

Escaping Your Personal Hell

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Introduction

In the article on the “[Four Levels of Happiness](#)” (on this landing page), we indicated that one of the levels of happiness would become dominant in our lives. When it does, it takes on greater significance over the course of time and eventually, it becomes our meaning or purpose in life. If we live for this purpose long enough, it becomes our identity—it becomes *us*. It is almost impossible to avoid making one of these levels of happiness dominant because in various situations the levels of happiness will conflict with one another, and when they do, we have to make the decision—we have to choose one over the other.

For example, someone might give me a box of See’s chocolate (which would definitely make me happy on the first level) but I might think to myself, “If I ate this whole box of chocolate I would gain weight” (which would make me unhappy on Level 2). If I take one piece and give the rest of the box to my friends, I am choosing Level 2 over Level 1, and this choice—done often enough—becomes habitual—and Level 2 becomes stronger. Now suppose further, that someone says “Spitzer, you should go to XXX University because it is much more prestigious and people will respect you more” (Level 2 motivation), but I know that ZZZ University will be more important for developing my character and faith (Level 3 and 4 motivation). After thinking about it, I choose XXX University (preferring Level 2 motivation to Levels 3 and 4). Even though I may not have explicitly chosen Level 2 as my dominant, by preferring Level 2 motivations over Levels 1, 3 and 4 motivations, I make Level 2 my dominant—my “default drive.”

Some of us explicitly choose which level of happiness will be dominant for us, but the majority of us slip into a dominant level of happiness—and if we do this unthinkingly, there is a very high likelihood that it will be either Level 1 or Level 2, because these levels are more apparent and culturally reinforced. This all too frequent phenomenon of slipping into dominant Level 1 and/or 2 happiness is unfortunate because we really never use our free choice to make the most important decision of our lives—the one that will affect every decision we make, every friend we choose, and every fork we take in the road. We become unwitting observers to our own life and compulsively follow instincts shaped for us by our lower desires and cultural fixations.

Yet there is another, perhaps more pressing, consequence—by slipping into Level 1 and/or 2 as our dominant view of happiness, we make ourselves miserable—along with everyone else who is close to us or collegially connected with us. I call this consequence of our non-decision, “the comparison game--our own personal hell.”

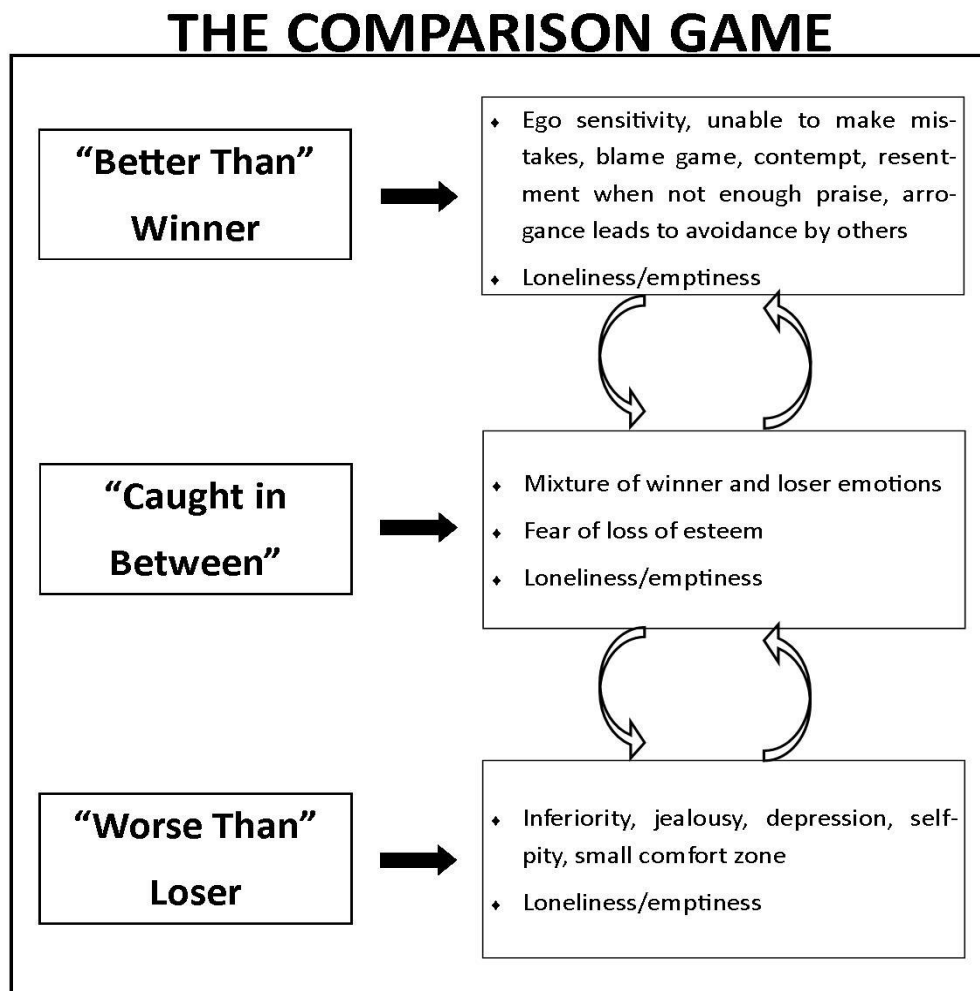
The following article first describes the comparison game and its debilitating and dangerous effects (Section I), then provides some remedies for escaping this “personal hell”

(Section II), and concludes with a consideration of whether we need to move to Level 4 happiness in order to be ultimately happy (Section III).

