

Post Copernicus

Remember how people used to naively think the earth was at the center of the universe, and that the sun and all the stars revolved around us? And then Copernicus came along and declared the radically counter-intuitive truth that the earth in fact orbited the sun. This launched a scientific revolution that focused on studying everything from an objective stance, as if we could hover outside ourselves and get a disembodied perspective on it all. This way, as the story goes, our view is not cluttered by all that messy, subjective stuff that only distorts reality according to our petty likes and dislikes and confirms our personal illusions.

Well, it's been a pretty good run for the objective sciences, but the cutting edge of all our post-modern understanding is putting us right back where we started—at the center of the world. It turns out that the non-personal “objective” perspective on everything cannot be sustained except as a sort of thought experiment. We are embedded in the world, whether we like it or not. All views are a view from somewhere, and we are discovering again and again that where you are looking from makes a big difference to what you see.

The Buddhists realized this a long time ago. They begin their take on things from the inside out, so to speak, rather than from the outside in. We are used to starting with a grand explanation of it all, from the big bang to coagulating stardust to roiling primordial soup, from life to monkeys to digital watches, and then, almost as an afterthought, trying to figure how we—that is you and me—fit in to it all. The ancient contemplative traditions of India started with the empirical phenomenon of consciousness—the capacity we each have for awareness—and developed a model of existence flowing out from that. The view they built their understanding around is one becoming more familiar to the contemporary cognitive- and neuro-sciences, namely that each individual mind and body system constructs meaning as a synthetic momentary act. Each one of us, in other words, is planted squarely in the center of a virtual world we create for ourselves every moment.

The implications of this are remarkable, but let's first dispatch a few mistaken ideas about what this means. It does not imply that oddity of philosophy, the solipsistic idealism that nothing exists outside myself, or that my mind is creating all the physical universe at my whim. Nor does it mean that I have a lot of power to control things, or even that I am the most important thing there is. It also does not mean that other people don't matter,

or that my pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain is the primary purpose of the universe. One might be forgiven for thinking so from time to time, but none of these views are conducive to sustainable well-being. At the same time, we need to be careful not to draw mistaken conclusions in the other direction. My life is not necessarily absurd, pointless, or without intrinsic value. It need not be the case that without reference to a transcendent reality greater than myself, for example, or without an agenda created by others, my life has no meaning.

As I understand the post-modern revolution, meaning is something constructed locally. The implication of being at the center of our world, in the Buddha's estimation, is that we have both the freedom and the responsibility to influence how it all unfolds. The pivot point around which the world of our experience turns is the node of conscious awareness manifesting in this particular body at this particular moment. An episode of consciousness arises again and again, like the firing of a spark plug, and interacts with sense objects and sense organs, perceptions, feelings and attitudes, to shape a glimpse of a meaningful order. With innumerable glimpses strung together in a stream of consciousness, the view of a coherent narrative unfolds.

The mechanics of this process are mostly hard-wired, thank goodness, but we have direct access to the very best part of it: we have the privilege of paying attention to all that is happening, and for it to be illuminated with mindful awareness. Being at the center of the world, we have pretty good seats for the show. It's all flowing around us and through us; it's all happening for us and by means of us. And when we decide to participate, by deliberately and whole-heartedly attending to the details of arising and passing phenomena, it can become a transcendent experience. Regarded objectively, this individual fountain of consciousness might not seem like such a big deal, compared to the other splendors of the universe, but when entered into subjectively, with direct awareness, it can become the most splendid of all things.

The Buddha invites us to move beyond the limitations that come from allowing ourselves to be defined by external conditions, a lump of earth orbiting some other sun, and to embrace the central source of our existence. By opening our awareness to what is pouring out of us each moment, and moreover by intentionally shaping what unfolds in wholesome and altruistic ways, there are few limits to how bright we can become—in this very life.

—Andrew Olendzki