

# Good and Evil in William Goulding's *Lord of the Flies*



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## Individual Course Project - ENG445

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The conflict between good and evil has been thematized by writers since earliest times understood of course in a religious context. There are several variations on this conflict, one being the battle between individuals or ideologies, with one side good, the other evil. Another variation is the inner struggle in characters (and by extension, humans in reality) between good and evil. What we regard as good is a peaceful order with the idea of a rule of law. Culture strives to establish a boundary between itself and savagery. The manifestations of savagery are called "crimes" which we consider evil. And thus there exists this conflict between two competing impulses within all human beings: the instinct to live by rules, act peacefully, follow moral commands, and value the good of the group against the instinct to gratify ones immediate desires, act violently to obtain supremacy over others, and enforce ones will. Through my study of the 1954 Novel by Nobel prize winning English author William Goulding's *Lord of the Flies* I intend to explore the qualities of human nature and the conflicting state within each character. The book grapples with the underlying theme of order vs chaos and loss of innocence when a small group of schoolboys find themselves stranded on an island after a plane crash. Through their story of existence in a community without boundaries, we can get a better understanding of the need of a social, political and moral construct within us and our society.



# 1

## Introduction

“I wrote this book *Lord of the Flies* and I think it was either 1953 or 1954. A great many things have been said about how it came to be written and I don’t know whether any of them are true or not. As far as I am concerned, it happened because one day I was sitting one side of the fireplace, and my wife was sitting on the other, and I suddenly said to her, ‘Wouldn’t it be a good idea to write a story about some boys on an island, showing how they would really behave, being boys and not little saints as they usually are in children’s books.’ This story is about the problem of evil and the problem of how people are to live together in society.”

– William Golding on *Lord of the Flies*

*Lord of the Flies* is a literary phenomenon; the title is instantly recognizable as a synonym for societal breakdown, the book has been read by millions worldwide<sup>1</sup>, and has entered the culture. First published in 1954, it has been adapted for radio, made into two films, dramatized for the stage by Nigel Williams and in an innovative ballet by Matthew Bourne.

The novel was written less than a decade after World War II, when the world was in midst of the Cold War. The atrocities of the Holocaust and horrific effects of nuclear warfare were present in the mind of William Goulding when he wrote the novel. The novel, then, is an allegory that presents its characters as archetypes of human fallibility. It brings out the reactions to fear and vulnerability that prevail in the society at large. It thematizes the manifestation of evil in the form of savagery at times of crisis and shaken faith.

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.william-golding.co.uk/>

## 1.1 About the Author

Born in Cornwall in 1911, William Golding is one of the world's most decorated writers, winning the coveted Booker Prize in 1980, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1979 and the prestigious Nobel Prize for Literature in 1983, and was knighted by the Queen in 1988. He was a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. In 2008, The Times ranked Golding third on their list of "The 50 greatest British writers since 1945". In addition to 12 novels, Golding also wrote plays, many essays and reviews, several short stories, some poems, and a travel book about Egypt. Many of his attempts at other works survive in manuscript or typescript.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.2 Overview

This report is divided into the following parts:

chapter 2 discusses the plot of the novel in details. chapter 3 elucidates the major themes and their development in classic and contemporary literature. chapter 4 delineates these motifs and themes by illustrating examples from the text. chapter 5 talks about the important characters and their tendencies and inner conflicts along with my interpretations of the same. Finally, chapter 6 concludes the report with an analysis followed by acknowledgment in chapter 7.

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<sup>2</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Golding](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Golding)

