

Ego, Mind, and Culture

With Miki Kashtan

The idea for this piece came to me when I read a comment on an earlier blog post. The specific content of that post (which was about race), is not the issue here. Rather, it was two references to “ego” which caught my attention and got me thinking for all these months. Here they are as context:

“The only use for these false values are to enhance the ego’s sense of separateness, be it through conceived superiority or inferiority.”

“One result of acting upon true values is the freedom from the ignorance to which the separative ego tenaciously clings.”

There is nothing unusual about these sentences. They simply capture a way of speaking that I have been aware of: attributing intention to what is, ultimately, an abstraction. Perhaps it wouldn’t be so noticeable to me if it weren’t for a second aspect: the intention being assigned to this abstraction called “ego” is one that has a negative connotation with it.

It was a sad surprise to me when I learned that the entry of “ego” into the English language was in large part the result of choices made by Freud’s translator, James Strachey. “Ego” was introduced as a translation of the word in German that simply means “I,” thereby changing the meaning and tone of what Freud wrote. “When one says ‘my ego,’” says Mark Leffert, “one can always distance oneself; when one says ‘I,’ no distance is possible.”[Footnote 1].

It is precisely that distance that allows us to see it as separate, a “thing” with an intention.

When translation of Eastern texts also use the same word, it has become a mainstay, ubiquitous. “Ego” is now fully something to avoid, to work to free ourselves from. It interferes with our higher sense of well-being, gets in the way of generosity, and keeps us focused on desires that are generally seen as “narcissistic,” such as recognition or being seen.

It took me some effort when I decided, some years ago, to deliberately free my language from the word “ego.” I did not want to use a concept so loaded with negative charge. I want my language to reflect my commitment to a different view of human nature instead of supporting the view that inside each of us there is a core part that must be transcended or suppressed in order to become a mature, functional member of human society.

Narcissism and Selflessness

This view of “ego” is intimately linked to the concept of narcissism as well as the idea that in order to be giving we are being “selfless” or “altruistic,” somehow subtly implying that we would be going *against* our nature in doing so.

I remember a walk I took with a friend one day, who commented on how it was such a sacrifice for me to do the work I do. I understood later that what she meant was related to how much effort and attention I put into my work and the degree of my availability to people and projects. Initially, though, it took some time for me to even understand why she was saying that, because my own sense is that nothing could be further from the truth. Sacrifice is about giving up on something and doing something I “should” be doing, whereas my commitment to my work arises from deep within, is compelling, and is fully what I want and am willing to do.

Another time I remember another person talking, disparagingly, about narcissistic needs. When I pressed on her for clarity, she named needs such as to be seen, for recognition, or to be loved. I wanted to weep when I heard her. These are precisely the kind of needs that are core and central to our capacity to know that we matter and are part of the human fabric. To the extent that we relegate them to “ego” and call them “narcissistic,” we continue to put forth the idea that there is something wrong with wanting love, for example. Perhaps we even reinforce a notion of separation between self and others.

Part of why I deliberately refrain from using these words – ego, narcissism, selflessness, altruism, and selfishness – is because I am seeking to transcend the dichotomy between self and other. I want to distinguish between self-care and “selfishness,” and hope that every one of us can attend to our needs while offering our gifts everywhere. Similarly, I want to distinguish between holding everyone’s needs with care and the notion of “altruism” or “selflessness,” so that I can remember and remind others that caring for others is not at the expense of me, that I am not separate, that we are all born and remain interdependent.

And What about the Mind?

While mind and ego are not equivalent concepts, both are seen as obstacles to overcome, especially in circles committed to spiritual, emotional-awareness, or recovery practices. We are instructed to quiet the mind in order to achieve inner peace, for example. Our mind is also seen as the seat of judgments. “Going to the head” is, itself, a judgment in those circles. Additionally, mind is viewed as the origin of fear, guilt, and more.

I almost titled this piece “In Defense of Mind” precisely because I find it tragic that our capacity for thinking, for learning, for discerning, for making sense of ourselves and of life, for generating ideas, for teaching others – or so much else that is quintessentially human – is maligned to such a degree. I am concerned about the anti-intellectual ethos I see in some circles.

