

# The Play of Masks

by

Frithjof Schuon

*This essay appeared in the book The Play of Masks (World Wisdom, 1992). The version below is from a new translation approved by the Estate of Frithjof Schuon.*

© World Wisdom, Inc.

When humanity is considered from the standpoint of its values, it is necessary to distinguish *a priori* between the man-center, who is determined by the intellect and is therefore rooted in the Immutable, and the man-periphery, who is more or less an accident. This difference is repeated—*mutatis mutandis*—in every man who is conscious of the supernatural, whether he belongs to the first category or the second; without this awareness he has no authentic centrality nor consequently any decisive worth. That is the meaning of the Eckhartian *distinguo* between the “inner man” and the “outer man”: the latter identifies passively with his experiences, whereas the former may enjoy or suffer in his temporal humanity while remaining impassible in his immortal kernel, which coincides with his state of union with God. The possibility of such a parallelism lies in man’s very nature, and is the essence of the notion of the *avatāra*; in this respect—analogically speaking and with all due proportion—every “pneumatic” is “true man and true God”. The underlying divine substance does not abolish the human mask, any more than the mask prevents the divine manifestation.<sup>1</sup>

It has been said that there are saintly men who “laugh with those who laugh and weep with those who weep”; which indirectly expresses the detachment, and directly the good will, of the “pneumatic” or “central” man. He is detached because he does not identify with the accidents; and he is good-willed because, for that very reason, he could be neither egoistic nor petty; but his very superiority poses for him problems of adaptation, for on the one hand he must partake of the human ambience, and on the other he cannot grasp immediately all its absurdity.<sup>2</sup> The

---

<sup>1</sup> The play of Krishna with the Gopis refers to the mask; the apparition of his immutable form before Arjuna refers to the divine Substance. This form, reflected in *Māyā*, assumed in its turn innumerable masks, not earthly but celestial.

<sup>2</sup> In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare puts forth the image of a contemplative but dreamy and passionate man: in the first respect, the hero remains a stranger to the absurdity of the world; in the second, he himself becomes enmeshed in this incoherence. It should be noted that the work of a playwright of necessity refers to the

man-center is necessarily situated in an isolation from which he cannot but suffer “externally”: feeling that every man is in a certain way like himself, he sincerely puts himself in their place, but it is far from the case that others put themselves in his. Moreover, the ways of acting of the man-center may be “amoral”, although not “immoral”: they may be contrary to a particular morality, but not to morality as such; thus it is proper to discern between a “justice” that is extrinsic and conditional and another that is intrinsic and unconditional.

On the other hand and in a general way, it is obviously necessary to distinguish between the mask out of charity and the mask of malice; the latter is insincere, the former is sincere. In ordinary language, the word “mask” is synonymous with “false appearance”, hence with insincerity; this is plausible from the standpoint of ordinary psychology, but it is to lose sight of the fact that there are sacred masks and priestly vestments, which express either what transcends the wearer, or on the contrary express his transcendent substance itself. It is thus, moreover, that the historical religion, which is an *upāya*, serves as the vestment of the “naked truth”, the primordial, perennial and universal religion: symbolism transmits the heavenly Message and at the same time dissimulates the provisionally unassimilable mystery.

There is a difference in function, in principle at least, between the veil and the mask: the latter is positive in the sense that it expresses, affirms, manifests, whereas the former is negative because it dissimulates and thus renders inaccessible. We could also say that, by the veil one wishes to appear “less than one is” since one desires to “vanish”; by the mask on the contrary, one wishes to appear to be “more than one is”, since one’s intention is to express something that one is not, unless the mask serves to manifest the very “heart” of the wearer and to specify thereby a personal value—which actually is transpersonal—and which otherwise would remain invisible. However, there are cases wherein wisdom takes on the appearance of naivety—or even absurdity—whether involuntarily through lack of experience in an inferior environment,<sup>3</sup> or voluntarily in virtue of a vocation of hiding wisdom, and thereby of ostentatious paradox;<sup>4</sup> this possibility is one that cannot be excluded from the gamut of human attitudes, nor with all the more reason from divine All-Possibility.