# 2

## The Plot

*Lord of the Flies* begins with a fair haired boy Ralph and the short, fat boy named Piggy emerging from a dense jungle onto the beach of a tropical island where they find themselves stranded after a plane crash during a nuclear war. They find a shiny, deep cream colored conch shell and Ralph blows it like a trumpet out of amusement. Other survivors gather at the blaring conch but there were no grownups, only boys between ages of six to twelve. Ralph is the oldest and biggest boy on the island and he is twelve. Eventually a whole choir comes out of the jungle led by a boy named Jack. The boys decide to vote for a chief and they pick Ralph because he is handsome and seems like a natural leader especially because of the conch. Ralph lets Jack, who feels humiliated for not being elected chief, be in-charge of the choir and proclaims that the choir will be the hunters. Ralph, Jack and Simon explore the island to find that it is a good island with food and water and pigs that they can hunt. In a meeting, a small boy asks Ralph what he is going to do about the 'beastie' on the island. Ralph brushes off the topic by saying that there is no beast on the island but this fear of a beast never really dies off among the kids. Ralph decides that they should light a small fire on the mountain top as a smoke signal for nearby ships but accidentally burn a big patch of forest and possibly killing a little boy with the mulberry birthmark who was playing down where the jungle fire started. No one ever sees him again.

Ralph takes responsibility for making shelter for everyone and Jack goes out hunting. Both are frustrated when the others instead of helping them drift off to play or swim or eat. Jack finally manages to kill a pig but at the cost of letting the fire signal burn out. A passing ship misses them because they let the signal die out and Ralph blames Jack for it. He calls for an assembly to set things straight and discuss why people aren't working as they should and opens a debate about the beast that they are afraid of. Jack behaves in a condescending manner and derides everyone for being scared and goes on to say that he is not scared because he is strong and can hunt. He mocks the rules set by Ralph and based on this show of power, he rallies off most of the other boys chanting and singing. Ralph feels defeated as a chief. That night when everyone's asleep, there is an air battle high up

in the sky and a dead man on a parachute sails down near the mountaintop. Sam and Eric, who are asleep by the signal fire see the parachuter but think its the beast and run off to tell the others.

Ralph, Jack and the older boys go to look for the beast on the far side of the island which they hadn't explored yet. They find nothing their and decide to hunt on their way back. Ralph enjoys the hunt and is thrilled by it. Close to night Ralph, Jack and Roger climb the mountain and again mis-see the parachuter as the beast and run off scared. In this frenzy, everyone sides with Jack who seems more powerful and Jack proclaims himself to be chief of a new tribe who hunt and feast. Only Ralph, Piggy and Samneric along with a few littleuns are left behind. Jack's tribe paint their faces and hunt a sow. They impale the head of the sow on a stake sharpened at both ends as an offering to the beast. Simon wanders off and sees the head of the sow. He has an epileptic fit but before he does the head says that its the beast, also called the lord of the flies. The head laughs at him and says that the beast is inside the boys and not something they can hunt and kill; then Simon passes out. Simon, then goes to the mountain and sees what the dead parachuter really is. He hurries off to tell the others that there really isn't any beast. Jack holds a big feast at night for everyone. Ralph and Piggy are present too. Jack's hunter enact a pig hunting dance while they chant "Kill the beast, cut its throat, spill its blood". In the middle of this Simon comes out of the forest and the boys mistake him as the beast and kill him.

The next day Ralph, Piggy and Samneric try to pretend they weren't part of what happened to Simon. That night Jack and his hunters raid Ralph's camp to steal Piggy's glasses so that the can make fire. The next day Ralph and Piggy and Samneric hold a meeting with the conch and decide to go to Castle Rock (Jack's camp) to demand Piggy's glasses back. At Castle Rock, Jack has Samneric seized and tied and fights Ralph. Piggy comes up holding the conch and starts off the banal argument about following rules. Roger rolls off a boulder from the top of the castle onto Piggy who dies from the impact and the conch is shattered. Ralph runs off and Samneric are tortured and inducted in the tribe by Roger. Ralph comes back at night to talk to Samneric who are on night duty. They tell him that Roger has sharpened a stick on both ends for Ralph and that the tribe would systematically hunt him the day after. Ultimately, Jack sets the whole island on fire and Ralph runs out to the beach where a British Naval Officer has just arrived investigating all the smoke. Ralph starts weeping. The other boys weep too.

# 3

## Themes and Motifs

I believe that the novel may be understood by a simple yet amazingly complex theme of good v/s evil. I will go on to show that this theme will encompass most of all that is being said and implied in the book. The following discussion will seek to elucidate the theme.

