

Incomplete ‘I’

An Impediment to Reaching Mutual Understanding and Community

by

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I am angry with Susan.

I have the feeling of anger. Susan has done X which arouses in me the feeling of anger. There exists an I-Susan, an I-You, in my experience which seems to fulfill the requirement for awareness of the experience of the organism/environment field.

In my awareness, I perceive in a complex way what Susan did to arouse my feeling of anger. Her action is vivid for me as is my feeling of anger.

Yet, I now contend that beyond my feeling of anger is something in me, a memory, an association, a bodily process that has contributed to the arousal of my feeling in respect to Susan. This is less vivid in my awareness than my perceptions of Susan and her action. This limit to my awareness is what I am calling an “Incomplete ‘I’”

Example: Susan says I am stealthily planning to do something she does not like. She is accusing me of being underhanded. As a result, I am angry with Susan. But why am I angry? There are many possibilities, including my not being angry but interested in what she is about. One reason I might be angry is that she has attacked my integrity. Anger is a common response when one’s integrity is threatened, yet we have not established why there would be a threat. We have transferred anger to the feeling of being threatened. Perhaps Susan has power over me, could hurt me, and I become anxious about that possibility. But I have not had that anxiety in my awareness vividly. So my

awareness is more distinct about Susan and her action than about what has been stimulated in me by Susan's action.

Perhaps Susan has accused me in a public setting and I feel exposed and somewhat shamed. But the feeling of shame, like that of anxiety referred to above, is not vivid in my awareness.

Perhaps there is some truth in Susan's criticism. I do not want to experience that truth and the shame or other feeling connected to my conniving, however innocent I consider myself to be. So that is dimmer than my perception of Susan in my awareness.

There may be many other inner memories and associations stirred up by Susan's action, such as she reminds me of others who have criticized me as my father was ready to do. The significant element in the Incomplete 'I' is how the perception of the other *is balanced* by the interoceptions, which are registrations in awareness of one's interior. The feeling of anger is composed of both perceptions and interoceptions, but the clarity of the interocepts is lesser than the clarity of the percepts.

This is what I am calling an Incomplete 'I'.

Early in his career, in the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, Freud wrote that consciousness was composed of perceptual images and simultaneously of mnemonic [memory] images. He also referred to external quantity in neurons and psychical [internal] quantity getting together in consciousness. In attending to a person's awareness in a relationship with another, it becomes important, I think, to attend to both sets of excitation leading to arousal and attention, which is an aspect of being angry.

Put in a relational context, my expressing my anger at Susan is quite different if 1) I emphasize only the perceptual origins of my anger, her action, from 2) my giving equal

weight to my own contribution to my angry feeling and to her contribution to that feeling. In the first instance, when I emphasize her action and obscure my inner part, I come across as blaming Susan and she will have to defend herself either by aggressing in response or withdrawing from me. My anger can be seen as aimed at dominating Susan. In the second instance, when I give equal weight to what she has done to me and what I have contributed to my feeling, I come across as being open to her as well as to me, and she is more likely to want to meet me on this plane of equality.

We tend to obscure our own contribution because it makes us vulnerable. We forget in such circumstances that we can be both vulnerable and substantial in the same interaction. And, after all, at bottom this is what life is – we are both vulnerable and will be controlled by others and we will ultimately die; and we are substantial as we nonetheless go about living. A more complete ‘I’ is thus life affirming.

There is more. As we consistently dim or obscure our own contribution to anger and other such feelings (e.g. frustration, hurt), we lose access to these contributions. Our awareness is predominantly consciousness of the other. Western culture, with its lack of support to vulnerability and weakness, promotes such limited awareness. I suspect Eastern culture does this also. This culturally-produced bias in awareness makes it hard for people to understand what I am talking about when I refer to an Incomplete ‘I’.

One consequence of limited access to interocepts is the readiness for projecting onto others what is properly one’s own. The inner processes connected to interocepts do not dissipate or disappear. They enter awareness as properties of the other, the classic situation of projecting.

Another consequence is the tendency to create polarities with others, us-them, good-evil, peaceable-aggressive. The complexity of the other and the complexity of one's own person is simplified into these polarities. The polarities in turn lead to divisiveness between persons, groups, nations, religions and so forth. From the pervasiveness of the Incomplete 'I' phenomenon in conversations, in political discourse, and in social life generally, comes enmity, contempt, fearfulness, and deadness in life.

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