

The most serious threat to humanity today is not nuclear war, or global warming or a rogue asteroid with an inconvenient orbit. The greatest danger is the collective identity or, rather, the collective ego – a symptom of our inability, or unwillingness, to think or be responsible for ourselves.

CONSCIOUSNESS

Our evolutionary ancestors most likely began their existence very much as infants begin their lives, unable to distinguish between themselves and their surroundings. At some point in our evolution, our brains reached a size and level of complexity that enabled consciousness, the mental activity that permits us to distinguish ourselves from the environment – and from each other. “Rational” thought developed and the “self” emerged. Each of us became an individual “I.” The expansion of the self spawned an awareness of separateness.

The ego arose as a defense mechanism to protect the self as a separate entity, thereby strengthening our sense of specialness, and serving as a nearly impenetrable guardian, a barrier between artificially created separation and the oneness of primal nature. The ego obscures reality, prevents the abandonment of the self and perpetuates the illusion that we are separate beings distinct from everything and everyone else. It is the ego that makes us special in our own minds.

Our need to protect our “selves” led us to differentiate and separate each manifestation of nature, and to designate them with labels to enforce their contrived boundaries. We created, and continue to create, a dichotomy of opposites, ignorant of the reality that the things that we consider to be opposites are simply varying degrees of the same quality. Birth and death are two sides of the same coin. You can’t have one without the other. Ugliness would not exist without beauty. We created a dualism, dividing everything that we could perceive into a polarity of component parts. This dichotomy is the basis for all prejudice. Things that we perceive to be like us are considered “good.” Things that we perceive as different from us, as “other,” we consider to be “bad” or, at least, “not as good.”

While naming all the distinct manifestations that we observe may be necessary for practical purposes, promoting further differences invites conflict, and is destructive of the oneness inherent in nature. Voluntary cooperation is natural when differences are no longer perceived.

Rational thought is both a blessing and a curse, providing the impetus and capability for us to change and control our environment, but also primarily responsible for obscuring the interconnections of nature and keeping us divided.

THE COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Despite our newfound separateness we found it necessary to join together for survival – against threats from the environment, from predators and from each other. Thus, the collective identity was born. We formed groups that are naturally linked together through shared creation, called families. Then we formed larger and larger associations: tribes, communities, ethnic groups, and nations. Today, these collective identities thrive.

You remember all we were told about the torture-chambers, the fire and brimstone, the “burning marl.” Old wives’ tales! There’s no need for red-hot poker. Hell is – other people!

– Jean Paul Sartre
No Exit

Collective identities are alluring because they insulate us from those “others” that we perceive to be different – and threatening – and thereby provide us with a level of comfort. While being part of a group gives us feelings of security, because we are convinced that the group will protect its own, it also provides us with self-importance and self-worth.

To protect itself, however, the collective identity has evolved and developed a collective ego that functions as a defense mechanism similar to the way the individual ego protects the self. The collective ego encourages loyalty from its membership through the two greatest products of the illusion of separateness: fear and superiority. All collective identities maintain membership through fear and perpetuate their existence through the illusion of superiority. In this way, collective identities promote division and disharmony.

Collective forces attempt to direct our lives from the very beginning of our existence. Adherence to blind rules begins early in life as we are inculcated into the religious faiths, political doctrines, and societal norms of our parents. Blind loyalty to these views continues later, through automaticity, as many of us never question the rationale behind “our beliefs,” and is reinforced as we seek associations with other collective identities that are congruent with our inherited views. The beliefs of our parents become our beliefs. The ideas of our peers become our ideas. The platforms of political or activist groups become our platform. The goals of society become our goals. Without the application of any critical thinking to our belief system, many of us continue well into adulthood, if not our entire lives, without questioning these beliefs and ideas to determine whether they are truly what we believe, or whether they have been handed down to us by our genes, or our parents, or our society, or by what Carl Gustav Jung called “the collective unconscious.”

