

Buddhism and Social Science on the Affliction of Self-identity

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After the Cold War melted down, bitter ethnic and religious conflicts heated up all over the world. Endless images of death and violence now flash daily across our screens, as the multiple faces of suffering and evil stare steadfastly into our own. Our task, our moral imperative, is as urgent today as it was when Albert Camus (1971: 11) expressed it fifty years ago—just as many millions of murders ago. He said,

One might think that a period which, within fifty years, uproots, enslaves, or kills seventy million human beings, should only, and forthwith, be condemned. But its guilt must also be understood.

This essay is an attempt to take this challenge seriously, an attempt to understand the awful dynamics of human-inflicted suffering, of ‘man’s inhumanity to man.’ Human beings make war and kill each other in a way that no other species does, that no other species could, that no other species would. Somehow, we must make sense of it all. We must be able to discern some patterns, some common dynamics, behind behavior that is repeated so often, in so many different times and places. As Camus intimated, such an understanding, however repugnant its details or unpleasant its conclusions, is a prerequisite for preventing them.

Understanding, however, is not only what we require, it is also what we must interrogate. For it is understanding itself, imperfect, wrong-headed understanding of our human condition, that lies deeply and malignantly behind these unholy dynamics. It is this mistaken understanding of ourselves—as individuals, as members of groups, and as a contingent, historical species—that we must address. We must understand not only the passions that drive men to evil but also the confusion about our condition that makes such evil attractive. The tenacity and pervasiveness of these tragic strains in the human condition, our ‘fallen state,’ as it were, have long been recognized and addressed by nearly all religious traditions. In seeking to understand the darker sides of human life in this essay, however, we shall draw upon the conceptual resources of only one religious tradition, classical Indian Buddhism, in dialogue with comparable areas of inquiry from the biological and social sciences.

I. Introduction. Indian Religious Thought

According to the classical Indian religious traditions—particularly the yogic aspects of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism—the basic problem of human life stems from mis-identifying who we truly are and the misguided actions this mis-identification gives rise to. Rather than realizing that we are ultimately inseparable from a larger spiritual reality, however variously conceived, we identify instead with our transient physical, emotional, social, and religious selves. The actions that follow from these identifications thus become little more than attempts to preserve and protect whatever we imagine we are. But since whatever we usually identify with—our minds and bodies, our material and social worlds—are themselves complex constructs (*samskārah*) cobbled together out of ever-changing components, our attempts to preserve these

identities become little more than exercises in futility, inevitably inviting frustration and dissatisfaction, or *duḥkha* in Sanskrit. This does not, of course, prevent us from trying over and over again. And since we are always at least subtly aware of the precariousness of life, we are always trying to overcome it—nearly knowing that we can never truly succeed. This compulsive repetition of ineffective efforts to make impermanent things permanent, and dependent things independent, is the basic sense of *samsāra*: our going-around and around, repeating the same old behavioral patterns whether they accomplish their aims or not, whether they bring happiness or not. In Western psychology, such repetition effectively defines neurosis. Identity, in short, is a neurotic compulsion.

The traditional solution to the problem of compulsive behavioral patterns driven by false identification is a transformative awareness of the transient, constructed nature of whatever we identify with. This transformation releases the emotional energies and fixed ideas we had previously invested in constructing and preserving our identities, and allows them to be freely directed toward more realistic and altruistic aims.

In sum, the yogic traditions of Hindus, Buddhists and Jains suggest that we are deeply ignorant of the constructed nature of our identities, and so remain trapped in a vicious cycle of futile actions, which leads to frustration and dissatisfaction, to which we respond with further actions, etc. Overcoming this ignorance, however, and understanding the constructive processes we usually ignore, frees us from our compulsive, distressing behaviors.

Connection with the Social sciences.

In these terms, traditional Indian thought has much in common with the modern social sciences. The basis premise of most sciences is that things are not what they seem, that the ‘real’ causes and conditions that underlie phenomena are not readily apparent. Rather, we can only come to understand how things ‘really’ work when we analyze them through the methods of specific disciplines, such as biology, psychology, sociology, etc. In other words, although we are not normally cognizant of the processes that structure our lives and identities, and hence remain subject to them, we are able to free ourselves from these hidden influences through rigorous analytic understanding. The ameliorative aims of the social sciences are thus achieved through a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion;’ that is to say—as a matter of method—that we are suspicious of the appearance of things and must therefore look beyond or behind them in order to disclose their hidden structures. As anthropologist Victor Turner observed: “What is structurally ‘visible’ to a trained anthropological observer is psychologically ‘unconscious’ to the individual member of the observed society.” (Turner, 1969: 176).

