

Study Guide and Commentary

ACIM® Text, Chapter 23

The Escape from Conflict

Section III — Part 1 (Overview & III.1–3)

The Laws of Chaos

Explanation of underlining, italics and footnote formats can be found at the end of the commentary.

Overview of Section III

This section is the longest single section in the Text, apart from “The Obstacles to Peace” in Chapter 19, which is sub-divided into multiple subsections. The two sections deal with the same topic, from different perspectives: the thought system of the ego. Both sections are extremely important toward gaining an overall understanding of the Course, so we are going to devote five or more commentaries to it, and at least that many weeks in the study group.

I believe that it will be very helpful to get a summary overview of the entire section before we dive into the five “laws” that it discusses. A good half of this commentary will deal with the overview, and then we will delve into the “first chaotic law” in more detail.

Overview of the Laws of Chaos

The Five Laws of Chaos Taken Together

These are the laws that rule the world we have made:

1. The truth is different for everyone.
2. Each one *must* sin, and therefore deserves attack and death.
3. God, Who cannot be mistaken, must accept His Son’s belief in what he is, and *hate* him for it.
4. The belief that you have what you have taken; another’s loss is your gain.
5. There is a *substitute* for love.

While it may not be evident from this simple list, there is a logical progression from one law to the next. This progression is something we must attempt to understand as we work our way through the laws.

There is a deliberate oxymoron in speaking of “laws of chaos,” since chaos is complete disorder, the absence of any law. Much earlier, the Course has openly pointed out the oxymoron, and also underscores it in Workbook Lesson 53:

Laws of chaos are meaningless by definition. Creation is perfectly lawful, and the chaotic is without meaning because it is without God. (T-10.IV.4:1-2 (CE), T-10.IV.4:8-9 (FIP))

Insane thoughts are upsetting. They produce a world in which there is no order anywhere. Only chaos rules a world that represents chaotic thinking, and chaos has no laws (W-53.2:2-4).

The intent, I believe, is to show that we actually believe these are immutable *laws* that cannot be broken, a belief which results in the total chaos of this world. At the same time, the phrase shows that the author does not truly believe these are actual laws; they are connected links in a chain of insanity, distorted thinking that results in a distorted world.

Why This Section at This Juncture?

We’ve been considering, in Sections I and II, the truth about ourselves, our True Self as the image of God, a Self of which everything we see is a part. We’ve seen how a realization of Oneness makes attack or conflict impossible, because there is no “other” who can attack or be attacked, but a belief in separate selves makes peace (the absence of conflict) impossible. We’ve seen how this “battleground” state of mind obscures the memory of God.

How is it, then, that “the resting place of God” can “turn on itself and seek to overcome the One Who dwells there” (II.11:2)? What structure of thought has the ego woven that seems to *entrap* us in a consciousness of separation? “The Laws of Chaos,” I believe, is an attempt to answer that question. It involves digging deep into the unconscious thought patterns that have become a part of our every thought, the basic assumptions that underlie and govern the direction of all our thinking: the laws of chaos.

The Course’s description of the world we live in reminds me of the world of the super-popular TV series, *The Game of Thrones*, based on the books by George R. R. Martin. That world is filled with constantly warring kingdoms, all vying to conquer all the other kingdoms. It is filled with stories of vengeance, betrayal, and cruelty. This chapter has made it clear that the world we see is populated by illusions of ourselves, illusions that seem different but are really all the same. They battle with one another in the attempt to prove their illusion to be the “most real.” The result is endless conflict and chaos. What are the “rules” that govern our version of the Game of Thrones? That is the subject of our section.

Light Follows the Laws of Chaos

This long section is followed by another shorter, but still lengthy, section of 15 paragraphs: “Above the Battleground.” It is full of teaching about attack, conflict, and forgiveness. It calls for complete lack of compromise, complete freeing of the mind from the battleground of separateness. It calls for rising above these laws of chaos, recognizing them as meaningless, and abandoning ourselves completely to love, living “above the battleground.”

