

Reader Discussion Questions for

*Escaping Maya's Palace: Decoding an Ancient Myth to Heal the
Hidden Madness of Modern Civilization* (Karavelle Press, 2022)

by Richard Sclove

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Please feel free to suggest modified or additional questions using the [Contact form](http://www.EscapingMayasPalace.com) at
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OVERARCHING QUESTIONS

Why does Sclove begin his investigation of modern civilization by delving beneath the surface of an ancient myth?

Why was Yudhishtira's behavior during the dice match so compelling to Sclove? How was it an aberration from his usual character?

Reflect on the times of exile to the forest for the Pandava brothers and their wife. Were they times of despair? Did anything positive happen during these exiles?

How does Sclove use the concept of "Maya's Palace" as a metaphor throughout the book? What does it represent and how does it relate to the book's broader themes? What does Sclove mean by the phrase "escaping Maya's Palace" as applied to the modern world?

What is Sclove's *overall thesis* about modern civilization? (Hint: see the summaries in Chaps. 1 and 15)

What is the essence of his *argument in defense* of that thesis? (Hint: see Chaps. 8 – 9, 12)

What is the "hidden madness of modern civilization"? Why does Sclove describe this as insanity? (See Chaps. 1 and 15)

Why does Sclove believe that exposing the madness increases the odds of curing it (see Chap. 15)? What would a "cure" look like? Are you optimistic or pessimistic that the madness can be cured? Why or why not?

Why has our advanced scientific civilization failed to detect its own insanity? (See Chaps. 11 – 12)

What does Sclove mean by a “post-egoic perspective”? Why might a post-egoic perspective be helpful for understanding society? Why is academia typically hostile to adopting a post-egoic perspective as a research tool? How might academia change if the Taboo were overturned?

Can one have both material wealth and psychospiritual well-being? If yes, are there conditions and limits?

After finishing the book, do you think differently about consumerism in general? About your own consumption?

Has the book influenced how you think about: Mental and physical health? Social problems? Politics? The economy? The nature of work? The organization of family life? Religious life or spiritual practice? Modern world history? Your own involvement in social change activities?

What notable cases do you know about in the world today that are moving towards recovering sanity? Why do these examples stand out for you?

If the intensity of people’s ego-identification – and with it their insatiability – were to diminish, do you think that would that eliminate the motivation to innovate and create? Why or why not?

Sclove’s argument has a spiritual component. Could an atheist nonetheless find it of interest? (See Chap. 14 – 15)

What are some lingering questions or ambiguities that Sclove leaves open for further exploration?

DETAILED CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER QUESTIONS (for those who really want to dig into the argument)

Note: For every question about what author Richard Sclove believes or argues, feel free to ask yourself whether you agree or disagree and why.

Chapter 1 – Seeing Earth from Venus: *Suffering, stunting, and mortal threats in modern civilization*

Why does Sclove choose to begin his critique of modern civilization by first exploring an ancient myth?

Sclove sees a similarity between Yudhishtira’s momentary gambling addiction and everyday modern behavior. Do you agree?

Chapter 2 – The War Within: *The Mahabharata as psychospiritual allegory*

How is the *Bhagavad Gita*'s surface story different from its symbolic or allegorical meaning?

How does Sclove define the words "ego" and "soul"?

What does Sclove mean by "ego-transcendence"? Using this definition, how is being awed by a magnificent sunset different from ego-transcendence?

What does "transpersonal" mean?

How is "psychological" development different from "psychospiritual" development?

What does Sclove mean by the "post-egoic developmental range"?

Chapter 3 – The Story Beneath the Story: An epic secretly patterned on stages of psychospiritual development

What is the difference between the *Mahabharata*'s "Apart" and "Together" stages?

Does it make sense to portray the *Mahabharata*'s structure as an ascending spiral (Figure 1)? Why or why not?

Why does Sclove later elaborate the spiral into a double helix (Figure 3) and then add a vertical column running up the center (Figure 4)?

Chapter 4 – The Palace of Illusion: An escape from psychological stunting

Upon being challenged to a dice match, why does Yudhishtira say that he is obligated to gamble?

Later, during the Pandavas' exile to the forest, how does Yudhishtira account for his agreement to gamble and for continuing to gamble even as his losses mounted? Why does Yudhishtira change his explanation from what he said at the time of the dice match?

Why does Sclove say that Yudhishtira's sovereignty while living in Maya's Palace is an illusion?

Why does Sclove conclude that, despite what they think at the time, the Pandavas exile is beneficial to them?

Chapter 5: Maya's Arts of Deception: How is the stunting camouflaged?

What does the term "ego-sovereignty" mean?

In what ways is egoic psychology self-deceiving? How does this serve the ego's purposes? How is this self-deception contrary to psychospiritual growth?

Why does Sclove conclude that, during his time living in Maya's Palace, Yudhishtira's ego-identification is becoming *more intense*?