This process of disclosing what was previously hidden illustrates two essential aspects of human identity-making which we shall examine below, both of which are highly congruent with traditional Indian analyses of the human condition. First, in various ways human beings are constantly engaged in the process of identity construction, traditionally called ‘I-making’ (*aham-kāra*). As empirical processes, these are in principle eminently amenable to the causal analyses of the social sciences. And, second, to enable ordinary identity to ‘work,’ to carry out its positive functions, it seems that we must ignore or repress our own involvement in its construction, that we must take identity as a given, something independent, substantial, even sacred.

Conceptual Framework

Although these ideas have been clearly expressed in different traditions, the relationship between our misunderstanding of the human condition and the actions leading to dissatisfaction and suffering have been most clearly, directly, and comprehensively articulated in the principles of classical Indian thought, particularly in its yogic traditions (since I am most conversant in the Buddhist idiom I will use Buddhist terms, although its basic ideas are shared with other Indian traditions). These principles are:

1. That all ‘constructed phenomena’ (*saṃskṛta-dharmāḥ*) depend on various causes and conditions (*pratītya-samutpāda*) and hence lack any fixed or unchanging ‘essence’ (*svabhāva*);
2. That what we are, rather, are assemblages of dynamic ‘constructs’ (*saṃskārāḥ*), held together by craving and grasping (*upādāna*);
3. That we mistakenly take these assembled constructs as substantial ‘selves’ or fixed identities (*satkāyadr̥ṣṭi*), which we appropriate, i.e. take as our ‘own’ (*‘ad-proprius’*);
4. That in our efforts to fashion and secure such an identity we necessarily deny its contingent, constructed nature and, indeed, actively strive to counteract that nature; and
5. That these efforts, though ultimately futile, effectively channel our activities (*karma*) into repetitive behavioral patterns that, paradoxically, bring about even more suffering and dissatisfaction.

These activities, then, represent misguided attempts to deny dependence, to counteract transience and to attain true security for an apparently substantial, yet inescapably temporal ‘self’—attempts, as Buddhists put it, to ‘turn reality on its head.’¹

This bears repeating. In the Indian yogic view in general, and the Buddhist view in particular, it is our misguided attempts to protect and sustain such constructed identities that lead to the preponderance of suffering caused by human actions, that lead, in a word, to evil. Evil and suffering are therefore the unintended yet inevitable consequences of our tendencies to reify relationships and processes into unchanging ‘things,’ to abstract characteristics and qualities in terms of fixed ‘essences’ or ‘natures,’ and, most egregiously, to identify ourselves as singular, substantive ‘selves’ in contrast to and standing apart from our encompassing environment. ‘Self-identity’ is thus not only a construct based upon an ultimately untenable dichotomy between ‘self’ and ‘other,’ but it almost inevitably leads to attachment to ‘us’ and ‘ours’ at the expense of ‘them’ and ‘theirs.’ And it is this malevolent dimension of identity in particular—the processes whereby the construction of group identity necessarily entails sectarian and communal conflict—that I wish to address herein.

Prospectus of the Paper

Our attempt to flesh out these views on the relation between self-identity and evil and suffering involves an unavoidably sketchy excursus through the social sciences, for it is only at the social and cultural levels that the uniquely human scale of evil occurs. We will briefly discuss evolutionary and developmental psychology, before moving quickly into the cultural,

social and political spheres. We shall find overwhelming consensus that the construction, maintenance and protection of a secure identity—at the personal, social, cultural and political levels—are carried out with both increasing complexity and vulnerability, requiring ever more strenuous and artificial supports, which in turn lead to yet more complexity and vulnerability, etc. We are collectively caught in a vicious cycle of increasing and frightening intensity. And it is precisely these misguided efforts to secure a permanent and unitary identity in our complex, chaotic and pluralistic world that tragically leads to ‘man’s inhumanity to man.’