### 3.1 Good and Evil

The conflict between good and evil has been thematized by writers for a long time in religion, ethics, philosophy and psychology. Evil, in a general context, is the absence or opposite of that which is described as being good. Often, evil is used to denote profound immorality, expediency, selfishness, ignorance, or neglect<sup>1</sup>. The earliest origins between the dichotomy can be traced back almost five thousand years to a religious philosopher Zoroaster who simplified the pantheon of early Iranian gods into two opposing forces that were in conflict<sup>2</sup>. The modern ideas on the topic can be seen from a wide variety of viewpoints. Religion and philosophical views tend to agree that goodness is intrinsic to human nature and is ultimately based on the natural love, bonding, affection towards others. Most religious and philosophical interpretations agree that evil is an aberration arising from excessive greed. Biological theories of Social Darwinism, Sociobiology, Evolutionary Psychology, Multilevel Selection and E.O. Wilsons Eu-sociality argue that competitive, selfish and aggressive behavior arises because of savage animal instincts that make us fight and compete for food, shelter, territory and a mate<sup>3</sup>.

It was Victor Frankl who said in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*<sup>4</sup> "Our generation is realistic, for we have come to know man as he really is. After all, man is that being who

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<sup>1</sup>Ervin Staub. Overcoming evil: genocide, violent conflict, and terrorism.

<sup>2</sup><https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoroastrianism>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.humancondition.com/human-condition/>

<sup>4</sup>Frankl, Viktor E. *Man's search for meaning*. Simon and Schuster, 1985

invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz; however, he is also the being who entered those gas chambers upright, with the Lord's Prayer or the Shema Yisrael on his lips." I believe in the viewpoint that man has all kinds of possibilities within him, to reach extraordinary heights of good or abysmal depths of evil. J.K Rowling in one of her novels says "We all have good and bad inside of us. It's what side we choose to follow that defines who we really are". All the external manifestations of evil such as wars, genocide, terrorism etc. are based in this inner conflict among people and they choosing to side with the evil in them. Then, as Simon says in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* "Maybe there is a beast ... Maybe its only us.". There is no external evil just an illusion of it inside each one of us.

### 3.1.1 Civilization v/s Savagery

Civilization is characterized by a social and political order through organization in the form of legislature, judiciary and executive bodies while savagery is a state of chaos in which there is little to no organization or government and no common set of values. Civilization is marked by planning and this inevitably seeks advancement and progress by relying on common set of values. Such planning is void in a savagery and it is unsustainable. This society doesn't move towards progress but degenerates the human qualities to animalistic tendencies of mere survival. Moral and political philosophers have said time and again through social contract theory<sup>5</sup> how civilization is inevitable from a state of nature if human is rational. But human is also an emotional being and can succumb to destructive and immoral tendencies when faced with crisis.

Savagery is the end of human intellect. What leads to savagery in a society of order? One may say that it is the circumstances that make people act in a particular way but as Victor Frankl said, "Our greatest freedom is the freedom to choose our attitude.". What he means to say is that man has within him the good that can lead him away from the evil within him. Authors such as William Golding and Joseph Conrad hold the opinion that human is innately barbaric and that the struggle for humanity is to suppress this instinct rather than to completely end the external manifestations of this instinctual tendency.

## 3.2 Belief in supernatural & Superstition in society

In his novella *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad rightly says, "The belief in Supernatural source of evil is not necessary. Men are quite capable of every wickedness"<sup>6</sup>. The supernatural is often used to understand things which science is incapable of quantifying or evaluating. The supernatural instills fear and the inability to understand the phenomena leads to uneasiness. Superstition is excessively credulous belief in and reverence for the supernatural. Superstitious fear of the unknown can make us do anything, and some of the things we think are required are horrible. In 1948, behavioral psychologist B.F Skinner in an experiment with pigeons described how easily they get conditioned to a set of rituals, no matter how random<sup>7</sup>. These principles apply to society too.