I. Creating Your Personal Hell: The Comparison Game

When Levels 1 and 2 become so important that we implicitly believe they are the *only* real source of our happiness and that they are the *only* things that will make our lives worth living, we begin to define ourselves, our self-worth, career choices, success, friendships, and marriage choice in terms of this all important objective. This can lead to a host of very negative emotions.

Many pre-teens begin to split the world into two parts – winners or losers (people who are above the norm and people who are below it). If these young people have no real sense of either Level 3 or Level 4, they tend to classify themselves in one of three ways: (1) “*Winners,*” (2) “*Losers,*” and (3) “*Caught in-between.*” These self-classifications have negative emotional consequences which continue far beyond adolescence, and are frequently exacerbated in young adulthood and middle age. As will be seen, the only way out is to move to either Level 3 or Level 4 – or both. The following diagram outlines the emotional conditions that accompany each of these three self-classifications.



As can be seen, there is no real positive result of the comparison game (dominant Level 1-2 happiness or purpose in life). A brief profile of each of the three groups may prove helpful; let us begin with those who self-classify as “losing” and then proceed to the “winners,” and finally to those “caught in-between.”

Loser

Those who classify themselves as “losers” generally have feelings of inferiority. They see themselves as being judged critically or negatively by many, if not most, of the people around them. Since this perception of negative judgment is viewed as rejection, these individuals tend to feel isolated and lonely. Inasmuch as they do not see any worth in themselves beyond a particular set of objectified talents or skills (such as intelligence, beauty, athletic ability, etc.), their feelings of loneliness persist and frequently turn into feelings of worthlessness.

Dominant Level 1-2 individuals make the mistake of objectifying (thingafying) themselves because they have not yet discovered Levels 3 or 4. Inasmuch as they have not yet discovered Level 3, they do not see their personhood, personality, lovability, love of others, and empathy as being important. Indeed they might not even know about these ways of looking at or valuing themselves. Furthermore, because they have not yet reached Level 4, they do not see themselves as being valued and loved by God or having a transcendent and eternal dignity (a soul which is destined for unconditional love in God’s eternity). Their unawareness of these other ways of looking at themselves (as lovable and transcendent mysteries) makes them default to a set of *things about* themselves – such as the clothes they are wearing, their natural beauty, their intelligence, athletic ability, their parents’ wealth, etc. This superficial self-classification plunges them into the comparison game, and they see no way out (if someone does not explain Levels 3 and 4 to them).

In their heightened state of loneliness (with accompanying feelings of worthlessness), these individuals can become depressed. Notice that this depression is not brought on by a chemical imbalance or the repression of early trauma, but rather by a superficial classification of self and life’s purpose. The solution to this kind of depression may not require pharmaceutical remedies or long-term therapy, but rather education and reorientation of the dominant view of happiness and purpose in life. This reorientation of the view of happiness and purpose can bring some immediate relief, and over the course of time, long-term peace and efficacy.

Winning

It might seem at first glance, that the solution to the problem of losing would be winning. After all, one could then avoid inferiority, isolation, depression, self-pity, etc. However, further scrutiny reveals that none of these things can be avoided by being a winner. They all re-emerge in different ways through different routes. There can be no doubt that winners *initially* have it better than those who perceive themselves as “losing.” They can receive intense “ego highs” when they succeed, when people praise them, and when they perceive themselves as superior. However, as most perceptive winners notice, these “ego highs” are short lived and these positive feelings are frequently replaced by negative ones. Why does this happen?

Winners always run the risk of narcissistic behaviors, and many of them become full blown narcissists. As virtually every spiritual writer throughout history has recognized, “pride goes before the fall.” The movement from “winning” to narcissism begins when “adulation and ego highs” become addictive. After a while, the winner compulsively pursues more and higher forms of adulation. This frequently requires building a façade, spending inordinate time and resources to give the right impression, and shamelessly chasing after praise.

Narcissists frequently find themselves trapped in a set of compulsive behaviors to get to higher levels of status, power, honor, and achievement so that they are not only admired by others, but virtually idolized by others, but this behavior runs many risks. First, in order to maintain the upward momentum toward idolization, narcissists have to engage in riskier behaviors. Frequently they have to exaggerate their accomplishments or engage in ethically questionable behavior in order to achieve higher levels of success. History and literature are replete with examples of the fall of great characters who idolized themselves (and tried to get others to do so) – Narcissus, Henry VIII, King Lear, Macbeth, Hitler, and Stalin, to mention just a few. These individuals frequently find themselves in uncontrollable anger, aggression, and loneliness, and they cause great evil and suffering to the people around them.

Do all narcissists finish their lives in a tragic finale? Some do not, but all of them cause suffering and anguish to the people around them, leading these individuals to withdraw emotionally from the narcissist. Narcissists trade in their loving, lovable, ethical, and transcendent self for a mere shadow of their true selves – a reputation which elicits adulation. The real tragedy is that most of them do not recognize what they have done – what they have thrown away.