II. Identity as Interdependent Construct

The distinction between ‘self’ and ‘not-self,’ such as expressed in the processes of avoiding harm and absorbing nutriment, is essential to biological life, and clearly informs and influences the more evolved cognitive and affective structures found in all higher life-forms. Although the self-consciousness of humans appears to be unique, it nevertheless represents an evolution of elementary cognitive capacities that all organisms enjoy. An acute awareness of ‘oneself in relation to others’ is already clearly present in our primate cousins and must surely have been a crucial selective factor in both primate and early hominid evolution. However it may be conceived,² a sense of ‘self’ is an indispensable part of the complex web of agency, organization and order that constitutes human identity. But it is the dynamic processes associated with this sense of identity—its evolved origins, its dependent development, and its tenuous, often tortured, persistence—that are so problematic, so fraught with frailties, tensions, and conflict.

For what is unique about human beings is the extent to which our sense of order and identity is dependent upon the intersubjective world that arises out of the regularities of social interaction, and the shared, symbolic means we have of expressing, communicating and transmitting that world—i.e., culture.³ This world of social communication, however, is never simply ‘cultural’ as opposed to ‘natural,’ for what is social and cultural has helped configure our very physiology: by most accounts our uniquely human brain structures evolved roughly simultaneously with the development of culture, which itself could only have developed based upon the cognitive capacities this evolving brain facilitated. Culture and human biology are thus inseparable, interdependent, co-evolutionary phenomena. Culture, and the social relations that engender it, are therefore not something added on or extraneous to human life; they are *constitutive* of human existence itself.⁴ And it is these cultural and social ‘worlds’ that provide the context and content of our constructed realities. As sociologists, Peter Berger, et. al., explain:

To be human means to live in a world—that is, to live in a reality that is ordered and that gives sense to the business of living... This life-world is social both in its origins and in its ongoing maintenance: the meaningful order it provides for human lives has been established collectively and is kept going by collective assent. (Berger, Berger, and Kellner 1973:63)

But humans did not evolve, nor do we now live, in generic social groups. We have always been raised within specific groups and specific cultures, through whose particular social and cultural patterns we have received our understandings of reality, our implicit and usually unexamined worldviews. It is only within this larger context of a meaningfully ordered reality provided by social life that we can even develop a sense of self-identity, one that is thus unavoidably individual and social at the same time.

This sense of self is first and foremost forged during our prolonged period of childhood dependency through constant social interaction within the limited nexus of the family. According to developmental psychologists our sense of ‘I-ness’ develops in fairly specific stages. Piaget, for example, thinks that infants develop a conception of the ongoing existence of external objects which are temporarily out of sight (“object permanence”) more or less at the same time they develop a conception of a separate self who is experiencing those objects. Both the distinction between self and non-self, as well as their interdependence, are therefore not only logical, but ontological as well—they are intrinsic to the notion of self-identity from its very inception. For such inescapably social creatures such as ourselves, self-identity is therefore never simply given; it is forged in the crucible of extended interaction with others. As with the species itself, individual identity is a contingent and conditioned construct, a *samskāra* in Hindu and Buddhist terms.

Identity is thus a product not only of the evolution of our species-specific capacities, but of the developmental processes of growth, maturation and socialization of each individual as well. It is ontogenetic as well as phylogenetic. And since the family can never be fully separated from the larger social and cultural contexts in which it too exists, our sense of self is not only individually, but also socially or culturally constructed. Ludwig Bertalanffy (1968: 211f), the founder of general system theory, therefore argues:

“I” and “the world,” “mind” and “matter,” or Descartes’s “*res cogitans*” and “*res extensa*” are not a simple datum and primordial antithesis. They are the final outcome of a long process in biological evolution, mental development of the child, and cultural and linguistic history, wherein the perceiver is not simply a receptor of stimuli but in a very real sense *creates* his world.”

This sense of “I” as distinct from “other” therefore depends not only upon an evolved, innate capacity for self-identity but also upon conceptions of identity that are culturally and socially acquired, which have undergone their own development, articulation and often conflicted expression. But this introduces an entirely new set of problems.

