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Minority Report: Re-Reading Gilgamesh After Levinas

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Abstract

The Epic of Gilgamesh attempts to answer the question of how, given the finality of death, one might find meaning and happiness in life. Many commentators argue that the text provides two separate, although ultimately unsatisfactory, alternatives. What these commentators appear to miss, however, is the possibility that these two solutions may not be separate. Using Levinas's distinction between "need" and "desire," I argue that, by the end of the *Epic*, they may in fact be synthesized into a single solution, one that suggests the priority of an affective moral grounding as prior to and more fundamental than intellectual solutions.

Keywords

Epic of Gilgamesh, Levinas, morality, meaning of life, compassion

The Epic of Gilgamesh attempts to answer the question of how, given the finality of death, one might find happiness, meaning, and value in this life. Many commentators argue that the text provides two separate, although ultimately unsatisfactory, alternatives.

The first is fame—if I build lasting monuments or perform heroic acts, I can live forever in the memories of others. Early in the *Epic*, we see this solution in the building of the walls of Uruk and in the slaying of Humbaba. Yet, with the death of his dear friend, Enkidu, Gilgamesh concludes that fame is ultimately empty. He wants his friend back. Even more, he fears his own demise. So he journeys to the end of the Earth to find the two humans who have been granted immortality by the gods. Once there, he discovers that theirs was a unique circumstance that he could not hope to repeat.

Gilgamesh also receives a second answer to finding meaning and happiness in this life. He is told to eat, drink, and be merry. Love your wife, hold your children close, be satisfied with the simple joys of living. As Gilgamesh's culture did not believe in a robust afterlife, this was the best to which one could aspire. Gilgamesh, at last resigned to his mortality, accepts his role as ruler and shepherd for his subjects.

Why Seek an Alternative? Using Levinas to Understand the *Epic*

What is troubling about this interpretation is that these "solutions" are so easily dismissed. For our culture, wherein many believe that this life only has meaning in the context of some ultimate, eternal afterlife, such a dismissal makes sense. Even those who do not share a belief in an afterlife may tend

toward the assumption that "primitive" cultures have little to teach us in this regard. Taken in terms of the *Epic*'s culture, were these solutions really so inadequate? Why did this story endure? One characteristic of great literature is that it speaks to human experience in a multitude of ways. It is possible that the story is intended to reflect upon the many ways in which nature does not, ultimately, satisfy human desires. But it seems facile to use this to dismiss the possibility of a richer reading of the solutions proposed by the *Epic*. Looking deeper, we may find resources on par with, even richer than, some of our modern ways of addressing these questions.

It is not that the solutions offered here are absent from the literature. It is just that many commentators believe, as does Kramer, that "none of [them] holds any real promise" (Kramer, 1988, p. 100). Even George, one of the *Epic*'s great scholars, appears to discount what may prove to be a key moment in the *Epic*—downplaying shifts in the death of Enkidu and explaining care for one's subjects as "duty" to the gods (George, 1999, p. xxxvii; 2003, p. 504). But although George may at times fall prey to this tendency, for the most part, he rises above it. George is exactly right when he notes that the *Epic* has often been understood as a "vehicle for reflection on the human condition" (George, 2003, p. 527). Gilgamesh endured as an *Epic* because it spoke, on multiple levels, to the lives of the people who created it.¹

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Part of the reason these solutions are so easily discounted may be that they are usually understood as isolated, static categories. But just as Gilgamesh undergoes a process of transformation throughout the *Epic*, so, too, do these two solutions. By the end of the *Epic*, they may well become aspects of a single, transformed solution, one that is richer in its implications for human life and happiness than our current reading. Such a transformation can only be understood if we moderate at least two fairly common assumptions. First is the modern assumption that all human behavior can be understood as some form of egoism or self-interest. Second is the assumption that this life can only have meaning in terms of an infinite continuation of the self. Levinas, operating out of both the Greek and Hebrew traditions, can help us to see that these are not the only alternatives.