---

cosmic phenomenon of the innumerable masks that differentiate the human person; these are natural masks that are unaware of being masks, precisely, whereas an actor is aware of it and thus can “realize” the profound meaning of his protean art. The emperor Augustus, who was divinized while still living, is supposed to have said before dying: “Applaud, for have I not played well the comedy of life?” This indicates in its way the distance of the “pneumatic” with respect to the “psychic” and the “hylic.”

<sup>3</sup> However: “Whoso can do the greater, can do the lesser”; this is obvious, but it presupposes that the ambience be intelligible to the superior man situated in it, for he may not understand the psychological functioning of a given sin or vice; he comes from “another planet”, and moreover bears it within himself.

<sup>4</sup> The names of Diogenes and Omar Khayyam, and perhaps even those of Nasruddin Khoja and Till Eulenspiegel, could be cited here. The court fools pertain in principle to the same rather ambiguous category as do the *heyoka* of the Red Indians, not to mention the “fools of God” who can be encountered in various religious environments.

\*

\*

\*

We mentioned above the isolation of the man-center in the face of the world's absurdity; now the fact that his behavior can be like that of the man-periphery may give the impression of solidarity with the worldly ambience, but this is a deceptive appearance, since similar ways of acting can hide dissimilar intentions. Aside from the fact that the superior man may behave "like others" to mask his superiority, precisely—either out of charity or out of an "instinct" for self-preservation—there is this to consider, and it is essential: for the contemplative man, pleasure does not inflate the individuality; on the contrary, it invites to a transpersonal dilation, so that the "sensible consolation" gives rise to an upward opening and not to a downward inflation.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, an analogous grace intervenes for every sincere believer when he approaches pleasure "in the name of God" and thus opens himself to Mercy: he "invites" God and at the same time takes refuge in Him.

Extrinsically—given human weakness—the moral norm may be "counter to nature"; intrinsically, it is not so. "They have no wine," said Mary at the wedding at Cana, with an intention that could not be limited to the "flesh", any more than the symbolisms of the Song of Songs or of the Gita Govinda are. Asceticism is useful or necessary for man such as he is in fact—for man excluded from the earthly and heavenly Paradises—but the ascetical perspective could not for that reason be endowed with the whole truth, nor consequently with legitimacy pure and simple. The partisans of a frowning asceticism readily overlook the fact that men are not all alike: no doubt, every amusement is a pleasure, but it does not follow that every pleasure is an amusement, otherwise every marriage would be something frivolous, including the wedding at Cana.

Not only truth, merit and sacrifice lead to God, but also beauty; creation itself testifies to this, then sacred art, including liturgy, the forms of worship. Not only error, crime, and lust remove from God, but also ugliness; not when it is accidental, for then it is neutral,<sup>6</sup> but when it is willed and produced, as is the case of that universe of organized and appalling ugliness which is the modern world. Besides, vice is a kind of ugliness, as virtue is a kind of beauty; "thou art all fair, my love, there is no spot in thee."

---

<sup>5</sup> The in principle equivocal character of pleasure appears in a particularly flagrant manner in music, which inebriates in two opposite directions, self-love and the sense of the Infinite; it can invite to narcissism as well as to contemplative self-transcending. Meister Eckhart wrote somewhere that every meal has a sacramental import for souls deeply united to God; thus pleasure, to the extent of its effectiveness, excludes the mechanism of a passional lapse whether the person involved be a hermit or polygamous. "Water takes on the color of its receptacle," said Al-Junayd, which implies that pleasure takes on the nature of the man enjoying it; in other words, the nature of the subject determines the relationship of the subject with the object.

<sup>6</sup> And neutralized by a context of beauty; herein lies, in a certain sense, the meaning of the gargoyles on cathedrals. However, one does not blame a man for being ugly, but one may blame him for the ugliness of his expression.

Man's deformity implies moral beauty, if only—*de facto*—as a potentiality. The pneumatic is a man who identifies *a priori* with his spiritual substance and thus always remains faithful to himself; he is not a mask unaware of the one wearing it, as is the man enclosed in accidentality.

