

## Who you think you are

What if I told you that whatever preconceived idea, whatever comfortable or uncomfortable conviction you have of who you are is not only false but also stands in your way of experiencing life to the fullest and finding joy in the present moment? You'd most likely tell me that I'm one of those spiritual nutcases and you'd ask me if I was about to tell you to go and meditate or do yoga or something. I wasn't about to do that by the way. I just wanted to make a point. Namely: I have the impression that we are all getting more and more caught up in our identities, our ego structures because this is very helpful for consumerist capitalism. We live in a social structure that is centred around:

- separateness (i.e. individualism and divisive thinking)
- competition (hierarchical structures on all levels)
- the exploitation of vulnerable groups and
- the suppression of the majority of humankind in the favour of the wellbeing of a select few.

These cornerstones are created and enforced through several steps. Firstly, capitalism is a system based on the private ownership of capital. Capital is an arbitrary term used to describe things that get an arbitrary value assigned to them within this system. These are otherwise known as assets. Assets are things that have material value and usefulness in the sense that they are tangible and can be privately owned. For example a pair of socks or a computer or your time and energy during your working hours. On the other hand, many things that have inherent value to us as a species are not only neglected but outright undermined and destroyed by capitalism, such as altruistic communities and time spent in idle contemplation of the beauty of existence, just to mention two. In this way, capitalism enforces a categorical, divisive world view where only certain things are deemed valuable, while many things are considered worthless and are not pursued, cherished, cultivated. This is how people end up feeling unfulfilled, hollow, restless and afraid and lonely. Often while being surrounded by all that they would need but having no ability to perceive, experience or appreciate these things because of their internalised capitalist value systems.

The idea of private ownership will unavoidably create the illusion of separateness and the need to outcompete and overpower other people because they pose a threat to your assets simply by existing, since they could, theoretically, also become the owners of what you already have. It also underlies the perspective that other sentient or non-sentient beings can and should be exploited since they either can become assets or can, in some way, contribute to the production of assets.

In short, capitalism leads to a situation where the only way to be successful is to be selfish and individualistic because the ultimate goal is to hoard as much capital as one possibly can, at the expense of others. There is no capitalist system which

doesn't require the establishment of hierarchies and the exploitation of those below us in this hierarchy.

This is often justified by the misinterpretation of the behaviour of other species and of the history of humankind. Darwinism is the best example of this. The narrative of "survival of the fittest" implies that we live in a cruel, uncaring world where everyone is out to get you and the purpose and goal of your existence is to survive somehow, despite the challenges that come with it. Reality is subsequently perceived as a horrid nightmare filled with danger and lost battles. Such narratives underlie the feeling that the universe is hostile territory and us poor individuals have to fight to make it for as long as we can, regardless of whether we're having fun or not. Actually, you don't have to survive because from a more holistic standpoint, you were never born and you can't ever die. There is no *you* separate from the totality of the universal process, being an individual is an illusion, a myth, nothing more. I'll explain this a little later, I just wanted to come out and write it down already. In any case, the narratives that tell you otherwise are created by people who already internalised several similar narratives from the capitalist culture that they exist in. In this way, these narratives, these myths, become essentially self-sustaining in a never ending cycle of misery-making. By the way, Darwin was a miserable man who lived in a miserable time filled with human cruelty and suffering (look it up, seriously).

At the same time, we are constantly fed the paradoxical narrative that you *should* be having fun and if you aren't, then *you* are the problem and not the dysfunctional system that you find yourself in. To strengthen this false narrative, we are constantly confronted with the examples of the enviable people who are successful within our social system (the 1%). These people are presented to us as happy and fulfilled in life. We are then quite literally brainwashed to ignore the fact that these people are not suffering any less by and large than people who are not successful in the society-sense. Suffering can manifest in many different ways after all (more on this later). Ultimately, we end up with a bunch of contradictory, pressuring and perceptively false narratives that make us feel lost, lonely and cut off from existence altogether.

