



## How Does Projection Really Work?

by Robert Perry

Projection is one of those bedrock concepts that seems to figure prominently in nearly everyone's understanding of *A Course in Miracles*. Projection crops up so frequently when we talk about the Course because it explains so much about its thought system. The Course maintains that the world we see is radically different from what's really there. What better way to explain this than by saying that what we see is our projection?

But how does projection actually work? What are we projecting? And what are we seeing that is the result of projection?

These questions have plagued me for my entire history with the Course. I think it's because "projection" carries the connotation that I am seeing specific things in the world, especially traits in certain people, that are, well, just my projection. In this view, if I see you as judgmental it's just because I'm seeing in you my own tendency to be judgmental. "You spot it, you got it," as the oft-repeated saying goes.

But this is certainly not my experience of the world. In my experience, if I see you as judgmental it is most likely because you have shown me a lot of evidence of that trait in you, evidence that most other people you know have probably also seen and would agree with me on. So the idea that I am simply making up segments of my world because of qualities in me has always struck me as unrealistic.

But if that's not how projection works, then how does it work? I really haven't been sure. What finally cleared the whole matter up for me was two studies I did of the references to projection in the Course. In looking at those references, a clear pattern emerged that reframed the concept and showed me that even if I manage to more or less accurately see the traits that others display, I'm still projecting—in *spades*. In fact, it's almost irrelevant how accurate we are in the details of what we see. It's really about something more general that we are projecting *onto* the details.

### What are we projecting?

We can explain all of the references to projection that I will share by saying that what we are projecting is what I will call the "evil will" (or "evil" will). This is the ego's will, the will that we primarily identify with at present. As suggested by the word "evil," it is a will that is driven to do harm for its own pleasure. It is a destructive will.

The Course never explicitly calls this an "evil" will. Rather, it prefers the term "alien will," which implies that it's not our true will—it doesn't represent our real desires. However, the Course is certainly not shy about using the word "evil." It speaks of our evil deeds (two refs.), evil intentions (one), evil thoughts (eight), evil dreams (fifteen), and evil self (two). Clearly, none of these terms are very far from "evil will." Of course, this evil is not *real* evil, which is why the Course often puts quotation marks around the word (and which I will do as well). But it does use the word quite liberally, to a degree that may be slightly uncomfortable for us.

That discomfort is actually why I want to use the word here, for it is our extreme discomfort with our "evil" will that impels us to project it. We can't bear the thought that a raw urge to do harm exists in us. It's as if we had a scorpion in our mouth—the immediate reflex would be to spit it out. And that's what we do with our "evil" will. As Jesus explains early in the dictation (in a line that didn't make it into the FIP edition), "Projection still has this 'hurling' connotation, because it involves hurling something you do not want, and regard as dangerous and frightening, to someone else." So what we are doing is hurling the "evil" will, which we "regard as dangerous and frightening, to someone else." We don't literally hurl it outside; it is still actually inside. We just see it *as if* it were out there. We see something internal as if it were now external. That's the essence of projection.

This simple act has a number of sweeping effects on our perception of the world. Let's look at those effects one by one.

## Others seem guilty—more so than us

The perception that other people are sinful and guilty is one of the most unshakable perceptions we have. And not only do they seem guilty, they seem *guiltier*. They've got a lot of dirt—even blood—on their hands that we simply don't have on ours. It can be very hard to shake this belief, yet it is a logical consequence of projection. If projection projects the “evil” will, then it also projects the sense of sinfulness and guilt that comes with that will, as we see in the following quotes from the Course and *The Song of Prayer*:

The ultimate purpose of projection is always to get rid of guilt. (T-13.II.1:1)

It is impossible to forgive another, for it is only your sins you see in him. You want to see them there, and not in you. (S-2.I.4:2-3)

The effect of this projection is not hard to figure out. The sin, guilt, and evil that we thought was in us now seems to reside in others. Now they are the sinful ones. And as a result, our world looks like a very dark one indeed: “And by projecting it [guilt] the world seems dark, and shrouded in your guilt” (T-13.IX.7:2). We ourselves, in contrast, look squeaky clean now, at least in our own eyes. The evil is now out there, not in here. The end result is precisely the perception we all have—that we are the innocent one surrounded by a lot of sinners.