Narcissists hold “inferiors” in contempt, and when the victims no longer believe in the narcissist’s “intrinsic superiority” (and begin to avoid them rather than praise them), they become resentful, and want to punish them – “I am going to have to teach you a lesson – so that you will get back in your place, and give me the adulation I deserve!” This turns narcissists into destruction machines. They look for ways to insult, belittle, and undermine their victims. But they don’t stop there. They also try to undermine victims’ sources of dignity (beyond the narcissist), such as God, family, religious and cultural institutions.

Narcissism and anger frequently run hand in hand -- not only because of perceived loss of dominion and control, but also because of dissatisfaction and frustration with what they do not have. Most narcissists would like more achievement, control, power, status, intelligence, perceived intelligence, adulation, and winning than they can ever get. Hence, they tend to take what they do have for granted, miring themselves in discontent as they brood about what they do *not* have.

Furthermore, narcissists’ harsh standard of judgment frequently come back to haunt them. The biblical passage, “the measure with which you measure will be measured out to you” (Matthew 7:2) becomes a reality long before the final judgment. People who are impatient with others are frequently impatient with themselves; those who judge others harshly, judge themselves in the same way. We have a strange proclivity for consistency, and the mood we strike around others becomes the mood we bring to ourselves. Narcissists also suffer from ego

sensitivity. They incur tremendous stress (and even nightmares) from the smallest public *faux pas*.

In sum, the life of a narcissist is not easy. It is filled with compulsive striving, façade making, praise chasing, ego-sensitivities, discontent, frustration, anger, contempt, resentment, and loneliness. Yes, there are lots of ego highs to counteract these feelings, but at the end of the day, there is always a shadow of despair and a destructive force that have a way of impressing themselves as a sense of foreboding on narcissists' unconscious minds. They know they have only fabricated an illusion instead of contributing to reality. However, there is a way out – Levels 3 and 4.

Caught In-Between

A sizable number of dominant Level 1-2 individuals find themselves caught in-between “winning” and “losing.” They have what they consider to be “good days” (winning) and “bad days” (losing). They also have good moments and bad moments within any given day. And so, it is not unusual to see them fluctuating between inferiority and superiority, contempt and jealousy, anger and self-pity, ego highs and depression, and narcissism and fear of failure. Many will recognize the following scenario – beginning with a success, exaggerating its importance, then experiencing a reality check (generally in the form of a judgment or snide remark), and then exaggerating the effect of the insult.

As if these fluctuations were not enough, those who are caught in-between find themselves in a perpetual state of fear of loss of esteem. They are aware that their “winning ways” are not permanent, and that their “average talent” is seen by potential critics and rivals. Since the esteem of others is “all important” to them, they have to be continuously concerned about managing little *faux pas*, and creating a positive image for others to see. They spend an inordinate amount of psychic energy worrying about what others might be thinking, and they frequently stay awake at night obsessing about possible judgments of others. They worry that their “mediocrity” will be exposed, and that they will lose what little esteemability they have. The source of these obsessions, once again, is a focus on the thingafied esteemable self to the virtual exclusion of the loving, lovable, and transcendent self, and the source of this restricted sense of self, in turn, is a dominant Level 1-2 identity. We will need to proceed to a consideration of how we might best reorient and refocus ourselves on Levels 3 and 4 to avert continued pain and self-destruction.

II.

Escaping Your Personal Hell: The Move to Level 3

I will treat this matter briefly here. Readers interested in a much more detailed explanation will want to read Chapter 4 of *Finding True Happiness: Satisfying Our Restless Hearts* (Ignatius Press 2015). The free video, [The Four Levels of Happiness](#) (on this landing page) also explains some of the techniques described below.

There are two steps to moving out of the comparison game—Level 3 *and* Level 4. This section is concerned with Level 3 remedies, and the next one (Section III) is concerned with Level 4 remedies. If we are going to move from a dominant Level 1-2 identity (which is very

natural to us because it is like a default drive), we will have to deliberately choose Levels 3 and 4, and in order to do this, we must concretely specify what it is we want to look for in our life's purpose, others, ourselves, and our freedom. What we are *looking* for turns out to determine what we are *living* for (our life's purpose), and when we live for a particular purpose long enough, it becomes our identity (the essence we give to ourselves).

An important way of reorienting ourselves from Dominant Level 1-2 to Dominant Level 3-4 is to ask ourselves repeatedly *questions* that concern Levels 3 and 4. We need not answer these questions in the short term—it is sufficient only to review and *ask* the questions. This will enable both the conscious and unconscious parts of the psyche to be sensitized to them, and to eventually formulate answers to them through the ordinary course of life. As we repeatedly ask ourselves these questions, answers will begin to emerge which can become goals for directing our lives.

As the reader may have surmised, the four levels are more than levels of desire and happiness—they really constitute a *worldview*—the way we look at the world, others, ourselves, and our lives. That is why what we are living for influences what we are looking for and vice versa. There are four fundamental attitudes that influence our worldview:

1. What I seek for fulfillment and purpose in life,
2. What I look for in others,
3. What I am looking for in myself,
4. What I seek in order to be free.