As self-making, culture-creating, symbol-processing organisms, we require meaning and order at multiple levels—personal, social, cultural, etc. It is through these overlapping dimensions of identity that meaning and order coalesce and cohere. Identity thus serves important, perhaps indispensable purposes: it provides that continuous, predictable locus of experience, that sense of agency and organization, that allows us “to map and order the physical and social universe and our own place in it” (Barkow 1989: 110). But this very dependence on social interaction and cultural construction gives the lie to the assumptions of autonomy, unity and stability upon which our deepest sense of self depends. *For identity is inherently unstable*, its instability grounded in the very social and cultural nature of its origins: since we are always changing our minds and feelings, our modes of expression, our established patterns of interaction, and our complex symbolizations of experienced reality, *any* cultural symbol system is necessarily fragile and vulnerable. Identities, meanings and shared symbols proliferate and disperse with distressing regularity, ever prone to differentiation, dissolution and decay.⁵ And it is precisely this tension between the sheer necessity for such overlapping levels of identity and the inherent fragility of all such constructions that drives the underlying compulsions behind humanity’s massive, engineered inhumanity. ‘Identities,’ as Hindus and Buddhists remind us, are constructs designed to counteract the impermanent, restless and contingent nature of things, designed, in short, to ‘turn reality on its head.’

Securing Identity by Constructing Evil

How do human beings respond to this instability, to the inescapably provisional nature of our constructed identities? How do we shape and sustain these distinct personal, social and cultural dimensions of order and identity, constructed on such shifting sands? How do we ‘fixate’ our fundamental groundlessness in order to sustain stable, established modes of being?

Identities at all levels are constructed and stabilized by establishing order and security within an unavoidably impermanent and interdependent world. Forging group identities involves processes similar to those we have seen at the individual level—discomfort with disorder and insecurity, desire for self-perpetuation, and denial of dependence. To create order in our social ‘worlds,’ we exaggerate the variations between peoples, create dichotomies between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ and reify these into fixed and independent ‘entities’ set apart from one another by supposedly intrinsic and essential differences.⁶ Fostering such extreme emotional attachments, these fixations supply the raw materials for intense identification with ‘our’ group and animosity toward the ‘other.’⁷ They virtually define our ‘reality.’

And the definition of reality in which we are raised is so strong and so deeply ingrained that sociologists, following Durkheim, consider it the *fundamental religious* reality. That is, a culture’s definition of reality provides both the behavioral models required for meaning and order in our chaotic and confusing world, as well as the shared symbol system that provides that compelling and enduring sense of reality, that aura of objective and eternal truth, that *sacralized* reality, within which we find our place in the cosmos, our ultimate identity.⁸ Cultural symbols thus constitute ‘sacred’ meaning, order and permanence through whose mediation we, as mere mortals, may symbolically participate in something transcendent or immortal.⁹ As anthropologist Ernest Becker (1975, 64) so eloquently avows:

All cultural forms are *in essence sacred* because they seek the perpetuation and redemption of the individual life... Culture *means* that which is *supernatural*; all culture has the basic mandate to transcend the physical, to permanently transcend it. All human ideologies, then, are affairs that deal directly with *the sacredness of the individual or the group life*, whether it seems that way or not, whether they admit it or not, whether the person knows it himself or not.

But the sacralized ‘realities’ and identities that culture provides are compelling and effective only insofar as they appear to be more than mere constructs, mere human fabrications. To the contrary, sociologist Peter Berger (1967, 33) argues, “the institutional order must be so interpreted as to hide, as much as possible, its *constructed* character.” Our culturally sanctioned realities, in other words, are ‘sacred’ not in spite of but *because* they are obscured. They require mystification.¹⁰

These are by no means wholly evil processes, but neither are they incidental. They are *essential and constitutive* of identity formation itself. And they involve the same dynamics individual “self-making” does: although they may be eminently functional, they are nevertheless constructed, conflicted, and concealing. But while the consequences of individual identity construction are relatively simple, short-lived and fairly limited, the consequences of constructing social, cultural and political identities are complex, long-lived, and disastrously disruptive.