\* \* \*

*Jivātmā*, the “living soul”, is the mask-individual that is illusorily and innumerably superimposed on *Ātmā*, or on the one “Self”. Now the individual as such identifies with contingency, and for that reason is subject to the principles of limitation and fluctuation; limitation, because no formal perfection can include all other perfections, and fluctuation, because temporal manifestation is subject to phases or to alternations—namely, to activity and passivity—and although this takes away nothing from perfection as such, it can nonetheless disfigure it. The phase of activity favors man's natural freedom; but the phase of passivity renders man more vulnerable in relation to his ambience and thus to his own weaknesses, whether they be substantial or accidental. In a word, contingency is made of inequality, in time as in space, without this necessarily implying—it must be insisted upon—intrinsic imperfections.<sup>7</sup> Let us specify that there is not only the temporal fluctuation between the active and passive phases, but also the as it were spatial disequilibrium between man's outward and inward dimensions. The ideal is, on the one hand, the victory of spiritual activity over the passive phase, and on the other, the victory of spiritual inwardness over the outward dimension.

The problem of equilibrium is particularly related to the pull between the exteriorizing or manifesting function and the interiorizing or reintegrating function: there are sages whose sole duty is to attract souls towards the “within”, and this is the rule; there are others who add to this function that of creating sensible supports, and this is the exception; the most obvious and evident example of this is the “culture hero” (*Kulturheros*) who inaugurates a civilization or a period of culture.<sup>8</sup> And the following *distinguo* is essential: there is an exteriorization that is profane and amounts to a choice of the “world” as against the spirit; there is another that is spiritual, whose end is interiorization, the way towards the “kingdom of God”; for every man endowed with a minimum degree of spirituality, the criterion of the balance between the outward and the inward is the predominance of the internal pole of attraction. The “man of prayer” is capable of measuring what he is able to offer to his ambience, and what he is able to accept from it, without dispersing himself and without being unfaithful to his vocation of inwardness; nothing should be to the detriment of our relationship with immanent Heaven. Only those who give

---

<sup>7</sup> It is this that explains the states of “aridity” or “dryness” from which mystics may suffer; in these states they are particularly exposed to temptations or to inner trials.

<sup>8</sup> By painting the first icon of the Blessed Virgin, St. Luke introduced painting into Christianity and created the entire artistic dimension of this religion, which has been maintained in the Eastern Church. In an analogous manner, Jalal ad-Din Rumi introduced music and dance into Sufism, not out of invention, of course, but through inspiration.

themselves to God can know what they have a right, or duty, to give to the world and to receive from it.

Aside from limitation, fluctuation and disequilibrium, there is impermanence, which is temporal limitation; in one and the same life, childhood, youth, maturity pass, as does life itself.<sup>9</sup> Normally, youth and maturity constitute the manifestation of the prototype or the “idea”, for childhood and old-age both have something privative in them: the child is “not yet”, and the old man is “no longer”. Be that as it may, the summit of individual manifestation is not always situated in youth or in maturity: certain individuals manifest their best possibility in childhood after which they harden or become heavy; others manifest it only in old age. Of course, a peak manifestation at maturity need not preclude the same from occurring in old age: an *avatāra*, who is of necessity a perfect man in every respect, will necessarily manifest the perfection of each age; this is also possible for men of a less lofty category, and even for men who are modestly endowed but nonetheless marked by a heavenly favor.

\* \* \*

“The just man sins seven times daily”: this contradiction in terms has the function of making it understood that in this lower world perfection cannot be absolute, except in the sense of “relative absoluteness”; without this reservation, one would be able to do without the notion of perfection. According to Moslem esoterism, “no sin compares with that of existence”; thus the Sufi asks forgiveness of God morning and night, possibly without being aware of any evil;<sup>10</sup> he accuses himself because he exists. “Why callest thou me good?” said Christ; “there is none good but one, that is, God”; which obviously could not mean that there is the least blemish in deified man.