In modern times, the family, a peer group, and the community still serve an important and necessary role in nurturing us and providing for our security. Such affiliations will always exist. They influence our values and goals, fill important emotional needs and, to some extent, enhance our cognitive skills. Modern brain science theorizes that the need to belong is part of what makes us human, and a feeling of belonging is essential to our survival. Social needs act to counterbalance a sense of alienation from the rest of the world, and a feeling of anonymity that would otherwise frustrate our lives.

But as our connections to *collective* identities strengthen, we lose control of our *personal* identity. The beliefs, the standards, the norms, the likes and dislikes, the

prejudices and biases of the group become ours. We stop thinking for ourselves. We may stop thinking altogether and mistake our chaotic mind activity for actual thought.

Our beliefs come from the collective beliefs; our standards and norms are dictated by the collective. As members of the group we judge ourselves according to the collective criteria.

The danger of collective identities however, is the subordination of the individual for the good of the group. Since collective identities have, by their very nature, separated themselves as subgroups of humanity, have placed themselves in conflict with other collective identities, can only survive if there are perceived “external” threats, they cannot facilitate a contribution by the individual toward the good of the whole. Individual contributions can only be used for the benefit of the subgroup. Collective identities are a powerful force that keep us from realizing the fundamental reality of interconnectedness.

The collective identity has become such an ingrained part of our culture that, when meeting someone for the first time, we immediately try to classify that person according to our schema of collective identities. We assume that he or she must be a democrat or a republican, a liberal or a conservative, a Christian or an atheist. We are suspicious of people who proclaim to be independent voters or have no official religious affiliation and are skeptical of their motives. All of this is a sort of interpersonal shorthand. By considering the person’s collective affiliations, we can decide if we like them without investing the time to actually get to know them.

Collective identities separate us and mask our natural connectedness. We allow organized systems to control our society, the media to control our minds, and technology to control our lives in general. As technology advances, our self-reliance declines. As we allow technology to invade deeper into our lives, we also permit those in control of that technology to more closely control us. Our need to belong increases, both psychologically and physiologically.

DESPAIR

The collective ego imperils us as individuals if we permit the standards of the group to become our own standards without any critical evaluation as to whether they are congruent with our personal values, or even relevant to our individual lives. We begin to accept the beliefs of the group as absolute truth. We judge ourselves against the norms of the group and either find ourselves lacking, or lose our individuality in the process. Our personal goals become subordinated to those of the larger segment. The collective ego replaces personal responsibility: the responsibility not only for our own actions, but for our own thoughts as well.

There is a limit to the legitimate interference of collective opinion with individual independence; and to find that limit, and maintain it against encroachment, is as indispensable to a good condition of human affairs as protection against political despotism.

– John Stuart Mill

Cultivated people seek from themselves; small people seek from others.

– Confucius

Because the collective ego does our thinking and directs our actions for us, at some point in our lives most of us experience an underlying feeling of malaise, of non-fulfillment. One day – if we are lucky – we examine this feeling and realize that we seem small and unimportant, as though our very existence is irrelevant. Once, we felt we were the center of the universe. But there comes a time when we realize that our absence, though it may be momentarily lamented, will not mean much in the grand scheme of human affairs now, or in history. The greatest fear in our daily affairs with the collective ego is rejection, and it is acceptance we seek by becoming a recognized member of the collective. But our primal fear as individuals is that of being forgotten, of not being “special.” And then we despair.

There is not one single living being who does not despair a little, who does not secretly harbor an unrest, an inner strife, a disharmony, an anxiety about an unknown something he does not know or even dare to try to know, an anxiety about some possibility in existence or an anxiety about himself.

– Soren Kierkegaard

From time to time, most of us sense a general uneasiness, an inner unrest. We realize that there is something that we would like to change about ourselves – perhaps something big, perhaps something small. Some ignore this yearning, but most make a few cosmetic, surface changes and return to their usual lives. A fortunate few, either as a result of a personal crisis, or because a lifetime of chasing and achieving success has not resulted in the inner peace and happiness that was expected, take the time to stop and examine their reasons for wanting change and discover something much more significant, something usually hidden. Most of us sleepwalk through life, busying ourselves with the mundane, distracting ourselves with the quest for success, unaware that we are in the midst of despair.

