

Commentary

ACIM® Clarification of Terms

*Introduction*¹

Explanation of underlining, italics and footnote formats can be found at the end of the commentary. See also the note there on the effects of switching from the FIP edition to the Complete and Annotated Edition. Please note that the FIP and CE versions may differ in where paragraph breaks occur.

Overview

Concerning the nature of this *Clarification of Terms* part of the Course, I can do no better than refer to Robert Perry's footnote from the CE edition (please read Footnote 1).

This Introduction equivocates, in a sense, about the following definitions. Helen and Ken had asked Jesus for a “glossary” of ACIM terminology. Apparently, Jesus did not want to get into that much detail, or nail down definitions with precise language. He compares one thing to another but seems to avoid giving exact definitions, and only eleven terms are covered.

He points out that the Course is not a document on theology or philosophy. It is not at all concerned with precise terminology, which is why we sometimes ask, “What does this word mean?” about a term that we have seen many times before. He brushes aside any need for defining words like “mind,” “soul,” “conscious and unconscious,” or all the varied terms that can describe our individual consciousness. The aim is to correct our *perception*, not our vocabulary. Nevertheless, he proceeds to give a few general definitions of things.

He also explains to a degree why he wrote the Course the way he did.

¹ The Clarification of Terms (simply called “TERMS” in the Notes and “THE USE OF TERMS” in the Urtext) was dictated from September to December of 1975, three years after the completion of the Manual for Teachers, in response to a suggestion from Judith Skutch. According to Ken Wapnick, Jesus instructed that it be “placed...as an appendix to the manual for teachers” (Absence from Felicity, 377) in the then-upcoming publication of the Course. This made sense as the Course was to be published in three separate volumes, and the Manual was the last of those volumes. Thematically, however, the Clarification of Terms is entirely distinct from the Manual, dealing with Course terms rather than speaking to concerns related to being a teacher. It should therefore be seen as an appendix to the Course, rather than to the Manual.

Paragraph 1

This is not a course in theoretical philosophy, nor is it concerned with precise terminology. ²It is concerned only with Atonement, or the correction of perception. ³The means of the Atonement is forgiveness. ⁴The structure of “individual consciousness” is essentially irrelevant, because it is a concept representing the “original error” or the “original sin.” ⁵To study the error itself does not lead to correction, if you are indeed to succeed in overlooking the error. ⁶And it is just this process of overlooking at which the course aims.

The Course is not the “New Thought” equivalent of systematic theology, as much as many of us wish we had such a book **(1:1)**. Its use of terms is somewhat loose and not precise, and as readers, many of us find this to be a bit confusing. That's especially so for the more cerebral among us, a group I probably belong in. I may have tried too hard to nail things down in some of what I've written about the Course over the years! The Course is primarily concerned with Atonement, or the correction of perception **(1:2)**. “Aha!” my mind thinks: “There is a definition. Atonement = correction of perception.” Yes, but it isn't all that precise because, as we've seen in the *Manual for Teachers*, Atonement is also equated with forgiveness and healing. It says Atonement is the acceptance of forgiveness, slightly different from saying it *is* forgiveness. Indeed, here he goes on to say that, “The *means* of the Atonement is forgiveness” **(1:3)**. See what I mean by the imprecision? At least, it seems imprecise to me. Our ego minds want to ask, “So, is Atonement equal to forgiveness, or is forgiveness something we do that brings about Atonement?” And as I understand what he is saying here, Jesus does not answer that kind of question because, basically, it doesn't matter. What matters is the experience of forgiveness, the experience of Atonement, and *understanding* exactly how the two terms relate is irrelevant. It's the experience that counts, as he will make clear as we go on.

When he speaks here **(1:4)** of “individual consciousness” and its structure, what comes to mind first is terms like *body, soul, and spirit*; or more psychologically, *id, ego, and super-ego*. In reading Ken Wilber's books, I've encountered discussions about different kinds of bodies, such as physical or causal (no, I don't know what that is), or some third kind which I've forgotten². They seem meaningless to me because I have not had some of the experiences Ken has had, but I suspect that Jesus would consider a precise understanding of *all* these terms to be “irrelevant,” as he says here. His reason for this blanket judgment is that all such terms try to describe aspects of “individual consciousness.” There is a reason those words are in quotes! As such, they all are describing something that has never really existed! There is no such thing as “individual consciousness.” The notion of “individual consciousness” presupposes what has been termed “the

² Don't get me wrong. I love Ken Wilber's writings and I've read most of them. It's clear to me that he has had experiences I've never had and has done spiritual practices with far greater diligence than I have. Many of his experiences, I find, confirm what the Course says about Oneness. But at times I feel he loses me when trying to nail things down with precision, which is exactly what the Course says it does *not* want to do.