The questions we ask ourselves can shape and determine these fundamental attitudes—which in turn shape and determine our worldview. Immediately below in this section, there are four lists of questions—one list for each fundamental attitude. Though many of these questions can be understood without explanation, I recommend that readers look at Chapter 4 of *Finding True Happiness: Satisfying Our Restless Hearts* for an in-depth account of them. You may want to do a test by reading the first list of questions once or twice per day for a month, and at the end of the month, ask yourself the following questions: Are the negative emotions of the comparison game (jealousy, ego-sensitivity, fear of loss of esteem, inferiority, etc.) declining in intensity? Are my relationships with people improving? Do I have a renewed sense of spirit and meaning in life? Are my feelings of emptiness and alienation (not feeling at home here) declining in intensity? Is my life making a greater positive difference to the people around me? To the Kingdom of God? To the organizations with which I affiliate? And to my community and culture? If the answers to these questions are “Yes,” you will want to move on to the second list and so forth.

It is very difficult to do more than one list at a time, because our minds and hearts simply cannot absorb and focus on that much content. So I would recommend reviewing the first list at least once or twice per day for one month—then move to the second list asking each question once or twice per day for a month—then the third list for a month, and finally the fourth list for a month.

By simply asking ourselves these questions, we gradually move out of a dominant Level 1-2 worldview into a dominant Level 3 (and sometimes 4) worldview. This is likely to lead to greater happiness, purpose, efficacy, love, and faith.

The following chart outlines the contrast between Levels 1 and 2 on the one hand and Levels 3 and 4 on the other with respect to the four fundamental attitudes. The four charts that follow give the list of questions for each of the fundamental attitudes.

FOUR FUNDAMENTAL ATTITUDES

Attitude	Dominant Level 1-2 ("Default Drive")	Dominant Level 3-4
Purpose in Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Pleasure ♦ Material Accumulation ♦ Ego Comparative Advantage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Optimal contribution to family, organization, community, church, culture, society, and kingdom of God
View of Others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ The Bad News in Others ♦ The Other is Over-against Me 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Others' cultural institutions, and church institutions have value and should be promoted if deemed good
View of Self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ The Estimable Self ♦ The "Thingafied" Self 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ The Loving Self ♦ The Lovable Self ♦ The Transcendent Self
View of Freedom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Freedom From ♦ Getting what I want now ♦ Avoid Constraint By and Responsibility to Others ♦ Commitment is Negative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Freedom For ♦ Desire to get to the most pervasive, enduring, and deep meaning ♦ Self-Sacrifice is Acceptable ♦ Commitment is Positive

WHAT AM I LOOKING FOR? — PURPOSE IN LIFE

How can I make a positive difference in the short term, and in the long term?	
Category 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ To my family? ♦ To my friends and colleagues?
Category 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ To my organization? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * My organization's stakeholders (employees, management, customers, vendors, etc.)? * To the general welfare of the organization?
Category 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ To my community? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * To charitable and educational institutions within the community? ♦ To the culture? ♦ To the society? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Through education, politics, etc.?
Category 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ To my church? ♦ To the Kingdom of God?
<i>FOR THIS I CAME</i>	

WHAT AM I LOOKING FOR IN OTHERS?
What are the little good things they try to do?
What are their gratuitous acts of kindness?
What are their delightful idiosyncrasies?
What are the subtle and overt ways in which they offer friendship?
What are their values or principles?
What are the great good things they aspire to do?
What are the strengths they have that complement my own?
What are their spiritual or religious commitments?
How do they exemplify transcendent mystery? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *In their pursuit of truth? *In their pursuit of love? *In their pursuit of goodness and justice? *In their pursuit of beauty and home?

WHAT AM I LOOKING FOR IN MYSELF?

Relational and Interpersonal Attributes

Do I value and develop empathy for others?
 Do I value and develop humility (as an antidote to narcissism)?
 Do I value and develop compassion towards others?
 Do I value and develop loyalty to others?
 Do I value and develop patience, kindness, and gentleness towards others?
 Do I value and develop the quality of my personal presence and friendship?
 Do I value and accept others friendship and presence in my life?
 Do I value the above attributes as much as (or more than) my resume', appearance, net

Ethical and Virtue Attributes

Do I value and develop honesty and character in myself?
 Do I value and develop justice or fairness in myself?
 Do I value and develop a moral courage in myself?
 Do I value and develop ethical principles to which I am committed?
 Do I value and develop ethical ideals to which I am committed?
 Do I value and develop self-discipline?

Transcendent and Spiritual Attributes

Do I value and develop my awareness of perfect and unconditional truth, love, goodness, beauty, and being?
 Do I value and develop my relationship with God?
 Do I value and development my striving to be unconditionally loving
 (in imitation of God)?
 Do I value and develop my striving for unconditional justice and goodness

WHAT KIND OF FREEDOM AM I LOOKING FOR?