<sup>5</sup><http://www.iep.utm.edu/soc-cont/>

<sup>6</sup>Conrad, Joseph. "Heart of darkness." Joseph Conrad: Three Novels. Macmillan Education UK, 1995

<sup>7</sup>B. F. (1948). "'Superstition' in the Pigeon". *Journal of Experimental Psychology*. 38 (2): 168172



# 4

## Reasoning the text

As described by Sir Golding himself, the novel is about the problem of evil and the problem of how people are to live together in a society. Thus, the novel allegorically brings about the pessimism in the society and within each person. It is a tragic parody of children's adventure tales particularly *Coral Island* by R. M. Ballantyne<sup>1</sup>, that brings out humankind's intrinsic evil nature. The classic children's books depict them in an ideal way where they are able to figure out complex situations and handle them efficiently. This fable then brings one more closer to the actual nature of human.

The boys are the supreme beings on the island. The island is a symbol of the world and the kids are the human beings in it. Ralph, Jack, Piggy and Simon are the most influential in the decision making processes. They can be related to the world leaders that we have who exercise control over the resources of the earth unquestionably. Ralph is elected as chief, not because the kids listened to his policies and weighed in their options and opinions but simply because he seemed more glamorous at the time with his handsome personality and the conch (which becomes the symbol for civility). One may argue that they were kids and are prone to such ignorance. But looking around, we realize that rampant ignorance among voters for the candidates and biased views based on symbols (religious, regionalism, to downright sexism) and emotionally based self-indulgence. Ralph and Piggy are logical and reasonable approached with long-term and hard working strategy that involves co-operation and lot of effort. This bores the people who quickly lose interest in Ralph. Jack on the other hand is impulsive, egotist and shows a kind of strength that would attract people looking for quick fixes. This is suggestive of the natural inclination in people towards violence and evil. At a time of crisis, when they feel they are in danger because of a beast, they turn to Jack who claims he isn't afraid although he actually is. In exchange for his protection, the other boys sacrifice any moral reservations they may have about his policies and enthusiastically persecute the boys who resist joining their tribe. People

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<sup>1</sup>Ballantyne, Robert Michael. *The coral island*. Wordsworth Editions, 1995

in today's world too turn to radical leaders at times of perceived crisis (consider Hitler's rise in Germany, Nomination of Donald Trump as a Presidential candidate in USA). I will justify the comment on Trump by citing and completely supporting a quote from Sam Levine, Associate Politics Editor of The Huffington Post, that Donald Trump regularly incites political violence and is a serial liar, rampant xenophobe, racist, misogynist birther who has repeatedly pledged to ban all Muslims – 1.6 billion members of an entire religion – from entering the U.S.. The attitude of bullying the weak is common among kids in almost every culture. It so easily fits into our model of the world where there is subjugation of the weak and wars going on somewhere or the other. The boys finally end up burning the entire island!

At the time when William Golding wrote the novel, the atrocities of the Nazi regime and the atomic bombing were fresh in his mind. He considers such events fall of humankind and symbolizes this in his novel by recurrent patterns of falling such as the falling rock that strikes Piggy dead, Piggy falling forty feet at the impact, the explosion of the conch into a thousand white fragments, the falling parachuter and finally Ralph falling on his knees in front of the Naval officer. The society rapidly descends into anarchy. Loss of piggy's glasses is symbolic of the fall of reason and civility. It represents a transition from a reign of reason to reign of savagery similar to the World Wars. Realization does dawn on everyone when it all ends and they realize the violence that they are capable of.

Effective verbal communication is essential for development of abstract thoughts. Inability to ponder deeply and realize the rational explanation for the so-called beast led to a superficial thinking and an atmosphere of panic among the kids. The central symbol in this context is the head of the sow impaled on a stick called the Lord of the Flies- another name for Beelzebub, the prince of demons or the Devil<sup>2</sup>. When Simon asks the assembly "What's the dirtiest thing there is?" he looks for the answer "evil" but also included in that answer is decay and death. Ironically, Jack's excretory answer is partially correct. The Lord of the Flies here represents the destruction, decay and demoralization of mankind. Until now, the beast was an external presence and this offering and associated rituals marked the profound belief in supernatural and superstition among the boys. This is again symbolic of the blind, irrational and unnatural superstitions in a society.

The insight into the identity of the actual beast is brought about in Simon's interaction with the pig's head on the stick. The Lord of the Flies says "Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill! You knew, didnt you? I am part of you? Close, close, close! I am the reason why its no go? Why things are what they are?". The beast is not something external but the darkness within, the violence in the kids heart. It is the human nature itself, intertwining good and evil that gives rise to all the evil in the world in the form of violence, destruction, jealousy, power, chaos, greed, anger etc.