Sacralization of Nation or Ethnicity

In this modern world, our most effective ‘sacred reality’ has increasingly come to reside in ethnicities, communal groups, nations, and nation/states (although often used to denote political entities, ‘nation’—cognate with ‘natal’—more strictly refers to ‘birth-group’ or ethnicity). These

groups have been ‘sacralized’ by the same processes through which individuals, societies and cultures are reified into separate selves or fixed entities¹¹: by creating boundaries that dichotomize the world into ‘us’ and ‘them,’ enforcing homogeneity within and repulsing ‘foreignness’ without, all the while imbuing them with an aura of eternal truth and goodness that *simultaneously sanctifies and obscures* their contingent and constructed nature. In this way we populate our complex, interdependent human environment with multifarious imagined entities such as ethnicities cultures and nations,¹² even though, as anthropologist, Eric Wolf (1982:3) rightly points out,

inquiries that disassemble this totality into bits and then fail to reassemble it falsify reality. Concepts like ‘nation,’ ‘society,’ and ‘culture,’ name bits and threaten to turn names into things. Only by understanding these names as bundles of relationships, and by placing them back into the field from which they were abstracted, can we hope to avoid misleading inferences and increase our share of understanding.

And it is this falsification—this reification of aggregated individuals into discrete, autonomous entities abstracted from their larger, encompassing contexts—that provides the locus of identification necessary for sacralizing order and identity within an ethnic or national identity. The modern nation (in both senses) is thus a socially constructed ‘ultimate reality’ that is imbued with the implicit sacrality all societies share: it is a cosmic order that provides ultimate meaning and purpose and to which we may offer the ‘ultimate sacrifice.’ Thus, by creating order and purpose at the social and political levels, while simultaneously providing a locus of sacralized identity and belonging at the personal level, the nation is the modern sacred order *par excellence*. As Ernest Becker (1975, 113) so eloquently observes:

We couldn’t understand the obsessive development of nationalism in our time—the fantastic bitterness between nations, the unquestioned loyalty to one’s own, the consuming wars fought in the name of the fatherland or the motherland—unless we saw it in this light. “Our nation” and its “allies” represent those who qualify for eternal survival; we are the “chosen people”...All those who join together under one banner are alike and so qualify for the privilege of immortality; all those who are different and outside that banner are excluded from the blessings of eternity.

We can now see how the animosities evoked by ethnic, cultural or national conflict draw upon the deepest dynamics of identity formation. ‘Others’ play an indispensable role in defining ‘us;’ they provide both the contrasting boundary by which we can distinguish who ‘we’ are and the common threat that unites ‘us’ in ‘our’ sacred cosmos.¹³ The attempt to establish and protect essential ethnic or national identities therefore does not merely facilitate evil, it requires it.¹⁴

Identity is thus a tragically double-edged sword. It is the juxtaposition of the sheer fragility of any symbolic order with the magnitude of our need for it, the juxtaposition of our deep dependence upon a larger consensual reality with its constructed and contingent nature, that helps explain the endless violence and warfare waged over sacred symbol systems. Sacred symbol systems proliferate, mix and mutate in the vast marketplace of competing and incompatible worldviews. For many, this radical pluralism is deeply disturbing and destabilizing. For when our sense of order and meaning is tied to the sacralized symbol system of a specific culture, ethnicity, religion, or nation, then threats to its integrity are threats to our very existence. As Peter Berger (1967: 39) warns, “when the socially defined reality has come to be identified with the ultimate reality of the universe, then its denial takes on the quality of evil as well as madness.” The implications of this are both obvious and ominous: when each particular ‘socially defined reality’ is

exclusively sacred, then pluralism produces endless evil and madness. We need not merely imagine what this means.

These processes have generated a vicious cycle of mind-boggling proportions and heart-numbing consequences. As indispensable instruments for sacralizing identity within an eternal sacred order, which provide meaning, purpose and belonging, modern ethnic, national or religious identities have filled the vacuum created by the diminished influence of institutionalized religion in the early modern era.¹⁵ With its implicit promise of immortality, such identities supersede one's personal survival. Men are more than willing to fight and die so that their group, and therefore themselves, may attain immortal life.¹⁶ Paradoxically, as Otto Rank once observed (cited in Becker 1975: 65), "men seek to preserve their immortality rather than their lives." It is this intense identification with groups larger than ourselves that ultimately sacralizes the massive, incalculable blood sacrifice at the altar of the nation or state, our modern *ersatz* religion par excellence. Millions have died defending abstract religious or national symbols or political ideologies such as fascism, fundamentalism, socialism or democracy; millions more have killed in the name of the 'fatherland,' 'racial purity,' or even, most ironically, in the name of a loving God. As H. D. Duncan (1962:131) declares, in this time of ideological warfare "all wars are conducted as holy wars."