## Others seem different from us

Most of us carry the feeling that we are different from others. Our problems are far more understandable than theirs. Their desires can seem downright bizarre. And their actions often make no sense to us at all. This appears to be just a fact of life, yet this is exactly what we would expect if projection is at play. If we have tarred everyone with the brush of our “evil” will, leaving us apparently clean and pure, then they are obviously going to seem different from us:

Yet projection will always hurt you...It is solely a device of the ego to make you feel different from your brothers and separated from them. (T-6.II.3:1, 3)

## Others seem inferior to us

If we are honest, other people do not just seem different from us; they seem *inferior* to us. True, there are ways in which they are better—maybe they can knit doilies better than we can—but those ways miss the core point that in some fundamental way we are simply better. This rather suspicious picture is another predictable result of projection. If we project onto them the worst in us, then obviously they are going to look inferior. The Course says that this sense of superiority is not just an inadvertent result; it is an intentional *goal* of projection. It is the carrot at the end of the stick:

The ego justifies this [projection] on the grounds that it makes you seem “better” than they are, thus obscuring your equality with them still further. (T-6.II.3:4)

## Others seem separate from us

It seems to be an undeniable fact that other people are separate from us. Even if we believe the Course when it tells us that they aren't, the *experience* of separateness still remains. Could this too come from projection? The perception of separateness is actually an inevitable result of projection. Think about it: We are trying to push outside of us an internal will by plastering it onto others. Won't those others also now appear to be outside of us? By hurling the “evil” will away from us and onto them, don't we naturally hurl them away from us as well? The Course makes this very point:

The ego uses projection only to destroy your perception of both yourself and your brothers. The process begins by excluding something that exists in you but which you do not want, and leads directly to excluding you from your brothers. (T-6.II.3:7-8)

We may assume that others would still seem separate from us even if we weren't projecting, but do we know that? If we stopped using them to get our garbage away from us, is it possible that they would suddenly seem very near, so near that they are not really outside at all?

## Others seem antagonistic to us

Who has not felt that the world is against them? As the Course says, “You see yourself as...at the mercy of countless attackers more powerful than you” (T-22.VI.10:6). You see yourself “in a world perceived as dangerous, with forces massed against your confidence and peace of mind.” (T-29.VIII.2:2). If we are honest, can’t we identify with these descriptions?

Strangely, this too is the logical result of projection. Remember, the “evil” will is a will to do harm. That will is pitted against others, seemingly to our benefit. Little do we know, however, that it is also pitted against us. It is bent on destroying not just the world but us as well. If we, then, project this will onto the world, what kind of world will we see?

You have become at odds with the world as you perceive it, because you think it is antagonistic to you. This is a necessary consequence of what you have done. You have projected outward what is antagonistic to what is inward, and therefore you would have to perceive it this way. That is why you must realize that your hatred is in your mind and not outside it before you can get rid of it; and why you must get rid of it before you can perceive the world as it really is. (T-12.III.7:7-10)

This important passage describes why we see a world that is against us. Our hatred (another way of talking about the “evil” will) is actually antagonistic to *us*; it is an attack on what is *really* within (“what is inward”). So imagine that you take a will inside yourself that is antagonistic to you and then project it onto the world. Now the will that is against you, that attacks you, is (seemingly) out there in the world, animating everything you look on. What kind of world will you now see? Exactly—a world that is against you.

That the world is an unsafe, hostile place seems like a truly objective fact. Yet isn’t it odd that this is exactly what we would see if we are projecting? The Course suggests that without projection it wouldn’t occur to us that the world is against us, that people are out to get us. Sure, our eyes would see bodies performing attacking behaviors, but all our minds would see is a world that is calling for our help and friendship, a world that is *giving* us a chance to help.

## Others seem to be taking things from us

Loss is such a central part of the human condition. We are constantly trying to protect ourselves against things being taken from us—from our wallets to our very lives—often by other people. One of the Course’s most interesting, and most repeated, teachings about projection is that this experience of loss is another illusion conjured by the magic of projection.