Why Levinas? First, Levinas operates out of the Hebrew tradition, which is not only from the same part of the world as the *Epic*, but may also have shared a common source with Ecclesiastes. This suggests that there may have been similarities between aspects of these traditions. In fact, a crucial passage of the *Epic* for making the link to Levinas's thought is one that closely parallels a passage in Ecclesiastes. Second, as a phenomenologist, Levinas focuses on those basic experiences that define us as human. This is consistent with the possibility that the *Epic* is meant to describe basic aspects of our human condition. Specifically, Levinas argues that at the heart of our humanity is the recognition of a powerful, yet fragile, pre-intellectual experience of care. This is an experiential claim. If accurate, this affective call to care—particularly for those who are most vulnerable—lies at the heart of both ethics and the development of everything we think of as human. This includes the capacities of speech, reason, freedom, self, morality, and even particular forms of violence.² While this experience is pre-rational, if Levinas is correct, some form of this experience should be found in every culture.

For example, it has been argued that this call, while not fully articulated, surfaced in Greek medicine, underlying important aspects of the Hippocratic Oath (Degnin, 2007). In Gilgamesh, its implications are even more radical.

1. First, it provides a new way of viewing the solution of the *Epic*: that the meaning of life and happiness are found, not primarily in intellectual beliefs, but within rich, emotional, and embodied relationships of care.
2. Second, if accurate, this suggests that an excessive focus on individual afterlife can, at times, be a product of intellectual abstraction, born of an attempt to replace real, relational connections in a desperate bid for certainty.³

Regardless of the actual status of an afterlife, an excessive dependence on such beliefs, far from being a realistic source of meaning in this life, might actually serve to undermine it. It might also undermine any reasonable and compassionate ethics. One need only consider the many atrocities, both historical and modern, that have been justified to earn

said afterlife. In fact, some studies suggest that non-religious people may in fact be more motivated by compassion than those who profess to be religious.⁴ What Gilgamesh learns, and can teach us, is that the meaning of life, and the source of ethics, can be found right here, in the call to care.

This also ties to a second reason why Levinas is particularly useful in re-reading the *Epic*. As both a student of Heidegger and of Judaism, Levinas provides both a powerful critique of aspects of Western philosophy and a bridge between insights of his Jewish heritage with Western thought. This bridge is particularly suggestive in terms of the *Epic*. Not only were the Hebrews neighbors to the cultures that spawned the *Epic*, there is evidence that Hebrew scriptures shared common textural resources with the *Epic*—particularly the flood narrative and Ecclesiastes (Jones, 1990). Finally, there was a similar worldview in terms of an afterlife. *Early Judaism, as with some sects today, found meaning and value in life without recourse to an afterlife. Understanding this worldview could provide a resource for understanding this aspect of the Epic.* But for this, we need to turn to the text of the *Epic*.

Reading the Text

Consider the attitude of the *Epic* toward human mortality:

As for man, [his days] are numbered,
 whatever he may do, it is but the wind,
 . . . exists not for me . . . (George, 1999, p. 19 [text lost])

George then compares this with a text from Ecclesiastes 3:19-20:

. . . as one does, so dies the other.
 They all have the same breath.
 . . . all is vanity . . .
 . . . all are from dust, and all turn to dust again.

Both focus on the ephemeral nature of human life, we are but breath or wind. But if this is so, what gives one meaning and value in life? In the beginning, the *Epic* suggests fame, either by great works or heroic deeds. Gilgamesh does both, beginning with the great wall and temples of the city:

Climb Uruk's wall and walk back and forth
 Survey its foundations, examine the brickwork!
 Were its bricks not fired in an oven?
 Did the Seven Sages not lay its foundations? (George, 1999, p. 2)

As long as the city endures, so, too, would the memory of its builder. To ensure this, Gilgamesh had the story of his life and deeds inscribed on the wall. But this was not enough. Gilgamesh's desire for the second sort of fame guided his decision to kill the protector of the forest:

I will conquer him in the Forest of Cedar:

let the land learn Uruk's offshoot is mighty!