Meanwhile, consumerism, which revolves around endlessly increasing the consumption of goods, piggybacks on this miserable situation and tells us that in order to be happy and find our way through this mess, we just need to consume more. "You're lonely? Buy yourself a new car that will charm all the men or women and they'll instantly fall in love with you. Lonely no more!" Or "You're afraid of death? Go for a Botox treatment, so you can look younger and continue to ignore the fact that death is just as much a natural part of life as birth." and so on. Consumerism needs miserable individuals because fulfilled people connected to each other and their surrounding don't have the need to consume goods endlessly.

One of the cornerstones of late stage consumerist capitalism is the glorification of the identity of the individual. If you look at advertisements, you'll notice that nobody is selling you products anymore, they are selling you identities. This is something that works greatly in a culture that centres around separateness. It's a way to further distinguish yourself from everything and everyone else. It is also something that can be indefinitely improved and fine-tuned through consumption and it serves as the perfect distraction from actually being immersed in the present moment. It stands as an illusory barrier between the individual and reality.

The point is this: our identities, our egos are made-up abstractions created by our minds and by those of the people around us. We are part of a group psychosis, we have been fooled. I will now approach this point from several angles because I'm sure that some (or maybe all) will resonate with you.

### *Take 1: Zoom in, zoom out*

We know from the natural sciences that everything is in constant flux due to the expansion of the universe, gravity, and other fundamental forces. I won't go into any detail here because you'll get my point without it, but even objects that appear stationary are in perpetual motion. Zoom out and you can observe how planet Earth (which appears stationary to us) is constantly rotating around its axis, orbiting the sun, and traveling with the solar system through our galaxy. Zoom in and you can see atoms constantly moving and interacting with each other through forces like gravity and electromagnetism. Zoom in more and you'll find that on the subatomic level, nothing can be pinned down either; particles like electrons are in a constant state of flux within their orbitals too. (Let's not even get into how the theory of quantum entanglement suggests that all particles are linked.) In fact, when you examine any seemingly separate object or living being, it's quite impossible to describe it as separate from the entire dynamic process that the universe is. What I'm saying is: if the whole universe is in constant motion and can be described as a result of incessant interaction on all levels (microscopic to macroscopic), and no hard line can be drawn between one object, being or phenomenon and the totality of everything there is, how do you imagine a static self, an individual standing outside of this and observing it all? You don't, it's stupid.

### *Take 2: Are you microbes?*

I'm a molecular biologist and one of the first things I was taught about the human body at university is that it is made up of more microbial cells than human cells. When you refer to your self, your identity, are you also referring to these microbes? There's more of them within your body than there are "you elements" if we go by the idea that it is the cells that carry your unique genetic code (DNA) that count as you. Furthermore, we also know that there is constant, complex interplay between these microbes, our own cells and our environment. We know that the human microbiome doesn't only determine digestion and nutrient absorption but also immune system function, and even our neurological state and psychological well-being to a large

degree. Next time, when you think you are making a conscious choice, think about the fact that your microbes have a huge influence on your neurological functioning, meaning that the decision is just as much theirs as yours. So your microbes are clearly a key part of who you are. Yet aren't they, by definition, separate organisms? Their "individual nature" if you'd like is best proven by the fact that some of them can be referred to as opportunistic pathogens, meaning that if they get a chance, they'll overpopulate some part (or parts) of your body and can make you sick to the degree where they might even kill you.

So who are you then? You're not them... without them, you couldn't exist however. Could it be that your idea of being *somebody* just doesn't hold up?