If on the one hand man is subject to limitations, dimensions, phases—owing in large measure to his connection with matter—on the other hand he can be either fundamentally good or fundamentally bad, depending on his individual substance which pertains to the play of All-Possibility; it is the possibilities that “want” to be what they are, it is not God who imposes it upon them. And this is unrelated to the general modes of contingency such as space and time; the direct cause of personal character resides not in matter nor in other external factors, but in the spirit, in the individual sense of this term. The good manifests qualities, the bad on the contrary manifests privations; but both alike are subject to the vicissitudes of existence.

---

<sup>9</sup> “All that appears deserves to disappear” (*Denn alles, was entsteht, ist wert, dass es zugrunde geht*), said Goethe in his *Faust*, wherein he confuses in a way God’s destructive function with the corrosive function of the devil; the saying nonetheless expresses a certain “logic” inherent in creaturely *Māyā*.

<sup>10</sup> If David considered that “mine iniquities...are more than the hairs of mine head,” it is because, as a Semitic fideist and moralist—not a “philosopher” as the Aryan Greeks and Hindus—he “subjectivizes” his objective awareness of the dissonances of relativity.

The combination of fundamental characters and the modes of earthly contingency gives rise to an indefinite diversity of types and destinies;<sup>11</sup> thus the relativists will conclude that nothing is good or evil in itself, there is only “more” or “less”; which is flagrant nonsense. It is to overlook a *distinguo*—apparently absurd but metaphysically essential—which we have mentioned above, namely that between the “pure absolute” and the “relatively absolute”; the first is the good as such, and the second, the good through participation, or the good “projected into the stuff of evil”, if one may express it thus.<sup>12</sup>

We have said above that the limitations, dimensions, and phases that govern man may result from his connection with matter; in fact, they govern only the physical and the psychic and not intelligence as such; *corpus* and *anima* and not *spiritus*. The body and the soul are two masks superimposed on the spirit, which in its substance remains unlimited and immutable; and this takes us back to the Eckhartian concept of the “inner man”.

Perhaps we should add here a consideration that, although not pertaining directly to our subject, is nonetheless connected with it. According to a Hindu expression, “The Lord is the only transmigrant,” which means He goes from birth to birth crossing the chain of the worlds. This is true in the sense of *līlā*, the “divine play”, but not if one concludes that individuals are not real at their own level and that they are not responsible for their actions.<sup>13</sup>

\* \* \*

Our profound identity is our relationship with God; our mask is the form that we must assume in the world of forms, of space, of time. Our ambience, as well as our personality, necessarily pertain to the particular, not to the Universal; to possible being, not to necessary Being; to relative good, not to the Sovereign Good. Thus there is no need to be disturbed because one lives in one given ambience and not in another; and further, there is no need to be disturbed because one is a given individual rather than some other. Being a person—on pain of inexistence—one must needs be a particular person; that is, “such and such a person” and not the “person as such”;

---

<sup>11</sup> “Whoso willeth, cannot; whoso can, willeth not; whoso knoweth, doeth not; whoso doeth, knoweth not; and thus it goeth ill with the world.” (*Chi vuo, non puo; chi puo, non vuo; chi sa, non fa; chi fa, non sa; e cosi il mondo mal va.*) This Italian saying, with its proverbial quality, in its way sums up well the misery of the “human comedy”, and *ipso facto* that of earthly contingency.

<sup>12</sup> The notion “relatively absolute” could not imply that there is an “absolutely relative”, for this expression—aside from its intrinsic absurdity—is practically synonymous with “nothingness”.

<sup>13</sup> It should not be overlooked that it is as a consequence of their actions that they transmigrate, and that the immanent transmigration of the Lord pertains to the onto-cosmological dimension and not to that of concordant actions and reactions. Cf. the chapter “Universal Eschatology” in our book *Outlines of the Perennial Religion*. (Editor’s note: This chapter is found in the book *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism* by Frithjof Schuon.)

this latter person is situated only in the world of the divine Ideas, while such or such a person is its reflection within contingency.

What matters is to maintain, starting from possible being, the contact with necessary Being; with the Sovereign Good which is the essence of our relative values, and whose merciful nature includes the desire to save us from ourselves; to deliver us by having us participate in its mystery both immutable and living.