Let me start out, I will cut down the cedar,

I will establish for ever a name eternal! (George, 1999, p. 20)

Early in the *Epic*, Gilgamesh's focus was on his own needs. Due to his great strength and endurance, he terrorizes his own people, exhausting the men in games and demanding the right to sleep with brides on their wedding nights:

The young men of Uruk he harries without warrant,

Gilgamesh lets no son go free to his father,

By day and night his Tyranny grows harsher . . . (George, 1999, p. 3)

. . . lets no girl go free to her bride [groom] . . . (George, 1999, p. 4)

Because none could stand against Gilgamesh, Enkidu was created in response to the pleas of the people. He was intended to become friend and companion to Gilgamesh, to provide a healthier outlet to Gilgamesh's "enthusiasm" and to teach Gilgamesh to care. Enkidu begins more as wild beast than man, of strength comparable to Gilgamesh, but of a substantially different temperament. Whereas Gilgamesh was like a spoiled child, caring only for himself, Enkidu began as a caretaker for the other beasts, springing them from hunter's traps and protecting them from harm. Enkidu exhibited a natural compassion that was, in the beginning, merely latent in Gilgamesh. Seduced and civilized by the temple priestess Shamhat, Enkidu loses the trust of the wild beasts but gains the benefits of civilization. He becomes Gilgamesh's close companion.

But first, Enkidu challenges Gilgamesh. In part, Enkidu's challenge to Gilgamesh was that of any alpha male asserting dominance. But from the text, we see that there is more. Upon arriving in Uruk, he is told that Gilgamesh is about to claim "first night," the right to sleep with a new bride before her groom. George's claim that Enkidu's "face paled in anger" (George, 1999, p. 15) suggests that Enkidu was not motivated only by the desire to show dominance, but by a sense of moral outrage. But even without that claim, the fact is that his first act upon arriving in Uruk, one of compassion for the vulnerable, was to stand between Gilgamesh and the bride Gilgamesh intended to despoil.

For the goddess of weddings was ready the bed,

for Gilgamesh, like a god, was set up a substitute.

Enkidu with his foot blocked the door of the wedding house,

not allowing Gilgamesh to enter.

They seized at the door of the wedding house,

in the street they joined combat . . . (George, 1999, p. 16)

In the battle that followed, Gilgamesh prevailed, but only just. Meeting for the first time someone who could stand against him, he found someone he could love and respect. They became fast friends.

The arrival of Enkidu can be seen as a relief to the citizens of Uruk in at least two ways. First, by providing a companion and equal to Gilgamesh, he distracts Gilgamesh from seeking to entertain himself at the expense of his people. But there is much more. *The arrival of Enkidu began a process of transformation on the part of Gilgamesh. Just as children need boundaries in order to learn to care, so, too, Gilgamesh needed an equal to help set those boundaries.*⁵ Gilgamesh, for all his power, was bored—he abused his own people in a vain attempt to entertain himself.

The gods divine with remarkable insight what is at the root of the trouble: Gilgamesh's superior energy and strength set him apart and make him lonely. He needs a friend, someone who measures up to him and can give him companionship on his own extraordinary level of potential and aspiration. (Jacobson, 1976/2001)

Thus, Enkidu, while submitting to Gilgamesh, won the battle in two crucial ways. First, he won the respect and love of Gilgamesh. Second, we never hear again that Gilgamesh sought the right of first night. Enkidu succeeded in his defense of the vulnerable.