Jack is the embodiment of this fallibility of humankind as he says "The beast is a hunter" unwittingly implicating himself as part of the problem, a source of the boys' fears. His lust for power and authority causes him to commit and encourage savage acts against his own kind; an accurate measure of his depravity. Sitting in front of his tribe, "Power ... chattered in his ear like an ape". The figurative devil on his shoulder is his own animality, looking to master other creatures. This devolution of Jack coupled with Simon's

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/l/lord-of-the-flies/lord-of-the-flies-at-a-glance>

hallucinatory revelation paint the complete picture of the beast. In civilized societies this beast manifests in the form of wars, crimes or even concealed non-physical but immoral power-plays.

The deepest irony in the novel is that even though at the end the Naval Officer may look righteous as he dawns upon the kids the realization of their savagery, the truth is that he is also in the middle of a war. So the real tragedy is that there is nobody to save civilized humanity from their violent nature. In the paraphrased words of William Golding, "The adults save the children ... but who will save the adults?".



# 5

## Character sketches

### 5.1 Ralph

Ralph represents leadership, the properly socialized and civilized young man. He is charismatic, handsome and has decent intelligence and common sense. Though well built enough to be a boxer when he grows up, he is fairly decent and not abusive or egotist. Elected chief, he tries to imitate what he understands of the governance back in his country. He establishes a "Rule of the Land" and strongly believes in an orderly and proper organized conduct. He has his priorities straight throughout and is not swayed from the prime motive of being rescued. He takes his responsibilities as chief seriously and works persistently for others. He sides with Piggy and listens to his useful advice instead of ridiculing him as others do. He is a good, simple and reasonable person with strong inner values. He has a logical outlook and tries to sort issues with reason and deliberation; the mark of civility. Until the last assembly, where only he and Piggy and Samneric are present, he still believes in discussions and the possibility that they might be able to talk sense into others. He has learned that intellect, reason, sensitivity, and empathy are the tools for holding the evil at bay. He is the only one who identifies Simon's death as murder and has a realistic, unvarnished view of his participation. Once Ralph becomes prey, he realizes that he is an outcast "Cos I had some sense" not just common sense but a sense of his identity as a civilized person, a sense of the particular morality that had governed the boys' culture back home. He weeps at the end for the end of innocence and his realization of the darkness and the evil that man is capable of and the loss of his true friend Piggy.

### 5.2 Jack

Jack represents evil and violence. He is the embodiment of the fallibility of humankind. Having been choirmaster and "head boy", he exercises control over others through terror.

He seeks authority and gains pleasure in dominating others. He is extremely egotist and a bully by nature. Seldom displaying common sense and will to contribute positively in assemblies, he shows deep resentment towards the order that Ralph and others try to establish often abusing Piggy and speaking out of turn. He feels important as a hunter and the kills thrill him and give him an ego boost. Having been freed from the shackles of the orderly society that condemned his violence, Jack's dominating attitude magnifies and so does his tendencies of violence. He sways everyone through his politics of terror and fear and frequently lies to them. After taking title of "chief", he feels supreme and "power ... chattered in his ear like an ape". His animal nature becomes the figurative and literal "beast" on the island.

### 5.3 Piggy

Piggy represents reason and intellect. He is short, stout, wears thick glasses and has asthma. Having been bullied even back in England, Piggy has low self-esteem and seeks Ralph's approval to validate what he says. He is incredibly resourceful in terms of ideas and suggestions to a rule based society. He instructed Ralph on how to use the conch in the first place, suggested to light a smoke signal fire atop the mountain and to build shelters at the beach. His glasses were the only way to light fire on the island. He tries to reason about the non-existence of the beast. He is a good friend. When others leave Ralph he plans a feast of fruits along with Samneric for Ralph. He tries to convince Ralph on his their innocence in Simon's death. He is physically weak but in an organized society compensates by his intellect. He believes that Jack remains at bay from him only because Ralph saves him every time. He therefore relies heavily on Ralph for protection. Speaking of the deaths of Simon and the littlun with the birthmark, he asks "What's grownups goin' to think?" as if he is not so much mourning the boys' deaths as he is mourning the loss of values, ethics, discipline, and decorum that caused those deaths. He remains logical and untouched by any evil and even before his death, he shouted "Which is better, law and rescue, or hunting and breaking things up?".