As you study the laws of chaos, remember that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

I point this out to make clear that these four sections of Chapter 23 are a unit. They have a beginning, a middle, and an end. They carry a single message. The closing sentence sums it all up: “Who with the love of God upholding him could find the choice of miracles or murder hard to make?”

The First Law of Chaos

We begin with a single paragraph that sets the stage for our investigation of these five “laws.” What are we doing? Why are we looking at these so-called laws? Is our purpose understanding the laws themselves, or understanding their purpose? Do we need to accept these laws, fight against them, or what?

Then, in two paragraphs, we’ll look at the first law of chaos. Although there are only two paragraphs, the implications of what they say are profound and far-reaching. I’ll attempt to make them relevant to you, and to fulfill the goals that were set in the first paragraph.

Paragraph 1

The “laws of chaos” can be brought to light, though never understood.
²Chaotic laws are hardly meaningful, and therefore out of reason’s sphere.
³Yet they appear to constitute an obstacle to reason and to truth. ⁴Let us, then, look upon them calmly, that we may look beyond them, understanding what they *are*, not what they would maintain. ⁵It is essential it be understood what they are for, because it is their purpose to make meaningless and to attack the truth. ⁶Here are the laws that rule the world you made. ⁷And yet they govern nothing and need not be broken; merely looked upon and gone beyond.

• **Study Question** •

1. **Paragraph 1** introduces this crucial section in the Course. It says that chaotic laws are not meaningful—because lawfulness and chaos are mutually exclusive (see 15:3). It says twice that we are supposed to do two things in relation to these chaotic laws. What are those two things?
 - A. Understand them; break them.
 - B. Look upon them calmly; look beyond them.
 - C. Bring them to light; realize they are meaningless.
 - D. See them; feel them (touch them, heal them).
 - E. B and C.
 - F. All of the above.

To begin with, *forget any notion of understanding these laws*. That is not the reason we are looking at them, because they can *never* be understood. We can expose them, and bring them into the light, but we cannot understand them (1:1). As we've already pointed out, "Chaotic laws are hardly meaningful" (1:2); they are "meaningless by definition." How then *could* they be understood? "They are therefore out of reason's sphere" (1:2).

These laws are meaningless. They are incomprehensible. They are insane. And yet, somehow, "they *appear* to be an obstacle to reason and to truth" (1:3). They are "the laws that rule the world you made" (1:6). Thus, despite their lack of meaning or reason, we have to look at them, to see *why* they seem to be an obstacle.

We are encouraged to "look upon them calmly" (1:4). Please bear that in mind as we proceed over the next few weeks. We've read quite recently (earlier in this commentary) that "insane thoughts are upsetting" (W-53.2:2). We must remind ourselves *not* to be upset, but to be *calm*. I fully expect that all of us will find it difficult to maintain perfect calm as we study these laws. Perhaps at first there will be resistance. As the laws are revealed you may find yourself thinking, "*Not me!* I don't believe that." Or, perhaps there will be a feeling of dismay as you begin to realize that you *do* believe these things, and that your life has been governed by them. Or you may find it upsetting because you cannot understand the laws themselves. In any case, try to remain calm.

Remaining calm is critical to being able to "look *beyond* them" (1:4). Our purpose is not understanding the laws themselves, not understanding what the laws seem to be saying, but understanding *what they are*, "what they are *for*" (1:4–5), what their *purpose* is. Understanding their purpose is "essential" (1:5).