Assuming that I am committed to making an optimal positive difference to the world and the kingdom of God with my time, talents, and energy, and that I desire the most pervasive, enduring, and deep purpose in life:

- ♦ Do I feel more passion and excitement about my more pervasive, enduring, and deep goals than I do about satisfying my Level One desires and my egocentric desires?
- ♦ Do I feel excitement and positive energy about making commitments toward my highest goals even though they may have some difficult or unpleasant dimensions (foreclosing options, overcoming obstacles, and "sticking with the plan")?
- ♦ What kinds of activities hinder or undermine my pursuit of what is most pervasive, enduring, and deep — activities that are wasteful and beneath my true purpose in life?
- ♦ Do I have enough positive energy about my highest goals to let go of these hindering or wasteful activities?
- ♦ Am I willing to make sacrifices to have a truly meaningful commitment to someone or some ideal?

Please note that some Level One and Level Two activities are necessary and desirable — so we want to know the point at which Level One and Level Two activities become wasteful or undermine Level Three and Level Four activities. For example, it may be desirable for the purposes of recreation or rest to have a glass of wine or watch a movie, but at what point does drinking wine or going to the movies begin to hinder Level Two, Three, or Four?

III. Do We Need Level 4 Happiness to be Ultimately Happy?

Can Level 3 ultimately satisfy us? It would seem not because contribution alone cannot satisfy our desires for perfect truth, love, justice (goodness), beauty and home—our five transcendental desires. These matters were explained in the article on “[Four Levels of Happiness](#)” (previously referenced). These five transcendental desires affect us whether we acknowledge them or not. We will want to know everything about everything even if we abandon the pursuit of truth; desire perfect love even if we think it does not exist; desire perfect justice and goodness even if we have been disappointed by people’s conduct and the judicial system; desire perfect beauty even if we believe it is unattainable; and desire perfect home even if we believe that there is nothing beyond us but emptiness and darkness. Thus, if we are to be ultimately and perfectly happy we will have to satisfy our five transcendental desires.

The obvious question arises—how? As noted in the article on the “Four Levels of Happiness,” we cannot satisfy these five desires on our own, because we are not perfect truth, love, justice (goodness), beauty, and home. The finite and imperfect world around us is also incapable of fulfilling these desires for the same reason. So where can we turn to fulfill these desires—or are we left with the existential absurdity of desiring what cannot be fulfilled?

In the article on the “Four Levels of Happiness,” we showed that we could not have had a desire for the five transcendentals unless we had an awareness of them sufficient to arouse those desires, and we showed further that the only possible source of that awareness would have to be perfect truth itself, perfect love itself, perfect justice (goodness) itself, perfect beauty itself, and perfect home itself. These are all attributes of the unique unrestricted act of thinking which creates all else that is (God).

Interestingly, our very desire for perfect truth, love, justice (goodness), beauty and home reveal the existence of their objectives—for if perfect truth, love, justice, etc. did not exist independently of us, we could never have been aware of them sufficiently to desire them. Inasmuch as these five transcendentals are attributes of the one unrestricted act of thinking (God), then God is the source of our transcendental desires. Thus God has planted the clue to his own existence within our very desire for Him.

Since there can only be one unrestricted act of thinking—which is perfect truth, love, justice (goodness), beauty and home (see the proof of this in Chapter 3 of Spitzer 2015 *The Soul’s Upward Yearning*)—then God *alone* can satisfy our five transcendental desires. This is why St. Augustine declared, “For Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.”

Are there any other clues to our transcendental nature and happiness besides the five transcendental desires? There are—but they come from the opposite direction—four *negative* feelings (states of being) that religious existentialists (e.g., Soren Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, Max Scheler, Karl Jaspers, and Martin Buber) have associated with God’s call—*cosmic* emptiness, alienation, loneliness, and guilt.

Notice that the feelings of emptiness, alienation, loneliness and guilt have two contexts—a “*this worldly*” context and a *transcendent context*. With respect to the “*this worldly*” context, emptiness feels like an absence of purpose *in this life* (not having Level 2 or Level 3 goals and aspirations); alienation feels like we don’t fit into or are rejected by people or institutions in this world; loneliness feels like an absence of family, friends, and colleagues; and guilt arises out of doing harm to a person or group of persons.

These four feelings are qualitatively different in a Level 4 context. Before examining them, we need to define the term “cosmic.” This term is used here with one of its common connotations—“infinitely or inconceivably vast,” which implies “the totality of being.” Thus “cosmic emptiness” is a feeling that there is *nothing outside* of us except emptiness, darkness, and coldness; “cosmic alienation” refers to a feeling of not fitting into or not having a real place in the *whole* order of things; “cosmic loneliness” refers to a sense of being alone in the *totality* of things; and “cosmic guilt” refers to a feeling of living beneath our true calling and responsibility in the *cosmic* struggle between good and evil.

These four feelings are perceived as negative because they indicate a radically incomplete state of being, and suggest not only that something is missing, but that “what is missing” is essential to our happiness, completeness, purpose, and fulfillment. We feel this essential incompleteness in a way similar to the loss of vision or hearing—we are not only inconvenienced by our loss of mobility and autonomy, but we feel like we are not our whole selves.

