

**Edmundson, Mark. *Self and Soul: A Defense of Ideals*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2015. 283 pages. \$29.95 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-674-08820-7.**

When Mark Edmundson, University Professor of English at the University of Virginia, looks out from the front of his classroom, he sees ambitious and talented young people, the best of their generation. But, to his eyes, they lack all conviction. They want to achieve, sure, but their aims are dull, mundane, and self-focused. “Achievement” itself is often their sole aspiration. They want to be management consultants. Or physicians who will keep terminally ill patients alive for another three days, at great expense. Or inventors of apps that will help users upload pictures of their dinners more efficiently. None wants to be a hero, a saint, a thinker, or a poet. None lives for an ideal.

On Edmundson’s account, his students are typical denizens of the present age. As he argues in *Self and Soul*, his eleventh book, modern culture in the West has suffered from a loss of the classical ideals—principally courage, compassion, and contemplation—that would enable people to live self-transcending lives. Because we no longer believe in these or any other ideals, we are prisoners of ourselves. Or rather, of our Selves, for Edmundson establishes his argument on the opposition between capital-S Self and Soul, terms which represent two orientations. On the one hand, there is the focus on satisfying immediate desires, amassing wealth and prestige and seeking to maximize consumption by living as long a life as possible. On the other, there is the life devoted to ideals, a life that may be short and voluntarily impoverished, but one that, at its end, was obviously lived *for* something.

Together, the terms Self and Soul are a pithy expression of a dialectic that has occupied Western minds for a long time. Roughly equivalent terms from the canon include flesh and spirit, asleep and awake, *das Man* and *Dasein*, and selling out and keepin’ it real. Edmundson’s Self resembles José Ortega y Gasset’s *señorito satisfecho* or Nietzsche’s Last Man, the smug bourgeois citizen who pictures himself as having summited history and who now, as a trophy, enjoys his “little pleasure for the day, and [his] little pleasure for the night.”<sup>1</sup> Edmundson has special disdain for the little pleasures of video gaming, football fandom, journalism, and popular music, all of which he believes offer counterfeits of the true ideals. Gamers feel a false courage as they direct the avatar of a lone U.S. Marine through a ruined city crawling with terrorists; music fans are duped into

admiring the questionable artistry of the “racket of a garage band or the meanderings of a fulminating rapper” (98).

The classical ideals that constitute Soul are neither little nor, typically, pleasurable. Pursuing them may cost you your life. Edmundson explores these ideals in the book’s first three chapters, titled, “The Hero,” “The Saint,” and “The Thinker.” In each of them Edmundson turns to ancient literary works to flesh out the ideals and their chief representatives, most of whom died at others’ hands: Achilles and Hector; the Buddha, Confucius, and Jesus; and Socrates and Plato.

Edmundson’s portraits of these figures are (perhaps necessarily) selective. Edmundson’s Jesus is the man of limitless compassion who, as William Blake put it in his poem “On Another’s Sorrow,” attends our every sigh and tear:

O! He gives to us His joy  
That our grief He may destroy;  
Till our grief is fled and gone  
He doth sit by us and moan.<sup>2</sup>

For Edmundson, the multiplication of loaves encapsulates Jesus’ ministry. Jesus sees that the multitude of people he has been preaching to is hungry. Taking pity on them, Jesus has the disciples pool everything they have and distribute it to the crowd. It isn’t nearly enough, of course, but others in the crowd are moved to compassion and produce whatever store of food they had, too. And so on. All are fed, not because seven loaves were transmuted into thousands, but because one man’s compassion spread like a contagion. In this manner, what Jesus saves people from is Self (72–74).

To Edmundson, nothing like this had previously appeared in the Jewish tradition, and so he speculates that Buddhist compassion made its way to the Near East prior to Jesus’ appearance (67). To Edmundson, Jesus is a poor fit within a theological tradition he sees as focused on violent conquest and judgment. Edmundson grants that neighbor-love has roots in the Torah, but to him, Yahweh is too exclusionary and vengeful to endorse it fully. In fact, Edmundson faults Jesus for not breaking more sharply with Judaism (94). Jesus’ accepting death on the cross “can look like a concession to Yahweh at his most brutal” (93). Oddly, Edmundson does not see the crucifixion as the ultimate act of compassion, the enactment of Isaiah’s call for a suffering servant.

Edmundson's casual dismissal of the Jewish moral tradition is among a trove of problems with *Self and Soul's* chapter on compassion. Edmundson relies mostly on the Gospel according to Mark for his portrait of Jesus. It's a good choice for a literary scholar; of the four canonical presentations of Jesus, Mark's is the most interesting character, a mad preacher and exorcist, running around Galilee as if on fire. In Edmundson's hands, though, Jesus is reduced to one dimension: a chilled-out sage who is completely over the human distinctions that reinforce Self. One can arrive at this view only through a tendentious reading of the Gospel. Ignoring Jesus' frequent refrain that the first shall be last and the last, first, Edmundson claims that "At the table that Jesus sets no one is thrust away and no one is compelled by rank, age, or gender to eat last" (74). Of course, Jesus feeds multitudes in Mark's Gospel, but just as prominent are Jesus' exchanges with demons, his incomprehensible parables, and his prophecies of the coming of the Son of Man. There is little compassion evident in his warning about imminent troubles: "Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that it may not be in winter" (Mk 13:17–18).