I can’t improve on the words of Alfonso Montuori, professor of transformative studies at the California Institute of Integral Studies:

It is ironic how often the search for holism, transformation, integralism, and alternative approaches in general can lead to the exclusion of what is sometimes disparagingly called “the mental.” In this view, not uncommon with students

entering alternative programs and in New Age circles, anything considered “intellectual” is, by definition, not spiritual, because the intellect is the “old paradigm,” the foe of spirituality. It is precisely what separated us from the natural, spiritual, intuitive, spontaneous existence that our foremothers and forefathers apparently enjoyed in the days before Descartes, Newton, the industrial, and even the agricultural, revolution. The emphasis is on personal insight and/or connection with “higher wisdom” or God. Book-learning is seen as ultimately “relative,” second-hand, and even part of a process of egoic self-aggrandizement, aloofness, snobbery, elitism, and a removal from the “real” world. [Footnote 2]

I totally understand the reaction to the attempts to make rationality the only valuable aspect of being human to the exclusion and regulation of everything passionate and emotional. I, too, feel a deep anguish about that ongoing aspect of Western civilization. That disaffection was enough to lead me to dedicate several years of my life to challenging the primacy of rationality in my dissertation. Still, swapping “heart” and “mind” (so that heart is preferred over mind) maintains the split within us and the possibility of sustaining the negative view of human nature. Instead, what I advocated, both in my dissertation and since, is an integration of reason and emotion, mind and heart.

Whence the Mind?

What is of equal concern to me, in addition to the maligning of the mind, is the common practice of seeing it as a static entity, a given that exists independently of culture, and is therefore unchangeable. If it is a “negative” aspect of self, and is furthermore fixed, then the project of being a fully alive, loving, and integrated human being is destined to be one of perpetual struggle, since time immemorial and forever.

I feel immense gratitude for the discovery of feminism in the mid-80s, and to the years of immersing myself in the study of sociology, most especially, though far from exclusively, to my exposure to Karl Marx. Feminism and sociology provided me with an invaluable insight: that we are creatures of practice, that who we are as individuals, what our sense of self is, what we are able to think and feel, is profoundly shaped by the culture and institutions into which we are born. A child who was born 500 years ago in Europe, for example, would not be asking themselves or be asked by others what they wanted to be when they grew up. For the most part, that future role in life was determined by the time the child was born. Similarly, that child would be unlikely to imagine themselves to be self-sufficient, as child or adult. They knew life to be dependent on the goodwill of others.

Even without going very far back in time, the habits of guilt, fear, and self-judgment that are so common as to seem natural and inevitable to so many of us, are not universally familiar. I still relish the time I read of the visit of several Buddhist scholars from the West to the Dalai Lama, in which they had an ongoing discussion with him for a few hours before he could finally grasp the depth of self-loathing that is air to us: it was entirely unfamiliar to him.

There is no question in my mind that we are not born with judgments, whether of self or of others. We are not born with guilt, self-sabotage, or any of the other attributes assigned to the mind or the ego. I see all of these as reactive adaptations to what we encounter as small beings after we are born. Ideas of our own wrongness, in particular, are internalized by us to the extent that they are directed at us by others. Almost from the moment we are born we are evaluated – good girl or bad girl, good boy or bad boy – and told what we should or shouldn't do. We are expected to grow up to be empathic, caring, respectful, or honest when these qualities are not demonstrated in how we are treated, nor are we given room to find from within who we are. It's entirely unsurprising to me that most of us carry so much shame given how much and how often children are shamed by others.

Instead of telling us that as individuals our job is to overcome the “mind” or our “ego,” I want to inquire into the view of human nature that is responsible for creating those notions in the first place. While notions of “sin” are no longer accepted in many circles, the negative view of “ego” and “mind” seem to raise no concern. I see them as supplanting earlier notions, allowing the fundamentally negative view of human nature that is part and parcel of authority-based societies to persist.

I want us to be conscious that in order to liberate ourselves from the constriction of shame and self-judgments, what is needed is not an individual struggle to overcome a negative part of ourselves that is inevitably there. Rather, I see what's needed as a concerted effort to undo the worst of our socialization with the support of others who are similarly committed. In addition, in order to alleviate the need for such heroic struggles on the part of our children and all children, I hope that many of us will join hands in the commitment to ensuring that all children have a chance of growing up in environments that trust their innate humanity and allow them to flourish. Not an easy task when we have been trained to believe that unless controlled, children will be selfish and aggressive. In such a world, the word “ego” will lose meaning, and we will regain access to the beauty of what our minds can be: instruments of great cognitive and emotional capacity in the service of all life.

Footnotes:

1. Mark Leffert, *The Therapeutic Situation in the 21st Century*. P. 173.
2. Alfonso Montuori, “The Quest for a New Education: From Oppositional Identities to Creative Inquiry,” in *ReVision*, 2006, Vol. 28 no. 3.