We will now examine each of these four feelings briefly. Let’s begin with *cosmic emptiness*. For Kierkegaard and other religious existentialists, this feeling arises out of an absence of purpose, not in the immediate world around us, but in the totality of being. This is manifest by an overriding sense of *boredom* present even amidst a beautiful family, a successful career, material comforts, terrific friends, and just about everything a person could want in this world. The boredom keeps telling us that there should be something more – yet it does not seem to be apparent in the *natural world*. Lippitt and Pattison state Kierkegaard’s position as follows: “It is the existential experience of inner emptiness found in boredom’s directionless vacuum that is the decisive spur to Kierkegaard’s later analyses of human despair.”¹ Boredom is an indicator of inner emptiness, which eventually manifests itself as “being surrounded by nothingness, darkness, and coldness.” The longer we submit to the emptiness, the closer we come to despair.

Atheistic existentialists, such as Camus and Sartre, exclude the possibility of transcendental fulfillment, meaning that these feelings of emptiness cannot be overcome. This makes life absurd and despair inevitable. However, religious existentialists believe that this cosmic boredom and emptiness is *not* a pure negative, but rather a call (or perhaps better a neon sign) beckoning us to go beyond (transcend) a merely superficial purpose in life. This call beyond superficiality leads to a domain of spiritual, transcendent, and eternal purpose.

For religious existentialists, the feelings of boredom and emptiness amidst a great family, terrific career, etc. provoke us to ask, “How can this be? Everything is going great in just about every aspect of my life – How can I be feeling boredom, emptiness, and even insignificance – why do I feel the anxiety of overlooking or losing something of ultimate significance?” Thus, for

¹ John Lippitt and George Pattison ed. 2013 *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard* (Oxford University Press), p. 84

these philosophers, cosmic boredom and emptiness is God's way of provoking us to search for our true purpose, dignity, and destiny (which is spiritual, transcendent, and eternal)—and not to settle for “terrific success” in the domain of finitude, mortality, the conditioned, and imperfect.

Emptiness is perceived to be not only in the outer world, but also in our inner world. Sometimes we look at ourselves in the mirror and know that the eyes (the windows to the soul) staring back at us have in them a void or darkness or coldness. It can shock us or make us dizzy seeing this vapid stranger in the mirror. We don't want to entertain the thought of our nothingness or insignificance for too long, so we move away from the mirror, play some music loudly, or think about the urgent concerns of the day. We might think to ourselves for a second, “That was weird,” but we try to ignore it. If we experience this interior emptiness and insignificance day after day, it can give rise to malaise and quiet desperation. We may turn to our friends and family to fill the inner emptiness, but it persists because it is not the kind of emptiness that can be filled by a finite and imperfect being, but only a being of absolute and ultimate significance. The emptiness we sense in our mirror image is the absence of transcendent significance, and until we allow ourselves to be filled with it, the emptiness will persist along with the malaise.

We may now consider *cosmic alienation*. Alienation from the vantage point of “this world” (Level 3), generally signifies “not having a place in” or “not being at home in” our family, friends, workplace, community, or the culture. This sense of being an outsider not only brings with it loneliness (see below), but also an absence of worth or respectability – a sense of “not being welcome.”

Cosmic alienation has many of the same attendant feelings, but it does not arise out of “this worldly” contexts. It is not unusual for people to feel perfectly at home with family, friends, community, and culture, yet still feel a pervading sense of not being at home or not being welcome or being an outsider. If such a person is reflective, she is likely to ask, “Why do I feel a lack of acceptance or welcome, a sense of being left out of my home, when I have a wonderful family and friends as well as an agreeable community and culture?” She might notice that her feeling has a much more general context than the specific context of family and friends – “I feel out of sorts with *everything*; not at home in the *totality* of things; an outsider in the whole cosmos.” Even if she turns to her family, friends, and community for a greater sense of “home,” she will not be able to shake the pervading sense that a more general or transcendent home is missing. She is at home in small and intimate contexts, but not at home in the biggest context of all.

Atheistic existentialists would interpret this as yet another sign of the absurdity of life and the inevitability of despair, however religious existentialists see it as God's invitation to move more closely to our ultimate home – the transcendent, perfect, and eternal home. If we do not respond to this invitation, the feelings will persist, and they can produce a sense of purposelessness, malaise, and cynicism about life. Yet these feelings need not do this, for they can incite us to search for the ultimate and the transcendent which can lead us to our ultimate home.

We may now turn to *cosmic loneliness*. Religious existentialists also believe that the human person is interpersonal. When we are not in relation to others, we feel like a mere fraction of ourselves. The more we are in relation to others, the more we experience ourselves, and the deeper our relationship with others, the deeper our experience of ourselves. Other people make us come alive, reflect us back to ourselves, and give us significance in our relationship with them. The more we invest ourselves in others, the more others invest themselves in us. This brings with it love, meaning, and well-being. When we are deprived of the presence of others, we lose this sense of significance, love, and well-being – and along with it, most of our sense of self. It is almost like someone has torn away a part of our being.

The Jewish existentialist philosopher, Martin Buber, noticed that our interpersonal personhood has, as it were, two layers – the “this worldly” layer described above (which he terms “I-thou”) and a transcendent and absolute layer (which he terms “I-Thou”).² For Buber, our being not only anticipates and desires other human beings, but also an ultimate and absolute interpersonal Being. Our being is conditioned by the need for both a concrete person and an absolute person.