We have now reached the bloody paradox of our modern era. Our very attempts to turn reality on its head results in the "paradox... that *evil comes from man's urge to heroic victory over evil*" (Becker 1975: 136), from our ill-chosen means of constructing sacred identities whose very existence requires that we continuously create and vanquish opposing 'evil' entities in the world. Human beings make war and kill each other in a way that no other animal species does because no other species needs to collectively sacralize symbols of reality in order to make sense of their lives.¹⁷ No other species has the capacity, nor the need, to externalize identity out into the wide-open world where its fate, our fate, blows so helplessly in the wind.

III. Interdependence, Identity and Understanding

In the aggregate, these observations from the social sciences not only resemble, but resound classical Indian notions of the construction of identity (*aham-kāra*) as the locus of self-grasping in the face of the radically transient and conditioned nature of the world. These ideas have provided a conceptual framework from which we may make some sense of the massive perpetration of evil and suffering we inflict on each other each and every day. We can see how the construction of identity, and attachment to our 'selves' at the expense of others, functions equally effectively—and nefariously—at the biological and individual levels, as well as at the social, religious, and political levels organized around shared symbol systems. At the individual level, our self-centeredness and ignorance are universally recognized to underlie many of the interpersonal problems in life and much of traditional religious or moral culture has long been directed toward mollifying their expression or ameliorating their excesses. These processes, however, are but the ground level, the bare prerequisites, of our human capacities towards evil.

To understand how these are transmuted into the scale of violence and hatred unique to our species, we have examined the 'sacralization of identity' (*satkāyadr̥ṣṭi*) and its results: how emotional attachments and erroneous beliefs about social, religious and political constructions of reality necessarily lead to in-group/out-group discrimination, with all its exclusionary loyalties and attendant hostilities. Paradoxically, it is the constructive processes of identity itself that conduce to

the unprecedented scale of violence characterizing our blood-soaked era. For built into the self/other dichotomy is the tragic blindness to our ontological interdependence, our mutually conditioned and contingent identities. It is this ignorance that facilitates our blind belief in independent, autonomous entities, whether individuals or groups, ethnicities or cultures, or, more recently, nations and religions, those apogees of belonging and belief in whose name has so much senseless suffering has been instigated and so much needless destruction executed.

Having gained at least some purchase on these unholy dynamics, we cannot avoid asking what can be done to ameliorate these ills, to circumvent these vicious cycles. Indian thinkers have traditionally divided their ameliorative efforts into understanding the human condition and overcoming the baneful influences of our afflictive, self-centered activities. The theoretical analyzes pursued above are not merely an academic exercise, but offer potentially powerful tools for overcoming ignorance and attaining insight regarding the conflicted and constructed nature of human identity. Without such an understanding we could hardly approach these issues in a comprehensive, constructive fashion. We can no longer fully understand the indispensable meaning-making functions that the construction of identity clearly does serve, without at the same time ascertaining the destructive dynamics into which the ‘sacralization of identity’ too readily regresses.

This Janus-face quality of human identity must be an explicit component of any serious attempt to understand our human condition. “Ignorance, thirst for illusion, and fear,” Ernest Becker (1975, 143) urges, must all be “part of the scientific problem of human liberation.” Such a science, he continues (162), “would share a place with historical religions: they are all critiques of false perceptions, of ignoble hero systems. A science of society, in other words... will be a critique of idolatry.” Such a science, in traditional Indian terms, would be a critique of our futile and frustrating efforts to ‘turn reality on its head’ by misconstruing the impermanent as permanent, the unsatisfactory as satisfactory, and what is not-self as self. The collective recognition of both our contingent and conditioned nature and the alienation from a more encompassing reality that underlies all constructed identities is thus an essential component of a new, and yet very ancient, mode of understanding ourselves and our place in the world.