Fall,” which is what he means here by “original error” or “original sin.” We have never sinned, never fallen from grace; we remain as God created us. Trying to nail down exact definitions of an illusion is truly *irrelevant*. The thesaurus gives synonyms for “irrelevant,” such as “beside the point, unimportant, inapplicable.” Attempting to analyze “individual consciousness,” which is nothing more than analyzing the basic error we have made, is a waste of time because it doesn't lead us to *correct* the error (1:5). Correcting the error is the whole aim of the Course (1:6).

Consider this earlier statement about studying the ego:

“The study of the ego is not the study of the mind. In fact, the ego enjoys studying itself, and thoroughly approves the undertakings of students who would “analyze“ it, thus approving its importance.” (T-14.X.8:6–7 (FIP), T-14.XI.7:3–4 (CE))

At this point, I suggest you read over Robert Perry's footnote (#4 in the book, #5 in these notes), which includes a list of terms that is probably the list Ken and Helen proposed that Jesus define. This list will show some terms you should *not* expect to find defined in the Course! Let me give you a couple of examples. I attended many workshops with Ken Wapnick, one of the original Course editors. He often referred to “the decision maker,” meaning the part of us that chooses—for instance, between listening to the ego or the Holy Spirit. People continually asked him what the decision maker is, but Ken refused to define it precisely. It isn't easy to identify. It seems to be the mind, but the ego deceives part of our minds, and we live from that much of the time. Another part of our mind is in constant communication with God. So what chooses between the parts? I think you could chew on this problem for your entire life, which is exactly why Jesus says it is an irrelevant distraction. A more straightforward example is the term “world.” At times the Course uses this word to refer to the illusion of time and space we think we live in. But then he talks of “the real world.” That seems to be the same world but seen through the eyes of forgiveness. It's still an illusion because it ultimately evaporates, so how is it “real”? What we see in this Introduction is why so many of us find it hard to nail down the meanings of various Course terms. Jesus admits that sometimes he isn't consistent in the way he uses them!

Paragraph 2

² All terms are potentially controversial, and those who seek controversy will find it. ²Yet those who seek clarification will find it as well. ³They must, however, be willing to overlook controversy, recognizing that it is a defense against truth in the form of a delaying maneuver. ⁴Theological concepts as such are necessarily controversial, since they depend on belief and can therefore be accepted or rejected. ⁵A universal theology is impossible, but a universal experience is not only possible but necessary. ⁶It is this experience toward which the course is aimed. ⁷Here alone consistency becomes possible because here alone uncertainty ends.³

Whatever the term you may question, they are all “potentially controversial” (2:1). Course students can and do debate endlessly about many of them, and the point is that debate is a waste of time. It's easy to find controversy if you are looking for it, and our egos delight in controversy. What better way to feel separate from one another? When he goes on to say that those who seek clarification will also find it (2:2), it seems to imply that if we want to, we will find clear definitions of terms. I don't think it can mean that. Jesus points out later, in (2:5), that what counts is *experience*. That's where we find clarification. If we use terms that relate to characteristics of the illusion we think we are (ego, will, and so on), we may not be able to define what chooses between ego and God, but *we can experience making that choice*. To find that clarifying experience, we need to “overlook controversy,” such as arguing what terms mean or what various parts of us do. Controversy is the ego's attempt to defend itself against the truth. It's a delaying tactic (2:3).

Controversy *will* come up. Something someone says that contradicts our current understanding will always come up and will tempt us to argue or try to “correct” them. I sure see this in myself. That's why he uses the word “overlook.” Controversy will keep arising, tempting us. Overlook it. Let it go. Don't fight it. Theological concepts are especially controversial. Why? Because they depend on belief. You can accept or reject them, but you can't prove beliefs by observation or experiment. Is the Holy Spirit God, part of God, part of our minds, or just God's Voice? Who the hell knows? The Course seems to use it in all of those ways, and a person steeped in traditional Trinitarian theology would probably find all of them in error or at least not exact enough.

³The logic in this paragraph regarding theology seems to be that theological concepts are based on mere belief, rather than on the certainty that comes from direct experience. In the absence of that authoritative certainty, various theological concepts will be accepted by some and rejected by others, because no one really knows. The purpose of the Course's concepts is to bring us to that place where everyone has the same direct experience, the place where everyone *knows*.