The defense of the vulnerable, the capacity to care, is, for Levinas, the key humanizing trait. In this sense, Enkidu, even in his beast-like state, began the *Epic* the more human of the two. *Levinas argues that it is precisely the inversion of normal power relationships, this strange capacity of the vulnerable to evoke the power of compassion, that is at the heart of all we characterize as human.* The experience is fragile and pre-rational. Fragile because it does not always happen, fragile, too, because it is easily swept aside. This differs from self-interest—enlightened or not—in that the focus of self-interest is the ego, the needs of the person. Levinas speaks to a capacity to set those *needs* aside, to place oneself in service to another. He calls this counter impulse *desire* (Levinas, 1969, p. 117). Sometimes, it is just a moment: I see another person or creature in pain, and for an instant, I forget myself, feeling only a desire to relieve that suffering. It is not that one's own needs are unimportant. In fact, as Levinas writes,

only a being who can eat can know what it is like for another to go hungry, only a being that can feel pleasure and pain can care (Levinas, 1981, p. 74). It is rather that, to become fully human, the needs of the one must be balanced, and at times subordinated, by care for others. To be clear:

Needs: Are robust and basic to us all. They point “inward” to the person, to caring for oneself, to the satisfaction of basic human “needs” (food, shelter, etc.)

Desire: Is more fragile, in the sense that it is more easily “lost” or overwhelmed by needs. Desire points outwards, toward caring for and serving others. However, if nurtured, it can become strong enough to even overcome basic needs.

It should be emphasized that, without need, there might be no desire. One must be able to experience needs (and their satisfaction) not just to understand another’s specific needs, but even to understand the concept of need. In a “perfect” world, where there were no needs, there would also be no space for compassion.

Understood in these terms, Gilgamesh won more than a physical battle. Through Enkidu, Gilgamesh first experienced limits, even pain, and gained a companion he respected and loved. This began a process by which he would, in stages, learn to live beyond his own selfishness. Gilgamesh was now vulnerable. But he was also no longer bored.

To clarify how this changes the *Epic*’s answer to meaning in life, it helps to jump ahead to the second solution. Here, Gilgamesh, despondent after the death of Enkidu, is seeking the help of the one person who escaped mortality. In an older version of the story, he receives the following advice from Shiduri, the goddess/alewife:

But you, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full,

Enjoy yourself always by day and by night,

Make merry each day

Dance and play day and night!

Let your clothes be clean,

let your head be washed, may you bath in water!

Gaze on the child who holds your hand,

Let your wife enjoy your repeated embrace! (George, 1999, p. xxxvi)

George notes the close parallel to Ecclesiastes 9:7-9:

Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy,

and drink thy wine with a merry heart . . .

let thy garments be always white, . . .

live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest . . . (George, 1999, p. xxxvi)

It is passages such as these that suggest a common origin for both texts. Both begin with eating and drinking, taking joy in life’s simple pleasures, wearing clean garments, and end with loving one’s family. But it seems to me that the real import of these passages has been discounted. It is easy for those in our culture to notice the “eat, drink, and be merry” message. This parallels our notion of self-interest and Levinas’s notion of the value and motivation of need. Such an interpretation is characteristic of Gilgamesh’s behavior at the start of the *Epic*. Yet it is important to *notice that, even prior to receiving this advice, the Epic had already declared the inadequacy of said interpretation. Why then bring it up?* Perhaps the lack is not in the “solution,” but in Gilgamesh’s, and our, understanding.

Because our culture focuses primarily upon self-interest, we tend to read both parts of Shiduri’s advice in terms of self-interest. But that is not necessarily the case in either Shiduri’s speech or the passage from Ecclesiastes. It is possible that these passages address both aspects (need and desire) of human experience.

Need is addressed in the exhortation to eat, drink, and be merry.

Desire is addressed in the exhortation to love one’s wife and child.