### *Take 3: When were you born?*

I assume most of us automatically answer this question by providing our birth dates. Yet if we consider birth to mean the time we manifested, then we clearly were not, in fact, born on our birthdays at all. We were already conscious, hearing, feeling, growing, digesting etc. in the womb of our mothers for a quite a while before that. We were also present in the sperm and egg that combined into the first cell that began dividing to create the amazing organism each of us is. The egg cell was present in the body of our mother since her birth. Not only that but looking at life from this point of view, we can clearly see that we were already present within each cell of our parents since we were implied in their genome. So were they (hence so were we) in that of our grandparents and of the parents of our grandparents and so on... Any evolutionary biologist will tell you that all life originates from one common ancestor. From this standpoint, we were all present within that ancestor already, since we are results of variations upon that very same genetic code. We arise out of patterns and every life form is a pattern itself. You might also be able to recognise at this point that, although I am talking about several patterns, these patterns not only connect in several obvious and in several subtle ways, they can also be represented as part of one extensive and complex pattern, which we could refer to as the "game of life", or as "evolution". Evolution is best described as a game because there is nothing serious or grim about it. These are interpretations that we place upon it due to the cultural conditioning that we received. Equally well, we can see evolution as an elegant, beautiful game where there are no winners or losers because there is nowhere to get to, there is no goal, no purpose in a capitalist sense. The game of life just is... for the sake of it. Because it's beautiful. What I mean is: if you acquire the viewpoint I was describing in this paragraph, you start seeing all beings as diverse, unique and wonderful experiments of the life process. Each connects to all others because they each arise from a shared ancestor. Furthermore, if you look up the definition of what it means to be alive, you will find that it is a set of five requirements upon which biologists agreed a long time ago. In fact, what we consider to be alive and what we do not is merely conventional. Take viruses as an example. Many of us are surprised to find out that viruses do not count as living beings yet in many ways they do behave as such. If you take this line of thought further, you will see that the seemingly clear categories such as animate or inanimate, sentient or non-sentient

are simply labels us humans use to divide and categorise our surrounding in order to be able to manipulate it. Before our common living ancestor arose, simple organic molecules existed. Were these alive from your point of view? Scientists don't consider them to have been, yet without them, we wouldn't exist, we were also implied within these molecules. It is uncertain whether viruses existed at this point or arose later. Either way, you can clearly see that we are all connected through the beautiful process of evolution. When I look at my children, not only do I see myself and our whole family tree within them, but also all life forms (and precursors of life) and ultimately the entire cosmos. Can you look at yourself and the people around you in this way? Once you succeed, your ego, your identity will lose its all encompassing significance and death will also stop having such a fearsome grip on your subconscious.

#### *Take 4: You are energy*

Earlier I wrote about the nature of the universe being that of continuous motion and interaction. Fundamentally, our world, our reality is a complex system where every particle, every atom, every molecule, every organism and every object is in interaction with its environment, which extends beyond what our minds can imagine or comprehend. You cannot separate organisms and their environment because all things only exist in relation to one another. The environment defines the behaviour of the organism and the organism impacts and alters its environment in turn.

Furthermore, the closer you examine any organism or object, the clearer it becomes that you can't even draw a hard line between these and their environment. All lines we draw, all categories we form, every separation we fixate on is only representative of our perspective, our beliefs and social conventions. It's entirely possible to adapt drastically different viewpoints and feelings towards existence. It's quite possible, for example, to stop feeling like you only exist as an individual, trapped in a decaying body. To our best scientific understanding, life is fundamentally a complex process of energy conversion. All life forms consume and transform energy. Furthermore, according to modern physics, energy and matter are equivalent ( $E = mc^2$ ) and all objects and life forms are made up of matter (i.e. energy). So looking at it from any angle really, one eventually reaches the conclusion that the entire universe can be represented as a complex, dynamic energy system. You are not wrong, scientifically and spiritually speaking, to think of yourself as an energy system that forms part of several characterisable energy systems and is made up of several individually characterisable energy systems. Each of your cells can be described as a complex energy system for example.

