

**Mark Edmundson.** *Self and Soul: A Defense of Ideals*. Harvard University Press 2015. 304 pp. \$29.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780674088207).

Mark Edmundson has taken philosophic approaches in his writings on education, literature, and culture. In *Self and Soul: A Defense of Ideals*, Edmundson looks rationally and critically at the state of contemporary culture, and evaluates it in the context of ideas that have had a profound impact on the Western intellectual tradition. As Aristotle reminds us, philosophy begins with wonder. When one attempts to understand contemporary culture, one cannot help but wonder at what influenced the ideas, attitudes, and characteristics of our own age. Through this sense of wonder, Edmundson examines three essential values that he believes had an important impact on the development of modern liberal societies—courage, contemplation, and compassion—and relates these central ideas to the modern understanding of ‘Self’ and ‘Soul’. In *Self and Soul*, Edmundson blends literary criticism with intellectual history and philosophical reflection.

The central concern for Edmundson is that the West has become progressively more practical, materially oriented, and skeptical (1). Absent real virtues such as courage, contemplation, and compassion, contemporary culture demonstrates a state of affairs where ‘unfettered capitalism runs amok; Nature is ravaged; the rich gorge; prisons are full to bursting; the poor cry out in their misery and no one seems to hear. Lust of Self rules the day’ (1). Using the categories of ‘Self’ and ‘Soul’, Edmundson presents a thoughtful dialogue between two different metaphysical world views.

The book’s central thesis is both simple and profound—that ‘without ideals, life lacks significant meaning’ (102). Edmundson admits that he could be wrong. Those who have embraced genuine ideals, or values, have often been persecuted, killed, or marginalized. Perhaps Freud, Nietzsche, and Derrida are right—values might actually be tools the powerful use to oppress others. And yet, Edmundson wonders, what if Freud and Nietzsche, geniuses though they were, were actually wrong about human nature and the role of ideals in society? What if Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were right about the place of ideals and intellectual virtue in one’s life? *Self and Soul* provides an intellectual history that seeks to provide a dialogue and exchange of ideas between these positions. Edmundson also has another reason for exploring these questions. Many young people are not even given the option to explore them. For that matter, many adults have given up on these question altogether. ‘Every man and woman should have the chance to ponder the question of the ideal’ (2). Edmundson argues that everyone today should be able to discover if these values are true or not and determine whether they want to implement them in their lives. The intellectual process of inquiry, free exchange of ideas, and discussion should be available to all. Yet the concept of enduring, timeless, and essential values seems to be fading from our cultural heritage. The concern is that if we say there are no transcendent values, we cut ourselves off from the educational process of discovery and have no way of deciding whether or not we want to integrate ideals and values into our lives. Deciding whether or not ideals exist and how to implement them in life and society should at least be a living option. Edmundson is not simply concerned about describing a world or society in which values or ideals do not exist. He is well aware that false and counterfeit ideals do exist, and he believes that in various ways Freud and Nietzsche are the great intellectual proponents of anti-idealist ideals.

For Edmundson, the Self is a cultural condition of radical individualism, presentism, and greed. Society is increasingly driven and obsessed with consumer capitalism, mediated through technology and entertainment with no other significant purpose or end. ‘We live for our personal desires; we want food and sex, money and power and prestige’ (14). For many, the mindless pursuit of appetite serves no greater purpose than providing inane distractions for their brief lives. The

Soul, on the other hand, as Edmundson conceives it, is a unity of being that fully embodies the ideals of courage, compassion, and contemplation. The Soul is 'unified, joy bringing, and fully present to experience' (1). Edmundson's conception of the soul is similar to Aristotle's 'great souled man', a soul centered on magnanimity and intellectual and moral virtue. The idealist hopes for joy and presence and unity, not only for himself but for others. Edmundson argues that a generous impulse lies behind the aspiration to the ideal and can be seen in the lives of Socrates, Jesus, the Buddha, and even Hector and Achilles (97). In contrast, however, 'lives without courage, contemplation, compassion, and imagination are lives sapped of significant meaning. In such lives, the Self cannot transcend itself. But the Self seems to hunger for such transcendence' (50).

The central values Edmundson seeks to explicate are courage, contemplation, and compassion. He uses Homer's *Iliad* to develop the ideal of courage, although contemplation and compassion can also be found in the epic poem. Plato is examined for the role of contemplation and the quest for eternal Truth and Jesus, the Buddha, and the Hindu sacred texts are used to describe the life of compassion. Homer's heroes (he focuses on Achilles and Hector) illustrate the unity of purpose between mind and heart as they experience a unity of being that centers them in this world. Edmundson explains: 'The warrior senses himself to be an integral part of all he sees around him.... The warrior is at home in the world, though there is little that is kindly, generous or sweet about the world in which he dwells' (27). Given a just and honorable cause, the true warrior takes appropriate action. He understands that one's words and ideas must correspond to one's actions. The Homeric hero experiences a metaphysical realism that centers him in this world. In contrast, contemporary man is not at home; he is restless and seeks the Self above everything else.

The idea of contemplation is found in Plato. Plato seeks a Truth that will be true for all time. He is not looking for truth that applies exclusively to Greeks, or to men and women who live in city-states, or to those who exist at the same point in time that he does. Plato seeks Truth that will apply to all men and women at all times. As Edmundson explains, 'if Plato's account cannot illuminate the human condition in America in 2020 as well as it did the human condition in Greece when he was teaching and writing, Plato fails' (5). If the true thinker, following Plato, succeeds, he will understand the permanence of human nature and the Good that transcends time and space. He 'can tell you not only what men and women are like now, and what the world is, but how those things will be for all time' (134). The thinker will understand human nature and understand what kinds of governments will succeed or fail and what kind of education is best. Edmundson then turns to the great ideal of compassion and focuses on the life of Jesus, although similar teachings can be found in the Buddha or the wisdom of the Upanishads. 'With compassion, every man is my neighbor. Every woman is my neighbor.... No longer is one a thrashing Self, fighting the war of each against all. Now one is part of everything and everyone: one merges with the spirit of all that lives' (8).

Is Edmundson right about our current social and intellectual climate? He is certainly not the first to point out the differences between contemporary culture and the classical worldview. Whether or not one holds to the declension model of Western civilization or sees both continuities and discontinuities in previous or current societies, it can certainly be said that there is much in today's culture that magnifies the Self above any and all ideals. Whether it be affective capitalism, ecotourism, or a simple online search (which is based on popularity and may or may not contain that which corresponds to reality), postmodern consumer capitalism exists to provide the ever new experience for the Self. Corporations invest large sums to give customers what they want and build their loyalty free from burdens of thinking too carefully or rationally about anything. The Self does seem to rule supreme. When it comes to education, having information does not mean one has understanding or wisdom. In a larger picture, *Self and Soul* speaks to the metaphysical tension of

being and becoming. Are we now living entirely in a state of becoming? If so, how do we find the eternal moral and intellectual values of being—those that do not change according to time or one's Self or political identities? Are there really no unchanging ideals? Perhaps because of the rationalism of Descartes, the idealism of Kant, or just disengaged global capitalism (simple self-centered greed), the culture of the Self does demonstrate a radical skepticism regarding knowledge of the external world or real values that might shape it for the better. In some ways, Edmundson echoes the philosopher F.H. Bradley as he explains that the Self is a consequence of the failure to seek and integrate the great ideals that were foundational to Western civilization. Many students do not get the opportunity to explore these questions. Edmundson's *Self and Soul* argues that our students deserve such a chance.

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