Buber’s insight is not as difficult as it might seem. Have you ever had an acute feeling of loneliness in the midst of a family get-together or at a wedding reception in which you felt the presence of your family and friends in a joyful and positive way? If so, you might have thought, “This doesn’t make any sense – I’m loved by family and friends, life is going well, there is a pervasive sense of joy, and yet I feel that something or somebody is missing – somebody really important.” You are aware that you are feeling lonely, but you don’t know for whom. You try to enter more fully into conversations, connect with certain family members and friends, but to no avail; the feeling of “missing someone important” persists.

The Catholic philosopher and theologian Karl Rahner provides some insight into this peculiar experience. He contends that God creates us in relationship to Himself from the first moment of our existence.³ If we enter into this relationship with Him, we will feel normal (though sometimes “supernormal”); however, if we ignore our relationship to the Creator, we will feel what was termed “cosmic loneliness.” This relationship with the Creator is so intimate and fundamental it is like a relationship with our parents. When we enter into it (let them into our lives, make them significant for us, and enter into their lives) we feel normal, but if we ignore this relationship and close ourselves off to our parents, we feel an acute loneliness—even if they do not ignore us in return.

If Rahner is correct, then no human relationship will be able to take the place of this transcendent one. Continuing to ignore it makes the loneliness more acute. The autobiographies of many holy people recount how their encounter with the transcendent in prayer or in a church

² Buber has three layers of personhood – “I-it” (corresponding to Levels One and Two), “I-thou” (corresponding to Level Three), and “I-Thou” (corresponding to Level Four). See Martin Buber 2010. *I and Thou* (Eastford Connecticut: Martino Publications).

³ Rahner contends that when God creates us in relationship to Himself, He already creates the condition under which we can enter into that relationship: “God’s self-communication as offer is also the necessary condition which makes its acceptance possible.” Rahner 1982, p.128.

community brought them out of this state of loneliness into a reality they had not even imagined. St. Augustine's prayer as he crosses this threshold expresses the moment well:

Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you!
Lo, you were within,
but I outside, seeking there for you,
and upon the shapely things you have made
I rushed headlong – I, misshapen.
You were with me, but I was not with you.
They held me back far from you,
those things which would have no being
were they not in you.
You called, shouted, broke through my deafness;
you flared, blazed, banished my blindness;
you lavished your fragrance, I gasped; and now I pant for you;
I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst;
you touched me, and I burned for your peace.⁴

St. Augustine, for years had ignored a relationship with God by supposing that the fulfillment of worldly desires would bring true happiness. Yet a feeling of emptiness and loneliness within him kept revealing his incompleteness (and his lack of true purpose and happiness). It is only when he takes his leap of faith that he experiences a moment of complete satisfaction – resting in the unconditional love of a “beauty ever ancient, ever new.”

We may now look at the phenomenon of *cosmic guilt*. In the article on “[The Four Levels of Happiness](#)” (previously referenced), we discussed the effects of conscience, one of which is an intense feeling of alienation when we have done something that we believe to be evil. Yet guilt goes beyond alienation from specific intentional activities. Philosophy and literature are replete with examples of a generic sense of guilt, the source of which at first seems ambiguous (e.g. Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Kafka's *The Trial*). Though there are many theories about the origin of this phenomenon, there is general agreement that one source is our sense of underliving our life, underrating our potential, and underestimating our dignity and destiny. It is a sense of wasting our lives – not living up to our full potential, and letting our true purpose slip through our fingers.

Recall that even if we do not pursue one or more of the various levels of happiness, we still desire it, and that unfilled desire leaves us with a sense of yearning. Yet because we are reflective beings, we do not simply yearn for the Third or Fourth Levels of happiness, we have an underlying sense that we are not living up to our potential, that the most important parts of life are passing us by, and that we have ignored or shirked one of our most important responsibilities. This feeling of guilt can occur not only to a dominant Level 2 person, but also to a dominant Level 3 person who has not yet pursued Level 4. Even though such individuals get tremendous satisfaction from their relationships with and contributions to others, they also feel that there is

⁴ Augustine 1991. *The Confessions*. Trans. by Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press) Bk. X.27, p 296.

something missing, and that they are responsible for this missing element in their lives, and so they have a cosmic sense of guilt.

At this juncture, cosmic guilt and cosmic loneliness become intertwined, because the feeling of letting life pass us by seems to involve a Personal Being. We seem to be ignoring not just an immense opportunity or a path to transcendence, but a Personal Being who wants to give this to us. We have a sense that this Personal Being deserves our response and awaits our response, and if we do not give a response we feel the above-mentioned guilt of ignoring a parent or a best friend – who wants to help us.

There is another dimension of cosmic guilt intermeshed with the one mentioned above. We not only feel a responsibility to make the most out of our lives, and to respond to a Personal Being who wants to help us to that goal, but also a responsibility to help in what was termed “the cosmic struggle between good and evil.” Carl Jung implies that we feel an involvement in a cosmic or spiritual struggle which goes beyond our concrete existence. Modern myths of cosmic struggles between good and evil – such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, and *Star Wars* – reflect this common belief (as seen in “[The Four Levels of Happiness](#)” article). We feel a responsibility to help the side of cosmic good and to fight the side of cosmic evil in a transcendent struggle that imbues our daily lives.