In addition, even the reference to *clean clothing* reminds one, not of the isolated individual, but of the member of a community. For an ancient culture, *cleanliness was a sign of being part of a greater community*. Only those who were part of a community typically had the energy to spare from survival to worry about cleanliness. As part of the community, one was expected to care for more than just oneself. Thus, Gilgamesh, following the death of Enkidu, wandered the wilds clad only in the skin of a lion. This was both where Gilgamesh was, in a sense, lost to both himself and to civilization. When he is re-clothed in garments that will not dirty until he reaches home (a place where they could be cleaned), he is reborn, re-civilized.

If everything in life is reduced to need, human meaning is reduced to a search for the service and survival of the ego. But if Levinas is correct, that which makes us distinctly human is our ability to also care for others—at times, prior to and more than for ourselves. In this reading, meaning is not found in the preservation of the ego, even if that preservation is into an eternal thereafter, but in the joining of a rich life in the giving of oneself to others. The real import of the passage is the balance⁶ between the two parts, the second of which Gilgamesh will understand only at the end of his journey.

There are few passages more suggestive of this possibility than the scene of Enkidu’s death. When Enkidu is told he is

going to die, he becomes bitter, cursing all those who led him out of the forest to his death. Then the god Shamash speaks to Enkidu:

O Enkidu, why curse Shamhat the harlot,
 who fed you bread that was fit for a god,
 and poured you ale that was fit for a king,
 who clothed you in a splendid garment,
 and gave you as companion the handsome Gilgamesh?
 And now Gilgamesh, your friend and your brother,
 [will] lay you out on a magnificent bed,
 [On] a bed of honor he will lay you out,
 [he will] place you on his left, on a seat of repose,
 [the rulers] of the underworld will all kiss your feet.
 The people of Uruk [he will have] mourn and lament you,
 the [thriving] people he will fill full of woe for you.
 After you are gone his hair will be matted in mourning,
 [clad] in the skin of lion, he will wander the wild. (George, 1999, p. 58-59)

This speech turned Enkidu's heart, so that his anger was stilled, he blessed those whom he has just cursed:

Enkidu heard the words of Shamash the hero,
 . . . his heart so angry grew calm,
 . . . [his heart] so furious grew calm,
 "Come, [Shamhat, I will fix your destiny!]
 [My] mouth [that] cursed you shall bless [you] . . ." (George, 1999, p. 59)

The question is: Why did Enkidu die in peace? Based on two readings of the *Epic*, there appear to be two possibilities. In terms of the first reading of the *Epic*, one might argue that Enkidu, having been reassured that his name would live forever, could now rest in knowing that he had achieved the only form of immortality possible for mortals: living a rich life and having died famous.⁷ Yet *it is precisely with the death of Enkidu that Gilgamesh comes explicitly to reject both fame and a life of pleasure as adequate solutions to happiness. This strongly suggests that these self-centered solutions miss the point of the Epic.* Instead, following

Levinas's notion of desire, it seems to me that Shamash's speech reminded Enkidu of how deeply his friend would suffer upon his death and how much the gifts that they had shared meant to them both. *It was Enkidu's love and compassion for others, so characteristic of his life, that mitigated his anger and allowed Enkidu to die in peace.* Enkidu would live on. But it was not for the sake of personal fame, it was for the sake of the love he had shared and the positive impact of Enkidu's life upon those whom he had come to love. In this way, both "solutions" are transformed. Whereas at the beginning of the *Epic*, both (fame and living a rich life) are separate and self-centered, with Enkidu, they become a single, other centered solution, focused on care for one's loved ones.