At the same time, you are a fundamental part of the ecosystem of the Earth, which is a complex system in and of itself, and let's suppose that for the most part, it is a closed system. Going by the first law of thermodynamics, energy cannot be created or destroyed, only transformed in closed systems. This means that the energy you are as a living being has already been there in other forms before you manifested and will continue to be there after you stop existing in your current form in several ways. You will be there within the plants that grow out of the soil where you get

buried for example. You will also be there within the memories of many of the people you meet throughout your life. You will most likely continue to influence the actions of many other beings long after you cease to exist in your current form. Their mind activity and their actions are also fundamentally energy, and within that energy, you are also there. In this moment, you exist beyond your physical form in several ways, you did long before you were born and you will continue to do so long after you die. Does your ego concept include all these different subtle forms of you? Even if you train your mind to see yourself in this way, you won't be able to see all the various ways in which you exist, it is simply too complex a picture for the human mind to comprehend. Can you see how this shows that any idea you have of your *self*, of who you are is limited and inaccurate in its nature?

*Take 5: One person - one body?*

The other day, a dear friend and I were having a discussion about dissociative identity disorder (DID), which is one of the most interesting conditions that, as far as we know, appears by and large only in our current sociocultural context. Someone with dissociative identity disorder has several different identities or ego structures, which can also be seen as different consciousness states. There is a high degree (or sometimes complete) amnesia between these different consciousness states. These states (otherwise known as alters) are also often able to communicate with each other through something like an inner discussion. Alters can be drastically different in behaviour, temperament, style of speech, body language, age, gender identity etc. This creates the feeling within the affected person and his or her surrounding that several distinct individuals share the same body. Do you find this far-fetched? If you met someone with DID, would you be open to accept them as several people or would you perceive this person as someone who is mentally ill and lost touch with reality? In the mainstream idea of reality, one body implies one person. We are all conditioned to perceive ourselves as a distinct individual, yet, people with DID do not manage to develop such a perception. The most likely explanation to this is that since their memories are fragmented and people's sense of self is constructed out of memories, they develop several senses of selves based on these fragmented memories. Doesn't this show how easily the process of becoming an individual can be disrupted?

People with DID usually switch between alters in response to triggers. A trigger is a stimulus that can cause a strong emotional or physical reaction, often linked to past experiences, especially to traumatic ones. People living with DID switch between distinct consciousness states when encountering triggers or triggering situations. The most interesting part here is the observation that my friend made during our conversation about DID after I had described this concept to him. He said "see, now that I think about it, I'm also fully different in different situations, depending on what kind of triggers are around. Almost as if I had alters. There's a 'work me', a 'family me', an 'MMA fighter me' and I'm quite sure that if the people who see me in one situation were to see me in another, they'd hardly be able to tell that it was the same person. So the biggest difference between me and someone with DID is that I

remember all these different 'me's, which creates a feeling of continuity?" I had to laugh at the time because he hit the nail on the head. I'm someone living with DID so I could have been offended by his pragmatic viewpoint if I were to take my predicament too seriously. I don't because it has taught me the lesson that my friend so instinctively phrased here: we are taught to believe that we are "this way or that way" and it is beaten into us through cultural conditioning that we must be consistent, we must be either extroverted or introverted, kind or callous, ambitious or lazy and so on. We are also taught to try and organise all our experiences of ourselves into a coherent narrative, which is what our sense of self ultimately is (or should be). We are supposed to write a personal, unpleasantly rigid rulebook in this way because this makes us predictable, controllable, socially easily manageable and adequately anxious to fit into the dysfunctional society we find ourselves in. In fact, nobody is "this way or that way". The truth is that we are constantly changing, we are continuously responding to our environment and there is absolutely no reason for us to get encrusted in any form of identity at all.

All the above snippets are meant to show that one's sense of self is nothing but a repeating thought pattern and a communication tool constructed out of memories. It is as real as you make it. Experiencer and experience are one. It is nothing but an inaccurate perspective to see it otherwise. Why does the illusion of there being an 'I', an experiencer, an individual trapped in a decaying body not only *seem* but *feel* so real regardless?