Despite his avowed aim of rupturing bourgeois self-satisfaction, Edmundson sees no economic implications to Jesus' ministry. (One might argue, as recent popes have, that capitalist dogmas prop up the world of Self and that Jesus undercuts these.) The chains Jesus breaks are all spiritual, and the equanimity he preaches is barely distinguishable from that of the Stoics. Commenting on the Parable of the Denarius, Edmundson writes, "If you are as pure as Jesus, you owe nothing to Caesar and everything to your conception of God" (85). Here Edmundson sabotages his own argument, showing that Soul, as he understands it, does not ultimately challenge Self. Devotion to "your conception of God" is in fact the apogee of Self. Ludwig Feuerbach's critique of Christianity was that its theology is really anthropology, which is to say that our conceptions of God express magnifications, even *idealizations*, of our most flattering self-conceptions. As Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth argued in Feuerbach's wake, a God who cannot say *No* to you is an idol. Ideals can pose the same problem. We have much to fear from those who strive unchecked toward an image of greatness.

Edmundson's selective reading of the gospels casts doubt on his reading of other texts. Throughout the book, Edmundson makes big claims without earning them through presenting sufficient evidence. For example, in an effort to anticipate the objection that his exemplary thinkers (really, all of his classical exemplars) are men who lived in thoroughgoing patriarchies, Edmundson says:

One has no doubt that as time unspools and women have more opportunity to choose their paths, more and more will take their places as lovers of wisdom and potential guides to their fellows. Will their wisdom be substantially different from the wisdom of male thinkers? Will they cut new routes toward the center of the major questions? Perhaps they will. But it is more likely that as they approach universal questions, issues of gender will matter less to them (though such issues can never disappear) and issues of humanity writ large will matter more. (112–13)

“Perhaps” women philosophers will raise new questions and look at longstanding ones differently? Is Edmundson actually ignorant of the entire corpus of feminist thought since Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949)? In raising these questions, I am not saying that Edmundson ought to have had a chapter addressing the gendered nature of his ideals (though that would not have hurt). Rather, I am insisting that he show the virtues of circumspection and humility that mark not just the scholar, but anyone who seeks the truth. (It should be noted that Edmundson always capitalizes “Truth.”) To Edmundson, ideals just *are* universal, and too much emphasis on particulars will tempt the person toward the private sphere of Self. Whatever else we want to make of this outlook, it’s a handy cover for intellectual parochialism, which is, ironically enough, a form of self-satisfaction.

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When and how did the West give up on its ideals? Edmundson locates a cultural shift in the early modern period. He does not aim at establishing causes (which is just as well), but he looks to literature as a cultural bellwether and focuses on a writer whose ideals are supposed to be completely opaque: William Shakespeare. This opacity is an illusion, however, born of the fact that we all believe what Shakespeare believes. Specifically, we believe that heroism, piety, and wisdom are all hollow, and getting ahead in the world by any means is the only real good. As Edmundson puts it, “almost every Shakespeare passage comes from the mouth of a character speaking to achieve his or her desires. They speak from desires for and of the Self—they articulate, directly or indirectly, self-interested aspirations” (173). Shakespeare thus gives voice and spectacle to the emerging merchant class, blessing both its commercial striving and its resentment of the old

regime. He parades the noble and warlike across the stage, mocks their ideals, and puts them to death, often at their own hands.

Edmundson argues in a later chapter that Sigmund Freud is Shakespeare's great collaborator in knocking down classical ideals, presenting courage as a mask for subconscious fear and neurosis. Shakespeare suggests that Macbeth is sexually impotent; he compensates on the battlefield. Following Shakespeare, "Freud makes the middle-class people who live by half-measures feel much better, allowing them to understand that the virtues that intimidated them are forms of sickness and that normality—clear-eyed and stable—is the true achievement" (165).

Edmundson underestimates what an achievement stable normality is, especially on a cultural scale. This is ultimately why the book fails; it laments as a loss what is in fact a change that allows new modes of human thriving—including new ideals. Edmundson can only condemn modern literature, modern art, the modern mind, and so on, because his outlook is so narrow. Charles Taylor has also charted the loss of spiritual idealism in modernity but, in basing his analysis on a closer and fairer reading of culture, resists a declinist narrative. His is a much more enlightening story.

At the end of *Sources of the Self*, Taylor notes that in the modern drive to aim for lower ideals, the West did indeed lose something. He writes that "the highest spiritual ideals and aspirations also threaten to lay the most crushing burdens on humankind." Nevertheless, "stifling" these ideals "too, is a heavy price to pay." Taylor concludes by saying that this dilemma "is in a sense our greatest spiritual challenge, not an iron fate."<sup>3</sup> He takes up the challenge in his second magnum opus, *A Secular Age*, in which he outlines the five-century shift from a culture in which religious ideals were taken for granted (if not often realized) to one in which they are among several different ways to orient one's life. On Taylor's account, ideals did not so much disappear as diffuse throughout Western society as the standards of the medieval religious elite were accepted by (or imposed upon) all Christians.