This reading finds support in Gilgamesh's response to Enkidu's death. Gilgamesh's love for Enkidu opens a door to love, but Gilgamesh only came to understand its meaning in stages. While his grief was authentic, what made Gilgamesh inconsolable was that he was still focused too much on himself:

For his friend Enkidu Gilgamesh
 did bitterly weep as he wandered the wild:
 "I shall die, and shall I not be as Enkidu?"
 Sorrow has entered my heart! (George, 1999, P. 70)

Gilgamesh's love of Enkidu had rendered him vulnerable to pain. But instead of turning that pain toward care and honor for others, he turned inward upon himself. He continued to pursue life and relationships as acts of aggression, something to be dominated and won, and not something calling for engagement and a profound surrender of the self for the sake of others. The journey that completes the *Epic* was needed for Gilgamesh to complete these lessons. Along the way, he meets various gods, goddesses, and their servants, initially discarding their wisdom, but also experiencing how his natural aggression acted against his goals. For example, his destruction of the "stone" poles⁸ on the Ferryman's boat, while intended to intimidate the Ferryman as a show of power, actually rendered them unable to cross the sea (George, 2003, p. 499). So Gilgamesh had to cut new poles and find new strategies to assist the Ferryman. When he arrives at the home of Uta-napishti, the only human to win eternal life, his intent had been to wrestle the secret from him by force. But instead of finding a heroic figure, greater than life, he finds an ordinary man. And, at this point, he loses his desire to dominate Uta-napishti. Gilgamesh is coming to learn prudence—and perhaps a bit of humility:

I look at you, Uta-napishti:
 your form is no different, you are just like me . . .
 I was fully intent on making you fight,
 but now in your presence my hand is stayed. (George, 1999, p. 88)

While at the home of Uta-napishti, he is given and fails additional tests, coming even further to grip with his mortality and his limits. Gilgamesh is disappointed but resigned to his fate. And this is where many commentators leave us. But while the transformation of the two solutions is not as clean as with the death of Enkidu, there are at least four pieces of evidence that it occurs.

First, in the prologue to the standard edition, the poet writes: “He came a far road, was weary, found peace . . .” (George, 1999, p. 1)

Second, he is given a garment which will not become soiled until he reaches home and is again able to receive clean clothing (George, 1999, p. 98). This clothing, replacing the animal pelts he had been wearing, serves as a symbol that he has been re-civilized (transformed), that he is ready to rejoin the human community.

Third, there is the pivotal position of the story of Enkidu’s death as the event which launched the journey—still our strongest piece of evidence.

Fourth, there is the record of Gilgamesh as becoming a wise and beloved ruler following his return.

Of course, the *Epic* externalizes this fourth item as the will of the gods. But rather than simply taking the *Epic* at its word, let us return to the insight that these motifs could be ways of expressing inner spiritual and cultural truths. If Levinas is correct, *it is precisely care that forms an internal relationship of meaning. In other words, just as the capacity for care precedes rationality, so, too, the meaning of life is something that must be experienced, it must be felt in the lived connections with others.*⁹ Of course, we do not want to die. But an obsessive desire for an afterlife, as evidenced by Gilgamesh, is not, in fact, the means to happiness. It may, instead, be a path to misery.

At the end of the *Epic*, Gilgamesh returns home, ready to take up his position as ruler. But he is no longer the ruler of the beginning of the *Epic*. He has become a humble, wiser man. When he returns with the Ferryman at his side, he takes him again to the walls of Uruk:

O Ur-shanabi, climb Uruk’s wall and walk back and forth!

Survey its foundations, examine the brickwork!

Were its bricks not fired in an oven?

Did the Seven Sages not lay its foundations?

A square mile is city, a square mile is date-grove,

a square mile is clay-pit, half a square mile the temple of Ishtar:

three square miles and a half is Uruk’s expanse. (George, 1999, p. 99)

The words echo the beginning of the *Epic*. But has Gilgamesh simply resigned himself to the notion that such fame is the only immortality available to humankind? Or has the meaning of the passage changed? George, even without the benefit of Levinas’s thought, names and objects to the common view:

It is often supposed that [these lines] reveal in Gilgamesh an acceptance that he will make do with the immortal renown brought to him by building the city’s wall. That is too specific a view. For while the epilogue begins by taking the audience in their imagination up on the wall once more, the last two lines make it clear that the poet fixes our gaze firmly on what the wall encloses . . . (George, 2003, p. 526)

The gaze is fixed, not on the wall itself, but on whom the wall shelters. It is no longer primarily about Gilgamesh, but about those for whom he cares.

