



Self and Soul: A Defense of Ideals

By Mark Edmundson

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Self and Soul: A Defense of Ideals By Mark Edmundson

In a culture that has become progressively more skeptical and materialistic, the desires of the individual self stand supreme, Mark Edmundson says. We spare little thought for the great ideals that once gave life meaning and worth. *Self and Soul* is an impassioned effort to defend the values of the Soul.

Edmundson guides readers back to the ancient sources of the three great ideals: courage, contemplation, and compassion. Homer's *Iliad* presents two contrasting versions of the heroic ideal: Achilles, who risks everything to become the greatest of warriors, and Hector, who sacrifices his life to defend his people. Plato's quest is for timeless truth: he is the prime example of the authentic thinker, concentrating the ideal of contemplation. The third great ideal, compassion, is embodied by Jesus, the Buddha, and Confucius, who taught loving kindness, forgiveness, and forbearance in a world where such qualities are difficult and sometimes dangerous to espouse.

Shakespeare and Freud are the modern world's great enemies of these ideals, Edmundson argues. Shakespeare detests chivalry and has little time for faith and philosophy. Freud sees ideals as illusions that will inevitably betray us. But between them, a new ideal arises: imaginative creation, exemplified by Blake and Shelley.

Self and Soul is, as Edmundson provocatively writes, an attempt to resurrect Soul in the modern world.

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Editorial Review

Review

There are few writers whom I turn to more eagerly than **Mark Edmundson**, one of our most perceptive voices on the subjects of teaching, learning, the humanities, and the conduct of a meaningful life. Edmundson believes, against the tide of the culture, that there is something more to existence than getting and spending (i.e., living half-awake for as long as possible), and in *Self and Soul* he shows us what that something might be. He is an idealist in an age of cynicism, a thinker in an age of surfaces. You won't regret a minute that you spend in his company. (William Deresiewicz, author of *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*)

Self and Soul is a series of secular hymns to the soul-saving idealists who shaped Western literature and spiritual philosophy—from Homer to Shakespeare and Blake, Jesus to Emerson and Freud. Let **Mark Edmundson** be your guide to these wise ones, and whether you thought you knew them well, or have scarcely made their acquaintance, you will be revived through his telling of a quest for salvation in classic texts that enshrine a trinity of ideals now under threat: courage, compassion, and contemplation. (Megan Marshall, author of *Margaret Fuller: A New American Life*)

Mark Edmundson's *Self and Soul: A Defense of Ideals* is in every way a wonderful and highly original book. (J. Hillis Miller, author of *Communities in Fiction*)

With this book **Edmundson** takes his place as one of the really remarkable contemporary cultural critics. The book, which is written with Edmundson's incredible lucidity and incisiveness, is really about its title: about what ideals mean and how they work. Ideals that inspire rather than humiliate; that intrigue rather than persecute. (Adam Phillips, author of *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored*)

Edmundson's essays are smart and to the point, and there are some very good turns, as when he lists all the positive things that come from a life devoted to contemplating the ideal...Edmundson delivers a welcome championing of humanistic ways of thinking and living. (*Kirkus Reviews* 2015-07-15)

[**Edmundson's**] bold and ambitious new book is partly a demonstration of what a 'real education' in the humanities, inspired by the goal of 'human transformation' and devoted to taking writers seriously, might look like...[It] quietly sets out to challenge many educational pieties, most of the assumptions of recent literary studies--and his own chosen lifestyle. (Mathew Reisz *Times Higher Education* 2015-09-17)

An impassioned critique of Western society, a relentless assault on contemporary complacency, shallowness, competitiveness and self-regard...Throughout *Self and Soul*, **Edmundson** writes with a Thoreau-like incisiveness and fervor...[A] powerful, heartfelt book. (Michael Dirda *Washington Post* 2015-11-25)

About the Author

Mark Edmundson is University Professor at the University of Virginia.

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