What is that purpose? Simply put, it is "to make meaningless, and to *attack* the truth" (1:5). The "laws" of chaos have a purpose similar to disinformation in a totalitarian political regime. They are designed to attack the truth, and to make the truth seem meaningless.¹

¹ On July 6, 2017, The *Rachel Maddow Show*, a cable news show, reported that, days earlier, they had received from an anonymous source what appeared to be an official top secret NSA document containing "a bombshell," identifying a specific individual in the White House who had collaborated with the Russian

“The laws that rule the world you made.” Aren’t you curious? Haven’t we all spent a lot of time trying to figure out how the world works? Well, here’s the answer—and it isn’t pretty. But, look on them calmly, because “they govern nothing.” We do not need to fight against them or to try to break them. We simply need to be aware of them, look at them, and then leave them behind and go beyond them (1:7). We just notice their meaninglessness, and recognize them as the attack on truth that they are, and then leave them behind.

Paragraph 2

² **The first chaotic law** is that the truth is different for everyone. ³Like all these principles, this one maintains that each is separate, and has a different set of thoughts which sets him off from others. ³This principle evolves from the belief there is a hierarchy of illusions: some are more valuable and therefore true. ⁴And each establishes this for himself, and makes it true by his attack on what another values. ⁵This is justified because the values differ, and those who hold them seem to be unlike, and therefore enemies.

• Study Question •

2. *How do you think this law relates to the very popular idea of the relativity of truth—that what is true for me may be totally different from what is true for you?*
 - A. *They sound the same, but are subtly different. For even though it is true that the truth is the same for everyone (the implication of the first law of chaos), this may not be useful for people. On this level people need to believe in their basic uniqueness and follow truths that are unique to them.*
 - B. *Both are the same; both are the first law of chaos.*
 - C. *Both are the same; both are an essential part of a loving, understanding perspective. Forcing our truth upon people who have a different truth is not loving.*

The first law of chaos “is that the truth is different for everyone” (2:1). This may not seem like a particularly heinous statement. In fact, it’s quite popular these days: “Everyone has their own truth. Your truth may not be the same as my truth, but I respect your right to hold a different opinion.” Or you might hear someone say, “Well, truth is

interference in our 2016 election. It looked and read almost exactly like an official NSA document. Careful, microscopic scrutiny of the document, however, proved that it was a forgery. If the news show had taken the document at face value and reported the “scoop,” they could have quickly been discredited by having the news story revealed as based on flawed evidence. This would have made any future reporting on this subject by the show suspect. The document, then, was an attack on the truth and an effort to make the truth meaningless. That is exactly the purpose of the “laws” of chaos. They are “forged” laws, not real ones.

relative.” Have you ever said something like that, or thought it? I’d be surprised if you had not. It seems so egalitarian! But the Course considers it to be the first law of chaos.

The idea that there is an *absolute* truth is big in the the Course.

The Holy Spirit, seeing where you are but knowing you are elsewhere, begins His lesson in simplicity with the fundamental teaching that *truth* is true. ²This is the hardest lesson you will ever learn, and in the end the only one. (T-14.II.3:1-2 (CE))

The truth is true. ³Nothing else matters, nothing else is real, and everything beside it is not there. (T-14.II.4:1-3 (CE))

...truth is true and nothing else is real. ⁵There is no opposite to choose instead. ⁶There is no contradiction to the truth. (W-138.4:1-6 (CE))

Salvation is the recognition that the truth is true and nothing else is true. ²This you have heard before,² but may not yet accept both parts of it. ³Without the first the second has no meaning, but without the second is the first no longer true. ⁴Truth cannot have an opposite. ⁵This cannot be too often said and thought about. ⁶For if what is not true is true as well as what is true, then part of truth is false, and truth has lost its meaning. ⁷Nothing but the truth is true, and what is false is false. (W-152.3:1-7 (CE))

Many people have a bitter reaction to any hint that there is such a thing as “absolute truth.” To them it reeks of authoritarianism. The idea that we should appreciate the validity of others’ points of view, and acknowledge that there is value in them, gets morphed into the notion that there is no absolute truth. Ironically, that notion is, itself, taken as an absolute truth! “It is absolutely true that there is no absolute truth.” It has become a self-contained paradox. If “There is no absolute truth” is an absolutely true statement, then the statement has been proven false. But if the statement is false, there absolute truth must exist.