Attack [from others] could never promote attack [by you] unless you perceived it as a means of depriving you of something you want. Yet you cannot lose anything unless you do not value it, and therefore do not want it. This makes you feel deprived of it, and by projecting your own rejection you then believe that others are taking it from you. You must be fearful if you believe that your brother is attacking you to tear the Kingdom of Heaven from you. This is the ultimate basis for all the ego’s projection. (T-7.VII.8:1-5)

This is perfectly logical, is it not? The “evil” will throws away the intangible things we really want—like joy, innocence, and joining—because it doesn’t value them. Then we project this will onto another, and now rather than an internal will throwing things away, we see an external will *taking* things away. The Course reiterates this principle later on: “Projection of the cause of sacrifice [the cause of our loss] is at the root of everything perceived to be unfair and not your just deserts” (T-26.X.3:4). So we cause our own loss, but then we project that cause outward, so now it appears to us that loss has been unfairly thrust upon us by other people.

The above passage applies this to the biggest loss of all: the loss of God. And isn’t it true that we blame this loss on others? “You took my peace away,” “You took my love away,” “You took my safety away” are all ways of saying “You took God away.” Could it be, then, that none of that is true? What if no one can actually take anything real away from us? What if the following is a literal description of what really happens?

Projection always sees your will in others. If you will to separate yourself from God, that is what you will think others are doing to you. (T-7.VII.9:4-5, original wording)

## Others seem to cause our attacks and our ego in general

We all do unloving things, there is no getting around it. Or is there? Perhaps we can't deny the thing we did, but we can deny responsibility for it. We can claim that we were provoked, that we had no choice, that we were perfectly justified. We can, in other words, see the other person as the cause of our own behavior. The Course caricatures this familiar dodge: "Thus do the guilty ones protest their 'innocence.' Were they not forced into this foul attack by the unscrupulous behavior of the enemy, they would respond with only kindness" (T-23.II.10:2-3).

Obviously, we are dealing with projection again. Remember the passage quoted above: "Projection always sees your will in others." If you attack, that attack was caused by your own "evil" will. Yet projection then sees this will in others. Now it appears to be outside you, causing your attack from a position outside yourself, seemingly doing from without what it is really doing from within. Because other people, not you, are now responsible for your attack, the attack itself seems excusable, innocent, even righteous. That is why the Course says that "projection is always a means of justifying attack" (T-6.II.3:5). Just project onto your brother responsibility for your bad behavior and presto! your behavior was justified.

The Course extends this principle even further, saying that we blame others not just for specific errors, but for our entire belief in the ego. Now that nasty ego that poisons our relationships and wraps chains around our minds is *their* fault, not ours. In the following passage, Jesus urges us to withdraw this projection:

Do not project the responsibility for your belief in it [the ego] onto anyone else, or you will preserve the belief. When you are willing to accept sole responsibility for the ego's existence you will have laid aside all anger and all attack, because they come from an attempt to project responsibility for your own errors. (T-7. VIII.5:3-4)

## Projection: the cause of our whole perception of self and world

Now we can step back and survey all that projection has wrought. The overall result is truly staggering. It goes way, way beyond projecting specific traits onto others. The end result of projection is the "reality" in which we see ourselves as living.

We can now see that projection is not really about me seeing some specific trait in you that is really in me, even though that can and does happen. The projection we have been looking at can operate perfectly well even if I see your traits with pinpoint accuracy, uninfluenced by any traits in me. Projection primarily operates on the level of the *meaning* I assign your traits.

For instance, if you display the trait of being judgmental, projection will assign to it the meaning that this trait in you is sinful, that it makes you different from me, inferior to me, and apart from me, and that this trait in you has power over me: it attacks me, takes things from me, and causes me to attack in return—none of which is actually true. It's as if I am drawing a portrait of you—even if I get the outlines more or less in proportion, projection will still come in and color in those outlines with the colors of evil. Thus, even though projection surely influences and distorts the *form* of what we see, its real result is to put in place the *meaning* that we see.

