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More on Ego-Dominance in Modern Civilization: Author Comment on Brian Martin's
Review of *Escaping Maya's Palace*

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I am grateful to Brian Martin for his thoughtful review of my book, [*Escaping Maya's Palace*](#). Yet there is more to say about the hidden psychological underbelly of modern civilization and capitalism and about the prospects for social transformation.

In my mind, my book's most important takeaways are threefold:

- ☛ Modernity is inextricably bound up with an undetected distortion in psychological development.
- ☛ This distortion contributes to a vast range of personal and social ills while also impeding our psychological growth. We are aware of many of the ills, but our developmental disorder blocks us from grasping the psychosocial dynamics from which they originate.
- ☛ Exposing this system creates new opportunities for system transformation.

I'll elaborate.

The Social History of Insatiability

One of my book's central claims is historical: Modern civilization is foundationally intertwined with an undetected alteration in psychological development—specifically, with people becoming more intensely “ego-identified.” I spend some time working out the various characteristics of intense egoism, but central is that the sense of being a small separate “me” strengthens, which both warps and impedes psychological growth.

I am working here with ideas found in Eastern philosophy and spirituality, in which egoism is understood as the unconscious process of erecting a psychological boundary and identifying with what is found on the inside. When egoism intensifies, in effect that boundary becomes firmer and more impenetrable. As a result, other egoic characteristics—such as self-centeredness, experiencing the world in terms of sharp subject-object duality, and feeling lack and insufficiency—also intensify. (My book invites those skeptical of such a perspective to suspend disbelief long enough to review my evidence.)

I build a case that this tilt toward amplified egoism is a product of global capitalism and its accompanying technologies which, as Brian says, dislocate people from stable communities and from experiential engagement with the worlds of nature and spirit.

However, Brian's review does not clearly differentiate changes in *cultural beliefs and behavior* from changes in underlying trajectories of *psychological development*. This matters because the social ramifications of a change in psychological development—that is, of alteration in the basic structure and functioning of the psyche—can be more wide-ranging than those

accompanying a cultural innovation that occurs in the absence of underlying developmental change.

For instance, one of my subsidiary claims is that consumer insatiability—a driving force in sustaining modern economic growth (and its collateral ecological harm)—is an expression of intensified egoism. Brian notes that: “In one sense this is not new. It is well known that marketers seek not just to satisfy needs but also to create wants” (12). So, if intensified egoism is simply another route to the same effect—i.e., new wants—how much is that adding to how we understand our civilization? Does it matter if I buy stuff because of TV advertising versus the distorted structure of my psyche?

One answer is that scientific advertising is a creature of the 20th century, whereas the insatiable craving that motors economic growth emerged as a mass phenomenon several centuries earlier, notably in early modern northwest Europe. Indeed, I assemble historical evidence—for instance, involving colonial-era American Indians and early-20th century Trobriand Islanders of the western Pacific Ocean—suggesting that marketing is typically ineffective in the absence of intensified egoic craving.

More importantly: Advertising can influence me to buy this or that specific product. However, egoic emptiness ensures that no matter what I buy, the satisfaction will soon subside. Intense egoism’s basic sense of insufficiency is never long assuaged.

This perspective challenges the core justification for capitalism—i.e., the promise to *deliver the goods and experiences* that will provide consumer satisfaction. If I’m right, capitalism does the opposite, secretly *delivering the psychology* that pushes enduring contentment ever further out of reach.

Self-Protective Self-Deception

Beyond intensified consumer craving for new household goods, clothing styles, and entertaining diversions, the early modern shift toward amplified egoism brought with it many additional, socially consequential psychological traits. As a result, my theory can explain historical concurrences that other social theories cannot—such as why consumer insatiability emerged simultaneously with:

- A massive increase in the consumption of psychoactive substances like alcohol, tobacco, coffee, tea, and sugar and, along with this, heightened susceptibility to addiction. The preindustrial Atlantic slave economy was substantially dedicated to producing these commodities (except for tea, which was imported from China).
- Cultural developments that reflect egoism’s atypically sharp subject-object dualism. Examples include Hobbes’s and Locke’s atomistic social-contract theory and a new societal interest in privacy (e.g., less communal bathing and building houses with distinct sleeping chambers).

- The emergence of a civilization-wide system of belief that has prevented us from detecting the transition into intensified egoism. This is exemplified in the scholarly taboo against integrating psychological insights lifted from Eastern spirituality into critical social inquiry (a taboo that, as Brian notes, my book transgresses).

This breadth of explanatory power weighs in on the side of my theory's plausibility.