I do believe that all the major world religions contain the truth, in a variety of forms and language. They all grew out of the experience of one or more individuals who saw the absolute truth and began trying to live from it and express it. They also contain a lot of crud, human ideas that have latched onto the truth like barnacles on a ship, and have been mistaken by the adherents of the various religions as part of the truth. When I say there is absolute truth, this does not mean that now we can take the Course as our absolute, inerrant authority, and to demand that everyone accept it as their path to God. I do not believe that *A Course in Miracles* is the perfect, final revelation of truth. I think it is the best we’ve ever had—more truth, very little crud—but no written document can ever capture the truth completely. That is why the Course itself advises:

². T-14.II.4:2-3: “The truth is true. Nothing else matters, nothing else is real, and everything beside it is not there.” W-138.4:4: “Truth is true and nothing else is real.”

"A universal theology is impossible, but a universal experience is not only possible but necessary" (C-Int.2:5 (FIP)).

The Truth is simple what's so. It is the nature of existence. We are beings and God is being-ness. Mystics of many different religions have had a universal experience of Oneness, and that is an experience that is open to everyone, since all are a part of that Oneness. When that experience comes to a particular individual cannot be predicted, but it *will* come, eventually, because our existence as a part of the One, in union with all, is the Truth.

The ego's dictum that "the truth is different for everyone," the first law on which all the others are based, clearly assumes the fact of separation. It "maintains that each is separate and has a different set of thoughts which sets him off from others" (2:2). If we were not separate, there would be no way for the truth to be different for everyone. If we are One, there can be only one Truth because there is only one mind. These different sets of thoughts consist largely of things we value, things we count as more important than other things ("a hierarchy of illusions" (2:3). You might think of them as your *value system*.

With each person having a different set of thoughts, our value systems define our identities (they set you off from others). The way this world works is that we try to prove that our value system is better than that of other people. This is the way we validate our identity, and "prove" that we are real, true, or at least, more true than the others. We attack the values of others (2:3–4) to prove the value of our own. People are doing this all the time, sometimes in very overt ways such as marching with signs like "God hates homosexuals" or "Black lives matter," and other times in subtle ways like cleaning up the dirty dish left in the sink by your partner or turning down the heat a degree or two when they are not looking.

Now, I realize that some of these things seem like good things to do, and perhaps they are. But we can't escape the realization that, in doing this, we are bringing our value system into conflict with that of someone else. The ego uses these opportunities to reinforce itself.

Attacking the values of others can seem justified "because the values differ, and those who hold them seem to be unlike, and therefore enemies" (2:5). I believe that, in the circumstances where we find it important to stand for certain values such as racial equality, equal rights for women, or ecological consciousness, we need to do so in a way that does not demonize those who hold differing values. I think one great expression of how that might look was something I believe Mother Teresa said: "I was once asked why I don't participate in anti-war demonstrations. I said that I will never do that, but as soon as you have a pro-peace rally, I'll be there." We need to speak *for* something, not *against* something. I'm not certain this totally avoids the problem the Course has raised here, but I think it's a move in the right direction. If we can stand for something while at the same time recognizing that those who hold a different value *are not separate or different*, but are part of the One just as we are, we have at least made some progress.

The Course teaches us that bodies are illusions. Do you believe that some bodies are more valuable than others? Some skin colors are more valuable than others? Some arrangement of facial features is more valuable than others? Some set of measurements? Some size? What about social status?

So, each of us “establishes this for himself,” that is, each of us sets up our own hierarchy of values, and exalts what we consider better or higher by attacking what we consider lesser or lower (2:4). My wife had a relative who believed that having narrow feet was a sign of being high class, and she often commented on how large or wide other people’s feet were. Hers, of course, were classily narrow!

