perfection. True, our world is not perfect, and there is much that can be done to improve it. And yes, we are not perfect either, and there is much that we can do to improve ourselves. Yet the present is the moment of meeting between us and our world, between us and ourselves. This present must be nurtured and praised—and if we succeed, we will know true joy.

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Notes

1. Avot 1:14.
2. Avot 3:1.
3. Niall Rudd, ed. and trans., *Horace: Odes and Epodes* (Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library, 2004), p. 45.