More recently, the effects of intense egoism have expanded to include heightened incidence of many of the major illnesses of our time, ranging from addiction, depression, and anxiety to follow-on physical ailments such as cancer, heart disease, obesity, and diabetes. Our egoism also contributes in both direct and indirect ways to the great societal macrochallenges confronting our civilization, such as climate change and the rise of authoritarian populism.

After observing that “it is well known that marketers seek . . . to create wants,” Brian writes that “What Sclove adds to the picture is that capitalism . . . undermines people's opportunities to achieve higher levels of psychological satisfaction” (12). That is true, but I believe that I am adding more to the picture than that.

In effect, my book shifts the overall assessment of modern civilization and capitalism by showing that the combined social costs are greater than we have known while the supposed benefits are exaggerated (i.e., since intense egoism ensures that any contentment from consumption will prove fleeting).

Another key feature of intense egoism is terror of ego-transcendence—that is, of psychological development into the higher ranges of human self-realization—which the ego mistakenly equates with death. The ego responds unconsciously by resisting ego-transcendence; it does this materially and ideologically. Materially, egoic insatiability is the motor that sustains economic growth, the disruptiveness of which circles back to sustain egoism. But egoism also perpetuates this system by camouflaging how it operates and the range of its ill effects.

The ego's remarkable knack for self-protective self-deception lies behind my otherwise quirky-seeming decision to turn to an ancient myth for insight into the hidden psychological underbelly of modern civilization. As my opening chapter explains, “To get started toward repairing our civilization, we need a vantage point that isn't corrupted by our psychological disorder” (4). Properly decoded, the *Mahabharata* can help elucidate modern egoism because its core authors were looking back at egoism from a more evolved “post-egoic” stance, hence perceiving a propensity for self-deception that is invisible to a modern civilization built upon a foundation of abnormally intense egoism.

My book's subtitle is “decoding an ancient myth to heal the hidden madness of modern civilization.” What “hidden madness” do I have in mind? It is exactly this: “We suffer unnecessarily and subject ourselves to mounting existential peril in fulfillment of the ego's

overarching ambition to *prevent* something of incalculable value—access to the higher ranges of self-realization” (191). What could be crazier than that?

In effect, the entire modern world has evolved into a gigantic machinery for stabilizing intense egoism. I call it the “ego/world system”: “Ego-identified, we are optimized to misunderstand and perpetuate this system, not infrequently judging ourselves ‘happy’ although enslaved to unquenchable emptiness, our suffering extensive and our deeper potentials never realized” (149).

Marx was impressed by capitalism’s prodigious productivity, but he decried its brutal inequities. Perhaps Marx was too kind to capitalism, failing to see that winners and losers alike are paying a variety of heavy costs that he did not detect (and that, in fact, he inadvertently helped conceal).

Unmasking the System Creates New Opportunities for Transformation

My final main takeaway is that the *same* social forces and structures that sustain mass egoism also contribute to engendering our great societal macrochallenges. Oversimplifying a bit: There are two basic ways to manage macrochallenges: address either their symptoms or their structural causes. As an example: Bill and Hilary Clinton favor *symptomatic management* of the social dislocation caused by globalization: Retrain displaced industrial workers for jobs in high tech. In contrast, structural critics favor *alternatives* to globalization, such as building up local economic self-reliance.

Egoism tends to weigh in on the side of symptomatic treatment, because addressing structural causes would, as a hidden side effect, soften egoism, which the ego unconsciously dreads (notwithstanding the fact that in truth our lives would be much improved). There are, of course, social movements hard at work trying to address the structural causes of our societal woes (e.g., social-justice activists, radical environmentalists, and proponents of local economic self-reliance), but they are frequently outgunned by forces favoring the structural status quo (e.g., governments and large corporations).

My argument could conceivably strengthen the hand of the structural transformers because I am showing that the changes they seek in order to advance social justice, sustainability, peace and democracy would, in addition, help to subvert the forces that hold us stuck in intense egoism—a psychological configuration that is adverse to everyone, up as well as down the class structure. Recognition of this important bonus psychosocial payoff could help empower progressive structural activists to recruit new members and resources and to assemble more muscular transformational coalitions.

As just one example: The millions of people engaged in healing- or growth-oriented psychotherapy or in spiritual practice will have new skin in the game—new reasons to participate in social-change endeavors—once they realize the extent to which the modern world is organized to counter the efficacy of their practices.

As I wrote recently in *Tikkun* magazine, “For people and the planet to flourish, we need a system that promotes the growth of human beings, not just GDP [Gross Domestic Product].”

I agree with Brian that my book is not the last word on modern civilization. But it may be filling in some important gaps.

Thanks, Brian!

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