Most of us despair, though only a relatively few know it. To the extent that we realize it, despair is a good thing. It is “the self’s longing to be itself.” Despair is like pain; it is a sign that something is not right. Without pain, many of us could suffer harm, but we do not like pain. We avoid it. It makes us uncomfortable and interrupts our fantasy that everything is perfect. But everything is not perfect, and despair tells us so.

Some ignore their despair and live, as Thoreau noted, “lives of quiet desperation.” They re-immense themselves in worldly affairs, pursuing society’s goals. Or they escape into the mindless diversions produced by the media, or the ever-quickening pace of technology that provides constant connectivity and artificial connectedness. Some escape into drugs, alcohol or self-destructive activities. Others surrender – a complete surrender to hope – a total abdication of personal responsibility for one’s life.

Our greatest fear is not rejection, it is annihilation. And more than acceptance, we seek affirmation of our importance. Our fear is that we are unimportant and that our lives will be meaningless. This fear manifests into a need to belong, a need for acceptance by others, and we come to depend on others to validate our self-worth. Such validation is unreliable though, and basically unsatisfying, because it fails to address the root cause of our malaise. We ignore the reality that all happiness, and all feelings of self-esteem come from within. We seek validation from others as a confirmation of our self-worth but not everyone will validate us, nor will others continue to validate us once they initially do so.

Despair is the absence of hope, and hope is one of the most negative and destructive of all feelings. Hope implies that anything beneficial that can happen to us is entirely outside of our control. Hope convinces us that for anything good to come about, it must arise from external circumstances. Hope implies that we are powerless. Despair tells us that we are in control. Something is wrong; otherwise, we would not despair. Whatever we've done, we haven't done enough, or we've done too much, or we've been doing the wrong thing. But *we* are responsible, not our genes, nor our parents, nor our social conditioning. We are responsible, we are in charge of our lives, and despair tells us that it is time to change course.

Kierkegaard wrote that "every human being is destined to become himself." When we realize that we have not fulfilled this destiny, we despair. Such despair is universal. Such despair cannot be eliminated through the herd mentality perpetuated by the collective identity.

THE MEANING OF LIFE

The same influence that underlies our mental separation from the rest of creation and causes our despair is the one that pushes us to find meaning in the events which brought us here. One byproduct of the evolution of our consciousness is our incessant need to know, to explain every phenomenon. The most obsessive search for an explanation is the need to endow our appearance on this planet with a special significance in order to reinforce our separateness, validate our specialness, and provide us with an implicit meaning to life. This is the nuisance of possessing rational thought. Rational thought has propelled us forward unlike any species before, but it has also given us a nearly insatiable curiosity.

Shall we reject the notion that we are a result of natural processes in favor of the belief that we are special creatures with a divine purpose? Is there a meaning in the seemingly random and chaotic sequence of events that has deposited us on this planet? Did everything happen for a reason, according to some greater plan that may, someday, be revealed to us?

Or, should we acknowledge that there is no inherent meaning to life that we can discover? Should we admit that there is no implicit significance to our existence other than our being the latest development in a history of cosmic energy that spans eons? Are we a small step on a very large ladder of evolution?

Perhaps it would be better to avoid the argument altogether. Then we can stop spending our short lives running around seeking proofs of our significance, and stop wasting precious time bemoaning the fragility of our lives. Then we can stop wasting time trying to comfort ourselves with metaphysical speculation, and accept the fact that we are here – *now*. We are the dominant species – *at the moment*. We are the first species capable of rational thought. We are the first species with the ability to alter our environment and direct our future.

Will we squander this opportunity and passively succumb to the evolutionary process, terminating ourselves as an unremarkable strain of microbe on planet Earth, leaving more advanced species to discover our fossils? Or will we take an active role in directing our own future, become a critical link in our own evolution, and ensure not

only our survival on this planet now, but our advancement as a species in the future as well?

