

The Egocentric Predicament

In 1910 U.S. philosopher Ralph Barton Perry published an article titled “The Ego-Centric Predicament.” In it he makes a point about “objects/events” outside us—that is, real objects. Perry addresses a question that Western philosophers have long debated: What is the metaphysical status of objects/events? What are things like outside our perception of them?

Perry reasoned that we can never observe things apart from our perception of them. This was obvious enough to Perry, because we must perceive any real object/event in order to know it. If we can’t know things apart from our perception of them, then we can never know whether our perception of things changes them—thus, the egocentric predicament.

Professor of philosophy James Christian has extended Perry’s point by suggesting that the egocentric predicament entails an *illusion*. This egocentric illusion lies in the fact that all our mortal lives we must occupy a physical organism—that is, we must occupy a point in space and time. As a result, it appears to each of us that we are the center of creation. Conversely, it appears to each of us that the whole cosmos revolves around that point in the space-time that we occupy. What’s more, wherever we go in space-time, this egocentric illusion pursues us, because we move our center. In a word, every living, conscious creature experiences itself as the true center of the cosmos, when in fact the cosmos has no true center.

Christian observes that when all humans take themselves as the center of things, we make *aristocentric* claims—that is, inordinate claims to superiority for

ourselves or our group. Aristocentric claims arise because we fail to correct for the egocentric illusion. Taking ourselves as cosmic centers, we may claim that our existence has special meaning, that we have a special knowledge or message, or that we have special powers. Rarely, however, do we make these claims in the singular. This is not surprising, for our arrogant pride would invite scorn and ridicule. But we do make aristocentric claims in the plural: “*We* are something special,” “*We* are favored people,” or “*We* have a unique destiny.” The beauty of such claims is that they’re so easily reinforced by group members. Sociologists have a word for any form of aristocentrism—*ethnocentricity*, the preoccupation with and belief in the superiority of one’s own culture.

When Ralph Barton Perry spoke of the egocentric predicament, he had in mind a timeless metaphysical concern. But, as so often happens, purely philosophical musings have a way of slipping into our everyday lives.

QUESTION

1. The great historian Arnold Toynbee once observed that a human self cannot be brought into harmony with absolute reality unless it rids itself of self-centeredness. Why is this so?

Source: James Christian, *Philosophy: An Introduction to the Art of Wondering* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973), 50–58.