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Radical Decency Reflection #51
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Monumental Self-Absorption

As we got acquainted with our Novgorod guide, on our just completed trip to Russia, she mentioned that she taught world history. Right away I knew what she meant. Her history course went all the way back to the “beginning,” to the “dawn of civilization” about 7,000 years ago. This is what “world history” meant when I was in high school in New York, in the 1960s, and what it means today, half way around the world and two generations later.

Most of us never give this definition a second thought. But when we do, its remarkable weirdness is impossible to avoid. The “world” of which it purports to be a “history of,” has actually existed, not for 7,000 years, but about 4 billion years. Moreover, we Homo sapiens have existed for 300,000 years, and the distinct line of primates that are our lineal ancestors for another 6 million years. So even if we accept the idea that “world” history can legitimately be limited to “human” history, the mainstream definition is still woefully incomplete, ignoring all but a small fraction of our species’ history.

So what is going? As I see it, two fundamental factors are at work.

The first is fairly apparent – once you begin to reflect on the mainstream culture’s wildly distorted vision of world history – and that is our breathtaking self-absorption. World history is about “us,” and us alone. Other species that coexist with us or preceded us – even dinosaurs, who dominated the world far longer than we have – are definitionally written out of world history. Equally absent, with the sweep of our conceptual pen, is any physical phenomena that is not directly implicated in “our” dramas.

Moreover, the “us” we are talking about isn’t even all humans. History only begins when people like us modern folks first appeared; people who lived in sedentary communities, had a written language, and organized themselves in hierarchical and authoritarian patterns. Everyone who lived before then is consigned to “pre-history,” the implicit message being that– having nothing to teach us – these people can and should be ignored.

Notice also, that world history is further limited to very distinct subgroup within this already limited group. Virtually every society and ideology that earns history’s attention has one key element in common: Its ability to dominate large numbers of people during the time of its historical interest. That is the common thread that draws into a coherent story characters as diverse as the Egyptians pharaohs, the ancient Greek philosophers, Roman Emperors, Christian and Muslim thinkers and rulers, Napoleon, the British Empire, Hitler, Stalin, and the United States.

In other words, history is about the winners; about the people who best exemplify a world culture in which competition, dominance and control are valued above all else. Losers,

by contrast, are history's footnotes, foils in the winners' drama. And non-competitors – the truest potential subverters of this mainstream ideology – are simply ignored.

The loss is incalculable. Mainstream history's extreme selectivity relentlessly reinforces the values that dominate the mainstream culture and just as relentlessly neglects alternative ideas. The effect is far more subtle and effective than outright suppression. Why? Because only an identifiable idea or movement – something that exists -- can (or needs to be) suppressed. By contrast, things that through systematic neglect are never even named have no existence at all.

The second factor that the mainstream definition of world history highlights is the extent to which this extreme self-absorption goes unnoticed. How is it that so many teachers, students, textbook writers, and professional historians can so easily and comfortably accept such an obviously distorted definition? The answer is not stupidity. Instead, it is a graphic illustration of the extent to which myopic, self-absorbed ways of thinking are our habitual mindset. From birth – from all sides – and, literally, for millennia – we have been massively brainwashed to think in this way. So why would just one more example be of any particular concern?

Indeed, it is the very pervasiveness of these self-absorbed, self-preoccupied ways of thinking that allows them – as in our example – to hide out, so to speak, in plain sight. There are so many examples, in so many different contexts, we hardly even notice them.

So, for example, serious historians continue to argue the merits of American exceptionalism; the view that this country is different and unique. Really? Seriously? Exceptionalism has been the cry of every empire and petty despot since, well, the dawn of civilization. In fact, the only thing that is exceptional about American exceptionalism is just how truly unexceptional it really is. Similarly, every generation's financial bubble – including the recent run-up of housing prices – has been extolled as an exception to the hitherto normal rules of economics. Every 20 years or so, we are told – and millions of us believe – that our investment strategies are somehow different and special.

Another rather stunning example is intelligent design; the idea that only a being with a brain like ours could have possibly created the world. Here again, massive self-absorption is at work. Physicists, systems theorists, and students of ants have all persuasively demonstrated the existence of intelligences that are not housed within – and bounded by – a single skull. Moreover, contemporary neuroscientists, such as Daniel Seigel, point out that even in our species, intelligence arises from the communion of brains with other brains; that it makes no sense to think about a single brain in isolation. And yet, intelligent design – the unquestioned supremacy of single skulled, human-like intelligence – is put forward as a proposition that is unquestionably true.

Note, moreover, that to the extent our myopic self-absorption is recognized as a serious issue, it is almost universally viewed as someone else's problem. So, in writing the last paragraph, I could almost hear the instinctual judgment of many, more secular readers at

the naïve ego-centrism of intelligent design’s proponents. With equal confidence, I imagine the intellectual superiority felt by more sophisticated historians when faced with the mainstream version of world history, discussed above.

But these reactions are, in reality, just further examples of the very self-absorption about which I am talking. The truth is that we are all remarkably prone to this way of thinking. Committed Christians and Muslims believe that they have found the way. Secularists claim intellectual superiority. National chauvinism is universal. Women judge men, and men judge women. My child is “special.” My school, job, neighborhood, car, or handbag sets me apart, in large ways or small. The list is endless but the common thread is this: We – that is, I and people like me – are different and better.

One very fair response to this rant about self-absorption is to ask why it is so objectionable. Can’t a passionately partisan love of country, or group, or family be an effective and fulfilling approach to living? My answer is a definitive no.

While the immediate psychic pay-offs are real, these self-absorbed approaches to living are, in the end, self-defeating strategies. To begin with, when primary loyalty is to a group, it too easily puts important areas of self-care at risk – suppressing (for example) nonconforming ideas, temperaments, emotions, and/or forms of sexuality. All too typically, it also leads to misguided and destructive loyalty to irresponsible leaders.

But the more fundamental objection is that it is hopelessly at odds with our biology. We humans are intensely creatures of habit. For this reason, a split approach to living – being judgmental and dismissive of “others,” even as we seek to create an island of empathy and understanding in our smaller, self-selected group – can never work. Inevitably, the attitudes we habitually practice, out there in the larger world, will infiltrate and infect ways in which we deal with members of our group and, sadly, with our selves as well.

The proof? We live a world where a split approach is the norm and it has produced just such a dismal outcome; a culture that fails to support us in being decent to our selves – or to others – or to the world.

Radical Decency offers a more hopeful alternative, in two fundamental ways. First, its approach to living is based on behaviors – being decent – and not a set of beliefs. As a result, it avoids the trap of confusing and compromising our vocation of decency with *a priori* notions about who we’re supposed to be.

The second key is its inclusiveness. Radical Decency challenges us to be just as attentive to other living things and to the physical environment as we are to our selves and others. So, with the possibility of privileging one group over another is specifically excluded, it decisively draws us away from self-absorbed mindsets. In their place, we are redirected toward new, habitual mindsets that allow us to more effectively craft ways of living that are more decent to others, to the world – and to our selves.