Relating the Temptations of Christ to the Challenges of the Buddha and Freudian Personalities

1. Stones to Bread / Challenge of Fear / Id

In this Temptation, Satan tempts the fasting Jesus to change the stones to bread to sate His hunger. Hunger is a basic need (à la Maslow); the awareness of an unmet basic need is fear of continued discomfort and dissatisfaction. Note that the Id does not think in terms of “If I don’t eat, I will die”; the Id, in fact, does not *think at all*; it only feels, experiences. It does not experience a sense of “I”; the Id may, in fact, be understood as simply the manifestation of basal needs/drives. The Id has a simple, binary consciousness; needs/drives are met, or they are not: eating stops hunger; drinking stops thirst; sex stops desire. Thus, in this Temptation of Jesus, hunger/bread represents all the “monsters of the Id”, the fundamental unconscious/preconscious needs/drives and the amoral satisfaction of sating them. Jesus’ response that one “… does not live by bread alone” seems simple and direct, but it is very subtle: the needs/drives of the Id are not the be-all-and-end-all of a person’s existence (again, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs) enumerates and relates the basal needs/drives to more sophisticated aspects of quotidian existence. The completion of the statement, “… but by every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God” is predicated on the awareness that the biblical God is both the source and arbiter of a wider ethical and moral consciousness that both subsumes and transcends the basal needs/drives of the Id (see the discussion below).

1. Testing God / Challenge of Lust / Ego

The word “ego” is actually the Latin first-person pronoun, “I”, and this aspect of the personality is aptly named, in that it is aware of “self” in relation to “not-self”. However, where the Id experiences fear, the Ego experiences *dread*, which can be defined as “the fear of fearing”. The Ego is aware of the basic needs/drives of the Id, and understands its *raison d’etre* as satisfying those needs and drives. Its dread is predicated on the consequences of not meeting those needs — it judges its self-worth on the results of its efforts to satisfy them, *uncontextualized by any other internal or external reference*. The Ego does not see the Id as related to itself, but rather as “Other”, a client to be served, a taskmaster to be indulged, and it assesses its own performance as either “successful” or “failed”. Thus, the Ego can be said to be “rational”, in that its primary purposes is to find ways to satisfy the needs/drives of the Id, but its ethics is limited to defining as “good” simply as “that which quickly and effectively achieves my immediate goal”. Its world is either black or white; the need/drive is sated, or it is not. There is no middle ground, no gradation of results between the two extremes. Thus, it is not only in the satisfaction of basal needs and drives where Ego finds its worth, but in the quick and complet silencing of the voice of those needs and drives. As Kahlil Gibran wrote, “We often sing lullabies to our children that we ourselves may sleep” (*Sand and Foam*, 1926). It cannot be over emphasized that the Ego’s task is greatly complicated by the requirement that the solution be *immediately successful*: the Id is not satisfied by delayed gratification; therefore, neither is the Ego. In the biblical context, the crux of the second Temptation is that Satan takes Jesus to the top of the Temple and challenges Him to throw Himself off as “proof” of Scripture’s promise that God will not allow any harm to come to Him. Jesus’ response is to also quote Scripture: the admonition not to test God. This Temptation, then, is related to the Freudian Ego, in the sense that the fundamental nature of the “test of God” would be to force God to prove Jesus’ worth to Him, thus satisfying Jesus’ Ego that Jesus is, in fact, important and worthy. The Ego demands: “Either I am in this instant important and worthy, or I am not; either my efforts are absolutely commendable, or they are not; either I am completely successful, or I am an abject failure”. The Challenge of the Buddha was that of Lust; however, it is too simplistic to assume that the word “lust” here is primarily related to sexual desire. In fact, in this context, “lust” refers to the sense of personal worth and satisfaction that the Ego experiences as a result of satisfying any-and-all of the Id’s needs/drives. The Ego “lusts” to have its efforts to satisfy the needs/drives of the Id judged worthy, immediately and at all times. Thus, the Challenge of Lust is not only about resisting sexual promiscuity but overcoming the compulsion of the Id-Ego to be perpetually sated and re-assured of its efficacy; e. g. that of demanding constant and immediate satisfaction and approval/acceptance/validation.

1. The Kingdoms of the Earth / Challenge of Obligation / Super-ego

The role of the Freudian Super-ego is to contextualize the actions of the Ego in its efforts at satisfying the needs and drives of the Id. Where the Id only experiences needs and wants and the Ego simply devises the most immediately effective path to sating the Id, the Super-ego determines the ethicality and morality of the Ego’s plans. It is important, here, to realize that the Super-ego *does not pronounce judgement on the needs/drives of the Id*; those are basal and fundamental — neither positive nor negative, good nor evil, they simply *are*. There is nothing either “right” or “wrong”, “good” or “evil” about feeling hungry, sleepy, thirsty, lonely, sad. The Ego, on the other hand, driven by the single-minded motivation to fulfill its task, does not take into account the impacts and consequences (either internal or external) of enacting its plan(s) to satisfy the Id. That task falls to the Super-ego. Thus, where the Ego may be seen as the voice of *consciousness*, the Super-ego may be seen as the voice of *conscience*. “Conscious: from Latin *com*, with *scire* (to know); conscience: from Latin *com* (intensive), with *scire* - to know well (or, in the vernacular, to know better)” (Frank Herbert and Bill Ransom, *The Jesus Incident*, 1979). In Jesus’ final temptation, Satan shows Him all of the kingdoms of the Earth and tells Him that he will come into control of all of them if He will only swear fealty to Satan. While this may seem at first glance to be another temptation of the Ego, it is far subtler than that. Here, Satan has become the voice of the Buddhist Ego, which is a conflation of the Freudian Id and Ego. Jesus’ primary task/goal is to bring peace to humankind. His ego resonates with the unmet needs and drives of the id of all humanity, and per his Ego’s nature, seeks the most immediate and effective solution to the problem. In this case, that would be to take the offered reins of political and economic power and therewith “fix” the world. The temptation here, then, is for the Super-ego to bow to the rationalization of the Ego. Rather than adhere to the long-term solution represented by the Plan of Salvation, Jesus could simply do as His followers were asking Him to do: become an Earthly power and impose a solution on humanity’s problems. The question of the Super-ego, however, is: “Will that really solve the problem? Will humanity appreciate what is given them? Would it not be better for them to achieve eternal peace by seeing the value of changing their beliefs and behaviors and thus becoming imminently worthy of such peace?” The third Challenge of the Buddha was that of Obligation — doing what is expected of you, whether or not your actions are in accord with your own internal sense of morals and ethics — as Joseph Campbell says, “… doing what you’re told” (*The Power of Myth*, 1988). Conformity is doing what is expected of you, whether it is right or wrong; morality is doing what is right, whether or not it is what is expected of you. Thus, the Super-ego also contextualizes; it assesses long-term consequences. Yes, the Ego’s plan may effectively achieve its aim quickly, but what will be the internal and external immediate and long-term consequences of enacting the plan? What future problems may arise as a result of the new state of affairs which results from enacting the Ego’s plan? Where the Ego says, “Here’s what the Id wants, and here’s the quickest, surest way to get it,” the Super-ego asks, “Yes, but is the quickest, surest way also the best way, all things being considered?” In this sense, the Super-ego’s job may be seen as that of thwarting the Ego’s single-minded thrust to “by the quickest means get the baby to stop crying and go to sleep”, by assessing the impacts of the Ego’s chosen means. Yes, a massive dose of sedative will stop the baby crying and send it to sleep, but what long-term negative effects might such an act have upon the baby?