Why can't the Pandavas see that Yudhishtira's sovereignty is an illusion, that Maya's Palace is a trap, and that exile is, after all, a good thing?

What can the famous story of "The Emperor's New Clothes" teach us about egoic psychology?

How is the lesson conveyed by the *Mahabharata*'s story about arrogant King Shishupala different from that conveyed by "The Emperor's New Clothes"?

Why does Sclove suggest that the *Mahabharata*'s "nested" (i.e., stories-within-stories) narrative structure encodes a "stage theory of knowledge"?

Modern *Mahabharata* readers and scholars have—just like the Pandavas—never concluded that Yudhishtira's sovereignty is illusory and that exile is beneficial to the Pandavas. Does this suggest anything about modern psychology? (See "Maya's Modern Palace?" at the end of Chap. 5)

Chapter 6: A Procession of Addicts: Why are so many of us addicted, anxious, or depressed?

Why does Sclove begin his investigation of modernity by exploring the causes of addiction?

What social circumstances contribute to causing addiction as well as many other mental disorders, such as depression and anxiety?

What are some ways that various mental illnesses contribute to causing physical illness like cancer, heart disease, or diabetes?

In what sense do all the mental illnesses that Sclove mentions represent disorders in psychological development?

According to the discussion in Chap. 6, why might one begin to suspect that the developmental disorder in question might involve intense ego-identification?

Chapter 7 – Uninterrupted Disturbance: Modes of dislocation

Previous civilizations all experienced dislocation from events such as wars, plagues, floods? How is modern social dislocation different?

How would you explain the difference between the device paradigm and integrative practices to a ten-year-old child? How does the device paradigm show up in your daily life? Can you think of examples of integrative practices in your own life?

Are devices more efficient than integrative practices? Please explain your answer.

How does the device paradigm complement the disruptiveness of capitalism in driving social dislocation?

Why did the Soviet psychologist A. S. Luria answer the “saw, hammer, axe, log” question differently than his peasant test subjects?

Chapter 8 – The Wants of Mankind: *The social history of insatiability*

“Colonial empires were built on the foundation of drug trades” (p. 95). What were those “drugs”? How were they produced?

How did the emergence of global capitalism in the 16th and 17th century contribute to the increased incidence of addictive cravings in northwest Europe?

How does Sclove use the increased production of addictive substances – such as tobacco, coffee, tea, alcohol and sugar – in the early modern era to explain the emergence of mass consumer insatiability?

Is there a historic link between the north Atlantic slave trade and insatiable consumption? What is it? When and why did it begin?

How is “functional satiability” different from “insatiability”?

How does Sclove build the case that mass consumer insatiability is a symptom of a distortion in psychological development?

Do you think that commercial advertising contributes to turning modern people into insatiable consumers?

Chap. 9 – Maya’s Modern Architecture: *Summarizing our theory thus far*

Why does Sclove say that insatiability is “essential” to capitalism in a way that addiction is not?

Are there ways in which insatiability is socially harmful? Are there ways in which it is socially beneficial?

If mass insatiability is a product of historical social forces, does this have implications for how we assess the virtues and drawbacks of capitalism?

What is the “conventional formulation” of Sclove's developmental-disruption theory of modernity? What is the “transpersonal formulation”?

Why did Karl Polanyi see “excessive” dislocation as a challenge to capitalism? Why does Sclove believe that “insufficient” social dislocation is also challenge? (See also Fig. 16 in Chap. 14)

In what respect is capitalism a perpetual growth-and-motion machine? Is this a good or a bad thing?

Chapter 10 – In the Sweetness of Our Repose: *Objections and refinements*

How did American Indians’ views of colonial consumerism compare with colonists’ views of American Indian lifeways?

According to the Sclove, both supporters and critics of capitalism share a common blind spot in understanding capitalism. What is it?

How can duress and insatiability operate simultaneously in a single person?

How does Trobriand industriousness differ from that of modern people?

Chapter 11 – A Butterfly Dreaming: *How is the distortion of psychological development concealed?*

What are some of the beliefs that have contributed to our longstanding failure to detect the role of dislocation in stabilizing intense egoism? Can you think of any other beliefs, besides those discussed by Sclove, that contribute to this failure?

Why does Sclove believe that intense egoism explains *why* people believe these things?

How does mainstream economic theory contribute to camouflaging the role of capitalism in intensifying ego-identification and causing insatiability?

Why does Sclove say that Adam Smith’s “Invisible Hand” is really an “Invisible Sleight of Hand”?

Why is academia typically hostile to adopting psychological insights lifted from spirituality as research tools?

In what sense did Karl Marx – history’s most influential critic of capitalism – also contribute to perpetuating capitalism?

Chapter 12 – When the Need for Illusion Is Deep: *The ego/world system*

Why does Sclove title this chapter “When the Need for Illusion is Deep”?