Transforming the Man and the Message

Just as Gilgamesh undergoes a series of transformations, so, too, do these “solutions.” Both begin as egocentric pursuits—Gilgamesh starts as a tyrant and a hedonist. The reason neither fame nor living well is satisfying is because both solutions are focused on himself—his ego—not on service to others. Through a series of transformations that occur throughout the text, Gilgamesh discovers a deeper, richer way of life. He discovers the value of care. It is this value, this embodied connection, that provides the unifying force for the two solutions and that provides, if this reading of the *Epic* is correct, the only authentic means for human satisfaction. Once discovered, Gilgamesh ceases to live primarily for his own pleasure. Personal fame, while still desired, loses importance. The joy he takes in daily life, the simple pleasures and human connections, these become sources of real satisfaction. Even living on in the memory of others is transformed from a focus on personal accomplishments to a focus on service.

The story ends with him showing the wall to the Ferryman—but its meaning and emotional tenor have changed. It is no longer primarily about Gilgamesh’s personal pride, although he still takes pride in and would like to be remembered for the accomplishment. Its deeper value, that which has become of greater importance to Gilgamesh, is how well it shelters his people.

Thus, both “meanings” are transformed:

Seize the Day! (Eat, drink, and be merry)

Is no longer just about personal pleasure, but about the joy of caring for one’s family, one’s children, one’s neighbors.

Fame! (Living on in the memory of others through monuments or enduring walls)

Is no longer primarily about his personal fame, but about their value in sheltering his people.

Fame! (Living on in the memory of others through great deeds)

Is now about having contributed to their lives and well-being, not just about personal immortality.

Perhaps another way of thinking about this would be to ask the question:

If you had a choice between

1. being “forgotten,” but having made the lives of your children and their children richer and happier for your passing; or
2. you could be one of the most famous people to ever live, so that almost all people would know your name, but that this name would be “Hitler,”

which would you choose?

If you would choose to be “forgotten,” but having made life better for your loved ones, the Epic speaks to you.

Thus, for the *Epic*:

“Egoistic” pleasure instead becomes focused on the pleasure of service, being part of a community.

“Egoistic” fame shifts from merely leaving a legacy to leaving a more specific legacy, a legacy of care.

Which then shifts to a single solution, where

The meaning of life is found, not in living forever (either immortality or in an afterlife), but in the concrete relationships by which we live and give of ourselves in this life.

It is not that Gilgamesh does not also seek his own pleasure, he still wants to be remembered. But these needs are now placed in the larger context of this desire to serve his people, to be a wise and kind ruler, rather than a tyrant.

Given that we know so little of the language and culture, we cannot be sure that this reading is any more “correct” than other readings. As is true of any great literary work, it addresses the human condition from a rich variety of avenues. The value of reading the *Epic* in the light of Levinas’s thought is that Levinas offers us evocative ways to approach difficult problems in the text, particularly Enkidu’s strange change of heart upon his death.

From another angle, this also parallels an insight recorded by Kubler-Ross, a pioneer in the study of death and dying:

To rejoice at the opportunity of experiencing each new day is to prepare for one’s ultimate acceptance of death. For it is those who have not really lived—who have left issues unsettled, dreams unfulfilled, hopes shattered, and who have let the real things in life (loving and being loved by others, contributing in

a positive way to other people’s happiness and welfare, finding out what things are really you) pass them by—who are most reluctant to die. (Kubler-Ross, 1975, p. xi)

I have seen this, along with others, working as hospital chaplain. To take the insight a step further, it appears to me, and to many with whom I have worked, that it is not one’s belief in an afterlife that correlates most strongly with whether one goes peacefully into that great beyond. It is really the two things named by Kubler-Ross:

First, whether one feels that one has lived a rich and full life (seize the day).