We sense that we are immersed in that struggle – whether we acknowledge it or not, and so when we ignore this cosmic dimension of our lives, we feel like guilty bystanders – who suspect that there is evil going on in the house next door, but ignore it because we do not want to become involved in a struggle. Even if we are not religious people, we can sense the presence of evil – in people’s contemptuous words, in the milieu of hopelessness and anxiety, and in a culture that undermines principles and love. We have an incipient sense of an adage popularly attributed to Edmund Burke – “all that is required for the triumph of evil is for a few good people to remain silent.”⁵ When we remain silent to the evil we sense, we feel alienated from our purpose in life and implicitly believe that we are letting other people down—that we are not stopping “the evil next door.” This sense of “letting people down” is also a sense of letting down the totality—not playing our intended role in the cosmos or the cosmic struggle, and this in turn, carries with it the sense of letting down the transcendent Personal Being who intended that role for us.

Cosmic guilt, like cosmic emptiness, alienation, and loneliness, can be suppressed as we move about in our daily lives. However, as can be seen, there is an interior penalty for doing this – a radical sense of letting down self, others, and a transcendent Personal Being that will not be suppressed.

Conclusion. The above four feelings can manifest themselves together. If this multidimensional feeling is left alone, it can give rise to a belief that happiness, fulfillment, and

⁵ Though this phrase is the most quoted among those attributed to Edmund Burke, he did not really write it. It probably is a paraphrase of another one of his sayings: “When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle.” The shortened paraphrase attributed to Burke may have been inspired by Plato who wrote, “The penalty good men pay for indifference to public affairs is to be ruled by evil men.”

completeness are not possible – that emptiness and darkness are more prevalent than ultimate fullness and light, that alienation is more powerful than ultimate empathy, and that loneliness is more powerful than ultimate relationship. It has been described by various existentialists as “sickness about life,” “dread about the future,” “anxiousness about self,” “fear about losing self,” and “guilt about shirking our responsibility to self, others, and a transcendent Personal Being.”

As noted above, religious existentialists have seen these negative feelings (and states of being) as something positive, because they lead us to our true nature, true home, true relationship with the Divine, and therefore to our true selves. However, if they are to have this positive effect, we must make a decision to move toward the transcendent domain to which they are pointing.

We can conclude with the thought that Level 3 is not enough for our happiness and fulfillment. Our five transcendental desires and the four feelings of cosmic emptiness, alienation, loneliness, and guilt collectively indicate that we want something more and that there *is* something more. Religious existentialists recognize that we could never have either the five transcendental desires or these four negative feelings if God were not present to us. Inasmuch as He makes Himself known to us as our fulfillment, we feel empty when we are not in relationship to Him; inasmuch as He makes Himself known to us as true home, we feel alienated when we are not at home with Him; and inasmuch as He makes Himself known to us as ultimate love, we feel alone when we are not in relationship with Him.

We do not have to blindly believe the interpretation of religious existentialists about these feelings—namely that they come from ignoring a personal relationship with a transcendent deity who is present to us. There is considerable warrant for believing in such a deity from contemporary physics, logic, and philosophy of mathematics,⁶ a transcendent soul capable of surviving bodily death from near death experiences,⁷ and the *unconditional* love of God manifest in Jesus Christ.⁸ This evidence is significant enough to warrant a serious examination. If the reader believes this evidence to be probative and desires a relationship with that deity, it would be reasonable and responsible to make a faith commitment—which would most likely entail pursuing a church community, a life of prayer, and a commitment to studying the revealed text of that church community—particularly the Bible.

The loving God will always respect our freedom – He will not force or push us on the journey to faith. The taste of perfect home, love, truth, goodness, and beauty is an invitation, not an ultimatum, and so we must follow through with an act of belief and trust in the One who has created us for perfect fulfillment with one another in Him.

IV. Where Do We God from Here?

⁶ See the evidence from physics on the free video—“[Science, God, and Creation](#)” and in the accompanying complete study guide—“[From Nothing to Cosmos](#)” (Science, Reason, and Faith landing page). Also see the three logical-metaphysical proofs in Spitzer 2010 *New Proofs for the Existence of God: Contributions of Contemporary Physics and Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing), Chapters 3-5.

⁷ See the “free article—Science and Near Death Experiences” on this landing page.

⁸ See the free video—“[The Reasonableness of Christianity](#)”, the “free article—[Science and the Shroud of Turin](#)” and the “free encyclopedia—[The Historical Jesus](#)” (The Reality of Jesus landing page).

If the reader decides to take the route of religious existentialists and enter into a relationship with the transcendent deity, it will be incumbent upon him or her to find a source of revealed truth to answer the questions that reason, our transcendental desires, and our feelings of cosmic emptiness, alienation, loneliness, and guilt cannot answer. If the reader believes further that love holds out the key to the meaning of life—and therefore to the nature of the transcendent deity—then I would recommend a move toward the revelation of Jesus Christ whose life and teaching center on these two truths. As noted above, it would be best to seek that revelation through a church community that has a lengthy history of interpreting that revealed truth. Once in that community, it is vital to pursue a life of prayer—which produces a living connection between us and the deity. Readers interested in a rationale for choosing the revelation of Jesus may want to investigate all the free resources on the fourth landing page ([The Reality of Jesus](#)) on this website. Those interested in [getting started on prayer](#) may want to investigate the article, by the same name, on this landing page.