Look at the history of the Christian churches. They've split and divided over theological concepts for over 2000 years. Talk about a delaying tactic! The classic question that seems to come up in Course circles is, "How did the separation happen?" If God created us as perfect beings, how could we possibly have made the mistake of trying to be separate? If we get restored to Oneness as in *The Beginning*, what's to prevent us from doing it again? These are insoluble problems. The Course's only answer to how the separation happened is that it never did! "But *something* happened," we think, "because here I am caught up in the *illusion* that separation is real." You can go round and round in circles on this. Jesus is trying to tell us, "Give it up! It's a delaying maneuver of the ego."

There will never be a universal philosophy, "but a universal experience is not only possible but necessary" (2:5). Let's admit it: We'd love to discover a universal theology. To be told it is impossible is at first discouraging. In the end, though, realizing that we are not looking for a brilliant intellectual achievement but a common experience is a relief. The goal is not limited to people of high intelligence. It's available to everyone. One way I apply this is to realize that theology does not matter if the experience exists. In general, Buddhism does not believe in God, but it is clear from their teaching and the lives of saints, such as the Dalai Lama, that their sages have known the universal experience Jesus speaks of here.

I often speak of "the perennial philosophy," which some have defined as "the universal truth that is the same within each of the world's orthodox religious traditions, and is the foundation of their religious knowledge and doctrine." I love the idea. The fact that not everyone agrees with it, however, could make it an object of controversy. For me, it reflects the universal experience that Jesus speaks of here, but I doubt I would find agreement about it with anywhere near half the population. Some may believe (which is theology) that the experience can only come through a particular religion. If they meet someone of another religion who shares the same experience with them, it might change their mind. No words could do that. What is *necessary*, Jesus says, is the universal experience. The Course aims only at this experience because it is the only way uncertainty will end in consistency (2:6–7). That's what we can and should seek for ourselves and look for in others. I love the way Lesson 155 puts it:

"There is a way of living in the world that is not here, although it seems to be. You do not change appearance, though you smile more frequently. Your forehead is serene, your eyes are quiet. *And the ones who walk the world as you do recognize their own.* Yet those who have not yet perceived the way will recognize you also, and believe that you are like them, as you were before." (W-155.1)

We don't need to look for theological agreement. We recognize our own, the people who walk the world as we do. They may be Baptists, Buddhists, Muslims, or no "religion," but we can see they've had the same experience we have had. I remember one sweet woman who hosted a Course group in her home in Cambridge, England, who was a loyal member of the Church of England. I know another Course student who has remained a very active member of the Roman Catholic Church. Both "walk the world" as I do. The belief system seems not to matter at all. Those "who have not yet perceived the

way” will continue to think we are just like them, caught up in the ego illusion as we used to be. They will want to argue with us. My advice? Don't bother.

Paragraph 3

3 This course remains within the ego framework, where it is needed. ²It is not concerned with what is beyond all error, because it is planned only to set the direction toward it. ³Therefore it uses words, which are symbolic and cannot express what lies beyond symbols. ⁴It is always the ego that questions, because it is only the ego that doubts. ⁵The course merely gives another answer, once a question has been raised. ⁶However, this answer does not attempt to resort to inventiveness or ingenuity. ⁷These are attributes of the ego. ⁸*The course is simple.* ⁹It has one function and one goal. ¹⁰Only in that does it remain wholly consistent, because only that can *be* consistent.

What? The Course “remains within the ego framework” **(3:1)**? Yes, because *we* are within the ego framework, so that's where the Course *needs* to focus. (The remainder of the paragraph will make it clear what this means.) The Course does not try to explain Reality (“what is beyond all error”). Jesus designed (“planned”) the Course to address people who think they live in the illusion of the world and start them moving “toward” Reality **(3:2)**. The Course, therefore, uses words. Words “are symbolic and cannot express what lies beyond symbols” **(3:3)**.

Any book will use words; there is no other way to write a book! But using words, which cannot go beyond the ego framework, limits the Course to dealing with the ego framework. Reality is beyond symbols, and as we've recently read: “Let us not forget, however, that words are but symbols of symbols. They are thus twice removed from reality” **(M-29.1:9–10 (CE))**.

Be clear about this: Words can never express Heaven or Reality, but they can move us in the direction of Reality. Our egos are going to ask a lot of questions that no one can answer. Egos are quick to doubt; our Self never does **(3:4)**. But, working in the ego framework of words, the Course gives “another answer” **(3:5)**. The word “another” implies that this has happened before. The ego keeps raising questions, and the Course answers, over and over. I think it repeats itself because we repeat the same questions. So the answer given does not try to be inventive or clever **(3:6)**; only egos do that **(3:7)**.