Based on this account, Taylor's assessment of the prospects for self-transcendence in the modern age is both more generous and more plausible than Edmundson's story of Self's triumph over Soul. As Taylor tells it, modernity does indeed fashion a self where none had been, in part by immanentizing goods, elevating instrumental rationality, and rendering questionable any spiritual reality. We imagine ourselves as individuals within this "immanent frame"; indeed, we are compelled to do so. But the immanent frame isn't a step down by any means, even to the eyes of

a committed Catholic like Taylor. It's a transformation, one that closes off some possibilities and opens others. Even given the cultural hegemony of expressive individualism today, there can be transcendence. Taylor asks us to look to poets, thinkers, politicians, and poet-thinker-politicians like Gerard Manley Hopkins, Charles Péguy, Ivan Illich, and Václav Havel—indeed, all European men—for examples of ones who “listen for a voice which we could never have assumed ourselves, whose tone might have been forever unknown to us if we hadn't strained to understand it.”<sup>4</sup>

Although Taylor gives attention to heroic exemplars, he doesn't blame you and me for our inability to become them, as Edmundson does. Rather, Taylor argues, with nuanced analysis, that the ideal of compassion, which Christians adopted from Judaism, carries with it an affirmation of the dignity of each person, an affirmation that made it possible to imagine that ordinary life could have meaning despite its lack of heroism, creativity, or contemplation. Taylor, then, shows us that a disappointed idealist like Edmundson doesn't just get the remedy to modern ailments wrong, but he has in fact made a false diagnosis.

It only looks like the West has abandoned compassion because compassion has in important ways triumphed and been institutionalized. This is not to say that there is an excess of compassion in Western societies; genocide, for example, is a modern phenomenon, fueled by the relatively new ideals of nation and race. But in part because we have witnessed the massive cost of pursuing these dubious ideals—thanks to the journalism Edmundson laments as having taken over from “authentic thought” (251)—we have stumbled toward an ideal of seeing strangers as fully human and their suffering as something we must attempt to alleviate. Post-Christian societies like Germany and Sweden are, as I write this, taking in Muslim refugees from Syria on a massive scale. Granted, the countries have economic reason to do so, as Northern Europe needs young workers. But that is not the sole case being made, and by welcoming the refugees at all, Europe is departing from violent ideals both recent and ancient. We might consider how Homeric Greeks would have greeted desperate, unarmed Syrians who landed on their shores.

A form of compassion even effects cultural change in allegedly entertainment-obsessed America. Professional football, a sport Edmundson claims is our cheap proxy for Homeric battle (98, 248), is under growing public scrutiny for its degenerative effect on players' bodies and minds. That is to say, real compassion, informed by journalism and technical scholarship on brain injury, has caused Americans to question why we ask young men to destroy themselves for our amusement. It is too early to make confident predictions about the future of the sport, but if pro

football becomes less popular as a result of what we know about concussions, or if youth football is ever banned, then even by Edmundson's standards, we could say that a true ideal, espoused not by an impassioned elite but having slowly become a cultural consensus, will have defeated a false one.

It's true that few of us are *terribly* courageous or wise. But then, that was true even in the purported heyday of ideals. Women, children, and enslaved men constituted the vast majority of society. Very few were educated, and most died too young to develop much wisdom anyway. Achilles and Hector never existed, and even the Buddha's historicity is murky. Hardly anyone ever had the ideals Edmundson claims have been lost. Even those who lived the ideals were few, and some of the best exemplars are fictional. This argument is typical of reactionary idealists. They invent a past that never was in order to condemn the present, the reality of which is presumably harder to hide.

But that move only works if we really are culturally bereft. Edmundson sees no one living out ideals today, but his eyes are closed. He complains about the inanity of pop music; fine. But has he not heard Henryk Górecki? Or Aretha Franklin? He says we have lost courage but never mentions the two wars our country fought in the last decade. Did the soldiers, all of them volunteers, not aspire to bravery? Are civil rights protesters not courageous? Isn't a writer like Toni Morrison—or Tony Kushner—wise? Isn't Charles Taylor?

Common wisdom says that the right to complain is not absolute. You supposedly can't complain about politicians unless you cast a vote, and an unwillingness to make things better invalidates any complaint at all. I happen not to accept this view. As far as I'm concerned, Edmundson is entitled to complain about our culture. Complaint is free. Credibility, however, must be earned. You do that through exercising careful argumentation, fairness, and good humor. Aristotle taught that. And, on this score, Edmundson falls well short of the classical ideal.<sup>5</sup>

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## Notes

1. Nietzsche 1954, 130.
2. Blake 2011, lines 33–36.
3. Taylor 1989, 519–21.
4. Taylor 2007, 754.
5. I thank Jacob S. Goodson for conversation and comments on a draft of this essay.

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