But understanding needs to issue in action. This is no easy task, nor is it to suggest that Buddhists or anyone else possess a panacea for all that ails our times. It is traditionally said that the Buddha taught 84,000 practices directed toward alleviating 84,000 kinds of afflictions. This traditional stock figure expresses the necessity of understanding the particulars of our complex world in order to address its multifarious ills. If, as we have argued above, we have the power to construct our ‘worlds,’ then we also have responsibility for the kind of world we collectively construct. We have little choice but to exercise this weighty responsibility of “the knowledge of good and evil” with intelligence and compassion, fully appreciative of their creative possibilities, fully cognizant of their demonstrated dangers. We have recently reached some consensus on both the grounds and causes of some of the most egregious of these dangers. If this hard-won understanding remains ensconced in the academy or the lab then we may not survive to develop its more promising possibilities.

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¹ This last phrase is close to the literal meaning of the four 'inversions' (*viparyāsa*): regarding the impermanent as permanent, the dissatisfactory as satisfactory, the impure as pure, and what is not self as self. This formula is also found in Patanjali's *Yoga sūtra* II.5.

² We need to qualify Geertz' (1979, 59) cautionary counsel about the various conceptions of 'self' in the world's cultures—"the Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures." First, the Buddhists make a distinction between an innate *sense* of selfhood, which they consider universal, and explicit *concepts* of selfhood, which indeed vary from culture to culture and are the obvious target of Geertz' remarks. However, one must infer from the experience of Buddhist thought in many cultures that even such "Western conceptions" of self and personhood can be found in other times and places. Throughout their history in classical India, for example, the Buddhists' explicit arguments against a notion of essential self (*ātman*), one that was remarkably similar to Geertz' "peculiar idea", consistently met with equally explicit, well-argued and often strident criticisms from opposing thinkers of many stripes. The Buddhist refutation of such a 'self,' moreover, met with puzzled and antagonistic responses nearly everywhere Buddhism has spread. In this respect, we should be as wary of a reconstructed exceptionalism couched in terms of cultural relativism as we need be of uncritical assumptions of cultural universality.

³ Hans Mol (8f), the sociologist of religion, elaborates this important point: "Both in animals and in human beings, security is bound up with order... The need for identity (or for a stable niche in this whole complex of physiological, psychological, and sociological patterns of interaction) is very much bound up with continuous regularity.... Order means survival; chaos means extinction.... Identity, order, and views of reality are all intertwined.... The point is that

an interpretation (any interpretation) of reality is necessary for the wholeness (and wholesomeness) of individual and society.”

⁴ “There is no such things as a human independent of culture.... As our central nervous system—and most particularly its crowning curse and glory, the neocortex—grew up in great part in interaction with culture, it is incapable of directing our behaviour or organizing our experience without the guidance provided by systems of significant symbols... Such symbols are thus not mere expressions, instrumentalities, or correlates of our biological, psychological, and social existence; they are prerequisites of it. (Geertz, 1973: 49).

⁵ Berger, et. al. (1973, 78) make the same point, intertwining themes of selflessness, impermanence, insecurity and a deluded belief in self-identity: “On the one hand, modern identity is open-ended, transitory, liable to ongoing change. On the other hand, a subjective realm of identity is the individual's main foothold in reality. Something that is constantly changing is supposed to the *ens realissimum*. Consequently it should not be a surprise that modern man is afflicted with a permanent identity crisis, a condition conducive to considerable nervousness.”

Sociologist, Anthony Giddens (1991, 185), makes much the same point: “In the reflexive project of the self, the narrative of self-identity is inherently fragile. The task of forging a distinct identity... is clearly a burden. A self-identity has to be created and more or less continually reordered against the backdrop of shifting experiences of day-to-day life and the fragmenting tendencies of modern institutions.”

⁶ Although the very notion of group identity implies relatively well defined boundaries, the world is seldom so neatly divided in practice. Identities, rather, must be forged through processes of abstracting qualities and categorizing classes. As the anthropologist, Mary Douglas (1966, 4) argues: “Ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created.”

⁷ Although we are necessarily classify, categorize and discriminate for eminently practical reasons, fixing boundaries between peoples, groups, cultures, etc. by labeling and stereotyping them is seldom simply neutral. “The maintenance of any strong boundary,” Mol (1976, 174, 11) observes, “requires emotional attachment to a specific focus of identity,” since “it is precisely through emotional fixation that personal and social unity takes place.”