How can modern people be “contentedly discontent”? Can you think of examples in your own life or in the lives of people you know?

Chapter 9 characterizes global capitalism as the “engine of malady and discontent.” Chapter 12 concludes that capitalism “depends on frustrating psychospiritual development.” How do these two perspectives differ? Can both be true?

How is it possible that nomadic hunter-gatherers can feel materially more secure than modern multimillionaires?

How does developmental arrest in strong ego-identification contribute to mental and physical illnesses? (See Figure 12)

Why is Gross Domestic Product (GDP) problematic as a measure of well-being?

What is the “ego/world system”?

Chapter 13 – Maya’s Global Empire: *Charting ego-sovereignty through history and across cultures*

How do hierarchical organizations contribute to intensifying ego-identification?

How did Emile Durkheim’s understanding of insatiability differ from Sclove’s? Which do you find more compelling? Why? (See Chapters 10 and 13)

When did the device paradigm emerge in U.S. history? How did it complement dislocation in stabilizing consumer insatiability?

Why might nomadic hunter-gatherers, such as the southern African Ju/’hoansi people, have easier access to the post-egoic developmental range than modern people?

How did addictive substances support modern British economic productivity while subverting Chinese productivity?

Do you believe that there were previous civilizations that exhibited mass insatiability and addiction? If the answer is yes, how might that bear on Sclove’s critique of modern civilization?

How, throughout Part 1 does Sclove gradually establish the superiority of the transpersonal formulation over the conventional version of his theory of modernity? (Hint: see “Modern Developmental Distortion in Transpersonal Terms” in Chap. 9, the first section of Chap. 12, and “Egoic Cultural Concurrences in Early Modern Europe” in Chap. 13)

Chapter 14: Perils of Planet Ego: *Egoism and the human prospect*

How does intense egoism contribute to climate change, the rise of authoritarian populism, and other contemporary macrochallenges?

How does it come about that certain actions proposed by progressive social activists are accidentally promising for damping down the intensity of ego-identification?

Can certain actions and policies proposed by conservatives also be favorable to this objective?

Can you think of any progressive policy recommendations that might inadvertently contribute to intensifying ego-identification?

Why, according to Sclove, are both politically conservative and liberal policies less often promising for damping down intense egoism than progressive policy preferences? Do you agree or disagree with his analysis?

Chapter 15 – Now We Know It: *Our theory in its complete form*

What is the hidden madness of modern civilization? Why and how is it hidden?

Do you believe that exposing the madness can help make it possible to cure it? What are some reasons to think it can? What are some reasons to think it can't?

Can you think of recent circumstances that are favorable or unfavorable to making it possible to cure the madness?

Chap. 16 – Learning to Heal: *A strategy for evolving soul-friendly structural ecologies*

What overall ethical principle informs Sclove's proposed action program for curing the madness of modern civilization?

What does Sclove mean by a “low-cost, low-risk trial-and-error learning strategy”? What are the advantages of such an approach to “escaping Maya’s Palace”?

What does Sclove mean by “shared causes and convergent remedies”? Why are these concepts central to his proposed strategy for extricating modern civilization from Maya’s Palace and all its accompanying ills?

Under what circumstances might people who are strongly ego-identified act in a soul-friendly way? (See the “Modern Implications” section of Chap. 13 and the “Bootstrapping” section of Chap. 16)

How can building local economic self-reliance contribute to softening ego-identification?

From the standpoint of softening ego-identification, how is local community-owned renewable-energy production different from deploying large arrays of solar photovoltaic panels in the southwest U.S. desert and distributing the electricity via a nationwide electrical grid?

What are some social movements or organizations that are – even if only inadvertently – already helping to establish a soul-friendly ecology of social forces and structures?

Why do you think that there are already progressive groups working to reduce social dislocation, hierarchy, inequality, and injustice but relatively few that are striving to redress technological dis-integration? Can you think of any examples of groups or organizations that are challenging the device paradigm? If yes, what motivates them?

Chap. 17 – Making Civilization Safe for the Soul: *Nonlocal action steps and concluding reflections*

Why does Sclove begin his action recommendations by focusing on actions that can be taken at the local level (as in Chap. 16)? Why are macro-level actions also needed in the long run (Chap. 17)?

What does Sclove mean by “making civilization safe for the soul”?

What is a soul-friendly structural ecology? (Chaps. 16 and 17)

How can you contribute toward helping our society escape from Maya’s Palace?

Chap. 18 – A Dog at Heaven’s Gate: *The Pandavas’ journey to wholeness*

Why do myths such as the Mahabharata conceal part of their meaning beneath their surface stories? Why don’t they just state directly all that they want to convey?

Do you think the Mahabharata's authors were consciously aware of their story's subsurface dimensions? Why do you think that they were or were not?

What is most striking about the story of Yudhishtira and the dog?

Bonus Question: Why does *Escaping Maya’s Palace* have eighteen chapters?