Anyone who has read through the entire Course has noticed that it repeats some ideas multiple times. That is because our egos are constantly raising questions, frequently the same questions cleverly rephrased to seem different. The Course does not engage in controversy; only egos do that. The Course is working with the ego's word tools but is trying to move us beyond words, beyond symbols, to the truth. The Introduction to Lessons 181–200 expands this idea:

“Words alone cannot convey the sense of liberation which their lifting brings. But the experience of freedom and of peace that comes as you give up your tight control of what you see speaks for itself. Your motivation will be so intensified

that words become of little consequence. You will be sure of what you want and what is valueless.

”And so we start our journey beyond words by concentrating first on what impedes our progress still. Experience of what exists beyond defensiveness remains beyond achievement while it is denied. It may be there, but we cannot accept its presence. So we now attempt to go past our defenses for a little while each day. No more than this is asked, because no more than this is needed. It will be enough to guarantee the rest will come.“ (W-181–200.In.2:3–3:6 (CE))

”*The course is simple*“ (3:8). The entire sentence is emphasized, which indicates it is extra-important. Our first reaction may be surprise. The Course seems anything but simple to us when we begin it and often all the way through. But if we look at the context here, it becomes clear. The Course is not inventive or ingenious; those are ”attributes of the ego“ (see 3:6–7). It has a single, unique goal (see 3:9). There are not a lot of dazzling ideas. It is single-minded, drumming away at the same thing repeatedly through all its pages. All it seeks is to lead us home to our Self and God. Its use of terms may not always be consistent, but its goal always is. Terms can never be completely consistent to everyone's satisfaction. Only the goal, the experience of Reality, can be consistent (3:10).

Paragraph 4

4 The ego will demand many answers that this course does not give. ²It does not recognize as questions the mere form of a question to which an answer is impossible. ³The ego may ask, “How did the impossible occur?,” “To what did the impossible happen?,” and may ask this in many forms. ⁴Yet there is no answer; only an experience. ⁵Seek only this, and do not let theology delay you.

My ego does not like having unanswered questions; no ego does. But the Course will not answer all our questions, as much as we wish it would. Robert Perry has shared a fabulous quotation from Houston Smith's classic book, *The World's Religions*, that shows a similar idea from Buddhism:

“Whether the world is eternal or not eternal, whether the world is finite or not, whether the soul is the same as the body or whether the soul is one thing and the body another, whether a Buddha exists after death or does not exist after death—these things,” one of [Buddha's] disciples observed, “the Lord does not explain to me. And that he does not explain them to me does not please me, it does not suit me.” There were many it did not suit. Yet despite incessant needling, he maintained his “noble silence.”

“His reason was simple. On questions of this sort, 'greed for views...tends not to edification.' His practical program was exacting, and he was not going to let his disciples be diverted from the hard road of practice into fields of profitless speculation.” (p. 95)

That expresses the same thing as the Course does here. It has one consistent goal, and it is not going to allow us to be distracted “into fields of profitless speculation.”

The Course does not even recognize some of our questions as questions! A question that cannot be answered because no answer exists is not a true question. It is a diversion, a refusal to consider the real content of what the Course is saying (4:2). I referred to questions like this a few paragraphs ago. “The ego may ask, 'How did the impossible occur?', 'To what did the impossible happen?', and may ask this in many forms.” (4:3–4). If you've been in Course study groups for any length of time, you know exactly the kind of questions I refer to and how inventive people can be in the forms they give to the same questions. Some people have rejected the Course because it refuses to address this as a valid question.

It tells us two reasons for a refusal to answer (5:4–5). First, no answer exists. Asking, “How did the separation happen?” is not a real question because separation is impossible. It cannot occur. To ask how it occurred is meaningless. By definition, it cannot be answered.

Second, the only solution to the apparent dilemma of separation is the experience of oneness (absence of separation) or Heaven. Don't struggle to find an answer to an unanswerable question. Seek the experience and only that. Don't “let theology delay you.” Trying to answer all your questions will only delay your experience of *no separation*.

Paragraph 5

5 You will notice that the emphasis on structural issues in the course is brief and early. ²Afterwards and soon, it drops away to make room for the central teachings.⁴ ³Since you have asked for clarification, however, these are some of the terms that are used.⁵

⁴ The reference to “structural issues,” as things the Course employs by necessity but does not want to emphasize, seems related to the “theological concepts” and “terms” that are discussed earlier (see paragraph 2). The phrase “structural issues” appears to refer to concepts that lay out the Course’s overall conceptual structure. This would make the “central teachings” the *contents* of that structure, the vital material that is supported and held in place by the structure. Possible structural issues covered in the early chapters of the Text include the four-tiered structure of the psyche, revelation versus miracles, knowledge versus perception, creating versus making, thought versus behavior, the concept of lack, sexuality, the authority problem, the cause of the separation, the making of the ego, the purpose of time, defense mechanisms, the Atonement, and the Holy Spirit.