⁸ Mol (1976, 5f) defines sacralization as “the process by means of which on the level of symbol-systems certain patterns acquire the... taken-for-granted, stable, eternal, quality... Sacralization, then... [precludes threats to] the emotional security of personality and the integration of tribe or community.... Sacralization protects identity, a system of meaning, of a definition of reality, and modifies, obstructs, or (if necessary) legitimates change.”

⁹ “The inherently precarious and transitory constructions of human activity are thus given the semblance of ultimate security and permanence.... The institutions are magically lifted above these human, historical contingencies... They transcend the death of individuals and the decay of entire collectivities... In a sense, then, they become immortal... [The modern individual] is what-ever society has identified him as by virtue of a cosmic truth, as it were, and his social being becomes rooted in the sacred reality of the universe.... Like the institutions, then, roles become endowed with a quality of immortality.” Berger (1967, 36f).

¹⁰ This mystification, in the concept of reification, is basic to the sociology of knowledge. Berger and Luckmann (1966, 89f) make a distinction, similar to the Buddhists analysis of self-identity, between two levels of reification of human culture, one implicit and unreflective and the other explicit and cultivated. Reification is “the apprehension of the products of human activity *as if* they were something else than human products - such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will... Reification is possible on both the pretheoretical and theoretical levels of consciousness... it would be an error to limit the concept of reification to the mental construction of intellectuals. Reification exists in the consciousness of the man in the street and, indeed, the latter presence is more practically significant. It would also be a mistake to look at reification as a perversions of an originally non-reified apprehension of the social world, a sort of cognitive fall from grace. On the contrary, the available ethnological and psychological

evidence seems to indicate the opposite, namely, that the *original apprehension of the social world is highly reified both phylogenetically and ontogenetically.*” [Emphasis added.]

¹¹ As the anthropologist Eric Wolf warns: “By endowing nations, societies or cultures with the qualities of internally homogeneous and externally distinctive and bounded objects, we create a model of the world as a global pool hall in which the entities spin off each other like so many hard and round billiard balls. Thus it becomes easy to sort the world into differently colored balls.” Wolf (1982, 6)

¹² “Nationalism depends upon a particular social definition of a situation, that is, upon a collectively agreed-upon entity known as a particular nation.... The definition of a particular group of people as constituting a nation is always an act of social construction of reality. That is, it is always ‘artificial’” Berger (1973, 167).

¹³ Such sacralization, Carrithers (1992, 19) notes, is “also fully consistent with, indeed necessary to, the notion of cultures or societies as bounded, integral wholes. For once mutability and the vicissitudes of history are allowed, the notion of the integrity and boundedness of cultures and societies begins to waver and melt.”

¹⁴ Becker (1975, 148): “The result is one of the great tragedies of human existence, what we might call the need to ‘fetishize evil,’ to locate the threat to life in some special places where it can be placated and controlled.”

¹⁵ Benedict Anderson (11) eloquently describes the spiritual vacuum that nationalism came to fill in the early modern period: “In Western Europe the 18th century marks not only the dawn of the age of nationalism but the dusk of religious modes of thought. The century of the Enlightenment, of rationalist secularism, brought with it its own modern darkness. With the ebbing of religious belief, the suffering which belief in part composed did not disappear. Disintegration of paradise: nothing makes fatality more arbitrary. Absurdity of salvation: nothing makes another style of continuity more necessary. What then was required was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning.”

¹⁶ “The hero is, then, the one who accrues power by his acts, and who placates invisible powers by his expiations. He kills those who threaten his group, he incorporates their powers to further protect his group, he sacrifices others to gain immunity for his group. In a word, he becomes a savior through blood” (Becker, 1975: 150).

¹⁷ “Since men now hold for dear life onto the self-transcending meanings of the society in which they live, onto the immortality symbols which guarantee them indefinite duration of some kind, a new kind of instability and anxiety are created. And this anxiety is precisely what spills over into the affairs of men. In seeking to avoid evil, man is responsible for bringing more evil into the world than organisms could ever do by exercising their digestive tracts.” Becker (1975, 5).