### 5.4 Simon

As opposed to Piggy who represents logical reasoning, Simon represents the spiritual ,mystic presence. He is a shy and reserved boy, who stays alone most of the time. Simon is physically frail, prone to fainting spells but expresses concern for the more vulnerable boys. He is the only one brave enough to suggest going on the mountain top to investigate. He understands the truly worst thing is fostering evil within one. He is epileptic and his hallucinatory conversation with the Lord of the Flies unravels to the readers the true nature of evil and the "beast" that the author is referring to. He is kind of an outcast and others think he is odd. Yet he has the cynicism of an adult and understands abstractness that others fail to see. When Simon thought of the beast, "there rose before his inward sight the picture of a human at once heroic and sick". This sight is precisely how Golding visualizes humanity. Like other mystics, Simon asks questions the other boys cannot answer. His

questions to them, “What’s the dirtiest thing there is?” and “What else is there to do?” require both abstract thought and courageous action to answer. Simon is symbolic of the more fundamental elements of knowledge.

## **5.5 Samneric**

Sam and Eric represent the open minded and general people who conform to whoever is in-charge and behave and work accordingly. Being twins, they do everything in unison; Often completing each others lines and speaking together. They are prone to societal pressures although they stick with Ralph as long as they feel they are safe with him. Like Piggy and Ralph, they realize that a smoke signal is essential if they are to be rescued. They aren’t too radical in their thinking and somewhat represent the gray area between the two opposing worlds of civility and savagery. They somehow fit in both the roles.

## **5.6 Roger**

Roger is a sadist and deeply evil, he enjoys hurting others. He is psycho-pathologically cruel and misses his aim while throwing stones at little Henry only because his “arm was conditioned by a civilization that knew nothing of him”. He is even more evil than Jack in a way that Jack’s atrocities are based on his desire for power and position whereas Roger simply enjoys to hurt others. He acts as a hangman in the regime of savagery. He kills Piggy for no apparent reason, tortures Samneric and sharpens a stick at both ends for Ralph!





# 6

## Discussion and Conclusion

Ralph and Piggy manage to keep themselves reasonable and civilized. They didn't cave in to the primal state that others devolved into. Victor Frankl would have argued here that a single example is sufficient to prove that it is possible for anyone to act the way Ralph and Piggy do. I dutifully agree to his point but the truth is they didn't. Everyone faced an individual choice and they had no justification to give to anyone and yet most embraced the dark side. The reason I believe this is so is that the novel is written in a pessimistic time and hence represents a pessimistic view.

I hold the opinion that man has within him the potential to achieve greatness as well as devolve into a primal self. Freudian School talks of the "id" which functions only to ensure survival<sup>1</sup>. Laws, moral codes, even intelligence doesn't mean anything in this domain. Giving in to hopelessness or fear in tough times fuels this id and complex ideas vanish and fundamentally animalistic qualities emerge. Logotherapy teaches us to find meaning even in our sufferings and to hold certain values and morals dear to one. Holding on to this at difficult times, we can avert the fear and hopelessness leading to evil within us. Thus if we consider human nature to include both good and evil permanently intertwined, then humankind's work lies not in the impossible mission of eradicating evil but in the struggle to keep it from becoming the dominant force in our lives. And that I feel is the essence captured when I say that evil is universally present in all people and requires a constant resistance by the intellect that was Piggy, by the mysticism and spiritualism that was Simon, and by the hopes and dreams that are Ralph's.

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<sup>1</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Id,\\_ego\\_and\\_super-ego](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Id,_ego_and_super-ego)



# 7

## Acknowledgment

My dwelling into the topic that seemed a bit linear to me initially really amazed me as I ended up reading texts ranging a wide variety including philosophy, psychology, sociology, biology, religion and literary fiction! I am thankful to IITK for providing high speed internet that made all the research possible!

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