Perhaps we will never find the meaning of life, because one does not exist. Bemoaning our fate and wallowing in despair will only squander the precious opportunity that each of us possesses. Happiness and success are right here, right now. We will not find them by chasing after some elusive meaning of life, but by discovering our individual meaning, our unique contribution that uses our particular skills and abilities for the benefit of the greater whole.

So hard to find such ease
and wealth whereby to
render meaningful this
human birth! If now I fail
to turn it to my profit,
how could such a chance
be mine again?

– Shantideva

The fortunate individual uses despair to change course. Each of us is a unique part of the whole, with distinct skills and abilities. By failing to fulfill our special role, and make our unique contribution for the betterment of the whole, we become aware of our lapse. This awareness is despair, the self's longing to be itself, the need to recognize that each one of us is an inseparable part of the whole and possesses unique skills and abilities that are to be used to make a special contribution to that whole, and that this need has as yet gone unmet; the contribution is not yet being made. Many of us will give up at this point, to the detriment of ourselves and our civilization.

Only those who persevere can find fulfillment and end their despair. But perseverance takes courage because bettering society through self-fulfillment is not a popularly-accepted notion. Society is self-destructive in that it prepares us only for the marketplace where we can serve the capricious needs of the popular collective. Rarely is the focus on the individual except for defining how that individual can satisfy the

Individuation is a process
of recovering personal
authority through freeing
ourselves from the
constraints of collectively
held belief systems.

– Carl Gustav Jung

immediate requirements of society. But society cannot function indefinitely as a collective identity, or groups of collective identities; it can only function as a collection of individuals. The only way that society can benefit long-term is by facilitating the development of the individual, by providing the tools and the environment for each individual to fully realize their innate potential. Jung called this process “individuation.” The pioneering motivational psychologist Abraham Maslow illustrated the individual’s development progression in phases that culminate in “self-actualization.”

It is individuals who despair if their unique skills and abilities are not fully developed so that a distinct life purpose can be discovered. At the most fundamental level, the promise of collective identities is to end our despair by providing us with a meaning to life. However, only the individual can end this despair and contribute in the most effective way to the greater whole.

It is only by developing the unique skills and abilities of each individual that each person’s despair, and by extension, the collective despair of society, can be transcended, and the human species then be capable of successfully directing its own evolution. Rather than spend our precious time searching for an inherent meaning of life, our goal should be to use our unique skills and abilities to make our lives *meaningful*.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE INDIVIDUAL POTENTIAL

To progress as a society, each person must discover, examine and challenge the limiting beliefs that they have about themselves. Whether we realize it, every negative or limiting belief about our self-worth comes from outside, either from a specific individual, an influential group, or the notion that we are somehow less valuable when separated from one or more collective identities.

First and foremost, we each need to change the way we think of ourselves. We need to change inside. Happiness and self-worth can only come from within. Each person has the same intrinsic worth as every other individual. All things are possible, but we have to accept personal responsibility for our lives, which entails fulfilling ourselves. We need to live by our own standards, judge ourselves by our own criteria, and act within our own sphere of control without regard for the collective's opinions of what we do or say.

TRANSCENDING THE COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

The more people that successfully navigate the process of self-actualization, the more society will benefit from having members that are personally fulfilled, inwardly at peace, and much more productive making unique contributions that arise from their personal visions.

As society becomes populated by more and more "individuators," a new form of collective can be formed – one that works for the benefit of the whole by promoting the eradication of despair in individuals. To do this, we must break the hold of collective egos, view technology as only a tool and transform our collective systems to benefit the individual. And we must do this with the full comprehension that we are all inter-connected in the modern world for practical purposes, as it becomes increasingly difficult to survive as independent entities in a complex global setting.

Resistance to the organized mass can be effected only by the man who is as well organized in his individuality as the mass itself.

– Carl Gustav Jung

We need to transform society into one of independent thinkers with open minds. To do so means challenging the assertions of collective identity. It is only by negating the effects of the collective identity, focusing on the individual and promoting the process of individuation, that we, as the first species capable of doing so, can successfully advance our own evolution.

The individual is society.

– Krishnamurti

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