We justify this kind of behavior because everyone seems to have different values, and the people we judge and put down are not like us, nor are we like them (Thank God!); they are “other,” they are therefore enemies, and worthy subjects for our attack (2:5).

Paragraph 3

³ Think how this seems to interfere with the first principle of miracles.³ ²For this establishes degrees of *truth* among illusions, making it appear that some are harder to overcome than others. ³If it were realized that they are all the same and equally untrue, it would be easy then to understand that miracles apply to all of them. ⁴Errors of any kind can be corrected *because* they are untrue. ⁵When brought to truth instead of to each other, they merely disappear. ⁶No part of nothing can be more resistant to the truth than can another.

• Study Question •

3. *Paragraph two painted a picture in which each person is battling with others in order to make his illusions, his values, more true. This, then, assumes a hierarchy of illusions, the idea that some illusions are more true than others. Paragraph three then says that this idea conflicts with the first principle of miracles. What is the first principle of miracles and, in your own words, how does the idea of a hierarchy of illusions conflict with this first principle.*

See the footnote to remind yourself of what “the first principle of miracles” is (3:1).

It’s quite appropriate, isn’t it, that the first law of chaos would seem to interfere with the first principle of miracles. Jesus wants us to “think how” that interference happens.

The first law of chaos, that “the truth is different for everyone,” makes it reasonable to see “degrees of *truth* among illusions” (3:2). A belief that all life is valuable seems much more *true* than a belief that whole wheat bread is better than white bread. The first seems as if it *must* be universally true, and that anyone who does not believe it is a monster. But if a person prefers white over whole wheat...no big deal.

³. T-1.1:1. “The first principle of miracles is that there is no order of difficulty among them. One is not ‘harder’ or ‘bigger’ than another. They are all the same.”

Once degrees of truth among illusions is accepted, it will look to us as though some illusions (false beliefs?) “are harder to overcome than others” (3:2). But that clearly flies in the face of the first miracle principle, that there is no order of difficulty among miracles. The logic behind that first principle is that all illusions are equally untrue and therefore equally without any power. “They are all the same,” just as miracles are, because miracles really are nothing more than the undoing of illusions. “Every miracle is but the end of an illusion” (T-19.IV.6:8 (FIP), (T-19.IV.7:8 (CE)).

I doubt that any of us is free from this first law of chaos and the corresponding degree of difficulty in illusions. Think of all the ways that some of what the Course calls illusions seem greater, or more real, than others. Different kinds of sickness, for instance. Or certain acts that you, along with most of the rest of the world, consider to be truly despicable or sinful. Some problem in your life that seems to persist forever and to resist all attempts to overcome it.

Or, think of certain people you know who seem to march to a drummer *very* different from your choice of drummer. Just in general, how many of us view *everyone* as equals on the playing field of life? We just can’t seem to help looking down on certain people, can we? But this is just another manifestation of this first law of chaos, that truth is different for everyone.

Learn to recognize this law when you find it operational in your life. And then, remember that it “evolves from the belief that there is a hierarchy of illusions: some are more valuable and therefore true” (2:3). What would happen if, instead of that hierarchy of illusions, you realized “that they are all the same and equally untrue” (3:3). It would then become obvious that miracles apply to all of them!

Why can errors of all kinds be corrected with equal ease? Because they are errors and therefore *untrue* (3:4). Stop comparing one illusion to another: “This is better than that. This is more difficult than that.” If you bring an illusion to the *truth* instead of matching it up with other illusions, it will “merely disappear” (3:5). All illusions, in the end, are *nothing*. And in a classic bit of understated humor, Jesus points out the obvious: “No *part* of nothing *can* be more resistant to the truth than can another” (3:6).

Legend:

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

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 exactly the same as the FIP version, the division into paragraphs is often quite 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 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. Passages that lie outside the current section will continue to have footnoted references. 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.

Answer Key

1. E
2. B
3. Answer in your own words.