⁵ According to Ken Wapnick, he and Helen drew up a list of terms for Jesus to define, “knowing full well that this glossary... would not be written in that way.” He then added “And of course it was not” (*Absence from Felicity*, 377). In the Notes, shortly after the beginning of the Epilogue to the Clarification of Terms, there is a list of terms that may be the list that he and Helen drew up. The terms listed are these: “God, Holy Spirit, Son of God, Christ–Self–Sonship, Jesus, resurrection, crucifixion, illusion, reality–creation, sin–guilt, separation—ego→self–body/Holy Spirit, Atonement—[continued next page]

What does Jesus mean by “the emphasis on structural issues? I’m not sure. My first thought was things like the nature of miracles, the discussion of spirit, mind, and body, and other terminology issues that seem to be analyzing “individual consciousness.” But I want to defer to Robert Perry, who has a broad view of the Course and a knack for such things as digging out what “structural issues” there are in the opening pages of the Course. See Robert’s footnote on this topic, Footnote 5, above.

It’s helpful to see how the earlier chapters address these concerns, but that kind of writing gives way to more practical issues concerning the ultimate goal of the Course. If you are beginning to read the Text, or to re-read it, bear this in mind as you do. If you find these early “structural” discussions difficult or boring, feel free to move past them quickly to the central teachings. Notice what the early discussion is doing, and if you wish more clarity about some of these terms and concepts, look back at the first chapter or two later. I know that I’ve found such later return to the “structural issues” to be very helpful, at least to satisfy my intellectual curiosity.

The implication is that he addresses such things for us at first in order to set the stage for what he really wants to communicate. As ego-based persons, we need some terms and concepts that he intends to use to communicate his real message. Once that has been accomplished, he soon settles down to “the central teachings” about forgiveness, relationships, and finding our way out of the ego (5:2).

Still, Ken and Helen had asked for more definition, so he agrees to explain at least a few of “the terms that are used” (5:3). That’s what we have here, and I think you will find all of these descriptions quite helpful. But don’t let them get you bogged down. Keep your eye on the goal. That seems to me to sum up the message of this Introduction. As we go on to examine some of these clarifications, bear this Introduction in mind at all times. Some of these very definitions may disturb you in some way, and you may find yourself arguing internally with them. They may seem too different, or not precise enough.

Remember: Don’t get bogged down.

salvation–[illegible word]–healing, world–time–space, Heaven, miracle–holy instant, perception–knowledge, will–wish, making–creating, vision→real world—seeing→illusions, Second Coming, Last Judgment, spirit–body–mind, [illegible word] of choice, which [or “what”] choices? specialness.”

Legend:

Light underscoring indicates emphasis that appears in the Urtext or shorthand notes.

The Text is taken from the Circle of Atonement's Complete and Annotated Edition (which I refer to as the "CE" for "Complete Edition" or "Circle Edition"). Please be aware that, even when the wording is identical to the FIP version, the division into paragraphs is often entirely different in the CE, which restores the paragraph breaks found in the original notes. This results in different reference numbering as well. I will indicate for each paragraph the corresponding sentences in the Foundation for Inner Peace (FIP) edition. You should be able to locate specific sentences in that edition if you need to, with a minimum of visual clutter in the commentary. References to quotations are from the CE unless another version is being quoted, in which case that version is indicated.

Footnotes by the commentary author are shown in this font and size. Other footnotes come from the Complete Edition itself.

Effects of Differing Editions of the Course

There were significant changes made in the CE, although for the most part there was no alteration in the meaning of the text, and the *Manual for Teachers* had far fewer changes. There are some changes in section and paragraph breaks and sentence structure that result in different numbering in references to the same text in the two editions. When there is a major difference I will indicate it with a footnote.

I have attempted for all references to add a separate FIP reference if it differs from the CE reference, but I may have missed some. If so, I apologize. Please let me know of any referencing problems you find.

I have also tried to edit my commentary so as to reflect any wording changes in the CE. For instance, the CE Text restored the plural use of "you" where the FIP had substituted the phrase "you and your brother." One such instance will illustrate the kind of change, significant in actual words but nearly identical in overall meaning:

FIP: Thus you and your brother but shared a qualified entente, in which a clause of separation was a point you both agreed to keep intact.

CE: You shared a qualified entente, in which a clause of separation was a point which you had both agreed to keep intact.