That meaning, even though I have presented it in terms of many categories, really divides neatly into two. First, we see our "evil" will as *existing* out there in others, making them seem sinful, different, inferior, and separate. Second, we see our "evil" will apparently *acting on us* from its place out there, "making" us feel attacked and taken from, and "forcing" us to attack in return. All of these things are really being caused in us from within, but projection gives us the illusion that their cause lies without. This principle of something in us that we cause but then attribute to outside causation may sound somewhat unfamiliar, but we can see examples of it everywhere in our lives. Who of us hasn't showed up late because we lacked the motivation to get there on time, but then gave all kinds of outer circumstances as the real reason for our lateness?

Based on these two categories, the scope of projection's effects is breathtaking. Projection is responsible for the untrustworthy, dangerous, sinful will we see lurking to one degree or another in everyone out there. It is also responsible for our experience that all those vicious wills exert power over us—wounding us, depriving us, and making us act against our better intentions. And it doesn't stop there, for projection has seemingly purged us of this "evil" will, so that we now see a world in which evil lurks everywhere *except* in us.

Isn't this our macro-perception of both self and world? We all to some degree perceive life through the lens of good self versus bad world. In this story we are the good guy making our way through a dark world, surrounded by sinful people out to take advantage of us. Yes, we attack at times, but only when our back is up against the wall. The Course

wryly captures this self-serving perception in its description of the face of innocence:

It is this face that smiles and charms and even seems to love. It searches for companions and it looks, at times with pity, on the suffering, and sometimes offers solace. It believes that it is good within an evil world.

This aspect can grow angry, for the world is wicked and unable to provide the love and shelter innocence deserves. And so this face is often wet with tears at the injustices the world accords to those who would be generous and good. This aspect never makes the first attack. But every day a hundred little things make small assaults upon its innocence, provoking it to irritation, and at last to open insult and abuse.

The face of innocence the concept of the self so proudly wears can tolerate attack in self-defense, for is it not a well-known fact the world deals harshly with defenseless innocence? (T-31.V.2:7-4:1)

In my experience, everyone relates to this passage. Everyone feels described by it so personally that it's almost as if Jesus is a mind-reader. This story of a good self beset by an evil world is to some degree everyone's story.

And yet we have seen that every single element of this story just happens to be a logical and unavoidable result of projection. If we are using projection, we would absolutely expect to see a world in which:

- others seem guilty—more so than us
- others seem different from us
- others seem inferior to us
- others seem separate from us
- others seem antagonistic to us
- others seem to be taking things from us
- others seem to cause our attacks and our ego in general

Every one of these things is exactly how we would see the world if we have an “evil” will inside and hurl it outside of us onto the world, where we see it both existing and acting on us.

Could projection, then, be the cause of our core story of good self in a bad world? It would certainly explain why everyone thinks he or she is the good guy even though that is logically impossible—who would then constitute the “evil world”? Yet to really consider that projection has conjured up our entire perception of reality, we have to be genuinely open to the idea that that “evil” will is really there in us. We have to be willing to consider that we have taken in a will that so horrifies us that we have a visceral need to expel it from within us, just as when the body senses something harmful in the stomach and expels it through the powerful reflex of vomiting. Can we consider the possibility that the world we see is the result of us “vomiting” our ego's will onto everything around us?

Pondering that may not sound exactly pleasant, but the payoff of withdrawing projection is considerable. Who really enjoys being the lone good guy in a bad world? You do get to feel righteous, but what you don't get to feel is happy. If the world we see is the result of projection, then we are seeing a world that exists only in our imagination, and the real world is actually a whole different place. Don't we want to know what the world really looks like? Could it not be immeasurably brighter than the one we have been seeing? Might it not be that without projection, the people in our lives would look more beautiful than we ever imagined? The Course offers this motivation for seeing the world free of projection:

How safe the world will look to me when I can see it! It will not look anything like what I imagine I see now. Everyone and everything I see will lean toward me to bless me. I will recognize in everyone my dearest Friend. What could there be to fear in a world that I have forgiven, and that has forgiven me? (W-pI.60.3:2-6)

If this is the world that awaits us, how could we not want to give up projection?



E-mail your comments to the author at: [robert@circleofa.org](mailto:robert@circleofa.org)

**Robert Perry.** He is the author or co-author of over twenty books and booklets, including *Path of Light: Stepping into Peace with 'A Course in Miracles'*.