Second, whether one is surrounded by those one loves, whether one feels as though one has made positive contributions to their lives, and they to yours.¹⁰

For those who have listened to the insights of the *Epic*, this “truth” should come as no surprise.

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Notes

1. There is controversy on this point; some believe that the *Epic* existed primarily in written form for the court and intellectual elite. Although we lack the evidence to be certain, George argues in favor of a wider oral tradition (see George, 2003). Even if the former were true, it still appears that it would have held such a position with the court. Also, it is worth noting that the sections on both the flood and the afterlife were not considered parts of the main body of the *Epic*, but were side stories. Here, we are focused on what is called the “standard” version.
2. Because there are various schools of thought as to how to read Levinas, and because the differences between schools is not crucial for this thesis, I have left the more detailed development of these themes to other works. Here, I focus mainly on themes, such as the distinctions between need and desire, which appear as a common denominator to any interpretation of Levinas’s work. To serve a wider audience, I have also avoided the use of most technical language.
3. *Even if one believes in an afterlife, the Epic has much to teach us.* One thing I suggest to my students is to set aside their belief in an afterlife, at least for the first part of my Death and Dying course, because facing that fear had a lot to teach us. My own experience, which included service as a hospital chaplain, suggests that those who use their belief in an afterlife to escape their fear are more likely to be dogmatic and judgmental. However, the psychology and spirituality of those who face that fear, embrace it, and learn from it, are much different, whatever their beliefs about an afterlife. Their beliefs are, in

important ways, transformed. *The Epic can be read as a story of facing that fear.*

4. It should be noted that these studies do not prove that religious persons are less generous than non-religious persons. For example, it could be (as other studies suggest) that religious people are more generous as a whole, but have their generosity as a lifestyle choice rather than in immediate situations. The studies only appear to support the claim that, in these sorts of immediate situations, compassion appears to play a larger role for non-religious persons. The value of this sort of study is in recognizing that generosity and compassion are not exclusive to religious people (Saslow et al., 2013).
5. It is interesting how often the “gods” in these stories act like spoiled children. For example, George refers to a passage wherein the goddess Ishtar is scorned “like an angry child . . .” (George, 2003, p. 474). With so few limits on their power and pleasure, they need never grow up. Boundaries may in fact be a gift.
6. By “balance,” I do not mean to infer a symmetry between need and desire, as Levinas would emphasize the asymmetry of the relationship between the self and other. (That gets into important, but very technical distinctions.) In this case, the term is merely intended to emphasize that each is of value and has a place in our lives.
7. Foster, for example, refers to the sun god’s “hollow promise . . . of a fine funeral,” apparently recognizing the incongruity of the passage without seeing a way to make sense of it (Foster, 2001, p. xxii). George offers a couple of possibilities for Enkidu’s reversal, such as mirroring society’s ambivalence about prostitution or as a commentary on the arbitrariness of the destiny of every mortal (George, 2003). None of these seem satisfactory.
8. Or stone crew, depending upon which translation. Either way, the intent of the passage appears to remain the same.
9. This argument would be lacking if it did not include mention of the loss of the plant of rejuvenation. In a sense, this was Gilgamesh’s consolation prize. If he found and ate this plant, he would not live forever, but he would at least regain the youth and vigor lost in this long journey—another indication of how an obsessive search for immortality achieves its opposite (George, 2003). Oddly, upon obtaining the plant, he does not eat it right away, allowing time for it to be stolen away by a snake. Perhaps he wanted to save it for the old men? Perhaps he wanted to test and see if it was poison? We cannot really be sure. But, recalling that there are many themes woven

throughout the *Epic*, my best guess is that it serves another purpose. For example, see George (2003).

10. Again, I’m not making any claims about the existence or non-existence of an afterlife.

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