

The experience that we have of our lives from within, the story we tell ourselves about ourselves in order to account for what we are doing, is fundamentally a lie – the truth lies outside, in what we do.

Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: six sideways*, 2008, p. 47

Our true nature

The main principle in the citation is that human beings will go to great extents to sustain an image, one that they are either entitled to or not, of a glorious “self”. “The most difficult is not to deceive yourself”, as Wittgenstein so eloquently said. We invent stories in order to account for our actions, to fulfil this ideal of a good man, perhaps even a great man. We do this because the alternative is terrifying; the bitterest realization is the one where the illusion of a greater “self” shatters, to live with the idea of yourself as inferior to most humans can be unbearable. It takes great courage to admit one’s incompetence, or worse, one’s profound immorality. We are therefore willing to lie and “manipulate” ourselves in our attempt to justify and rationalize our actions that are regarded as immoral or controversial, while we also overestimate our ethical standards and virtuous actions. The quote raises this important question: What is our true “self”?

Is the true nature of ourselves, the one we witness from within? Or are others in a better, less biased position to condemn or praise our actions and thereby understand our true nature? The actions perceived by the world, by other people, bear witness of the true nature of one’s “self”, claims Slavoj Žižek. What we do, is the truth. Thought is irrelevant, only actions can present our purpose and ideas in full and honest transparency. Žižek could potentially be influenced by Socrates, who claimed that “once we know what is good, we will commit good deeds”. Therefore, our actions are the world’s way of truthfully understanding us. “The truth lies outside, in what we do”, as the philosopher states.

Žižek’s citation brings connotations to the quote of Goethe in Faust: “In the beginning was action.” Thought and rationality evolved later in history and brought along the possibility of self-delusion. Žižek claims that this is true as it is pure behaviour perceived by other people, and perhaps even by yourself without the lies and “self-propaganda”. Mere action is honesty; it is our true nature.

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A question that arises a reaction to Žižek 's conclusion, is this: Do other people not have an agenda themselves, as they wish to condemn other's actions in order to feel good about themselves in comparison? How can they possibly perceive you more truthful than yourself? And what about "phony" people, with their actions designed to impress others? As Jon Elster said: "Nothing is as unimpressive as behaviour designed to impress." Also, one could perhaps add that nothing is as dishonest and untrue as behaviour designed to impress. This is incompatible with Žižek's idea; are our actions projections of our true self, which we justify to ourselves in order to respect and praise ourselves, or are actions a "phony" way of persuading others that we are virtuous and decent men? And if the latter is true, what is then our true self?

What is completely true, one could argue, is the behaviour that bears no consequences, like what a completely apathic person may experience. No witnesses to impress, no ideal of one's self. Or, drunkenness, when defence mechanisms are down, and social filters dissolved. Or, more interesting perhaps, the intuitive behaviour, as in the case of the family of four on vacation in Switzerland: They are relaxing at a cabin in the mountains, when they all observe a brutal avalanche approaching with fierce speed. The father completely ignores the screaming of his family, puts on his skis and run downhill. The family stays behind in the cabin, the children crying, clinging to their mother. The avalanche never reaches the cabin, and the scenery is quite a farce, really, but it portrays the father's actions as product of pure intuition (or instinct, perhaps), and the genuine agency of saving himself is displayed in his actions. It may be what is called his true nature; cowardice.

Human beings tend to forget the obvious fact that we all perceive the world somewhat differently. We may not share the same perceptions of colours; what looks "green" for one, may another person call "red", although they both refer to it as blue. Some people resemble more than others, we range from fundamentally to slightly different in ways of thinking. The colours is a very specific example, but it is convertible to many other aspects of life – metaphysics, ethics, quality, religion, language, thought, etc. These are all fields of live that are applicable in our culture. Our different perceptions of reality make us compromise our

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personality when living in a society, as it is necessary to reduce the different perceptions to a minimum to function as a whole. Yes, society may be the one that has formed us, but we also have a vital ability to cultivate our personality and our “self” through rationality and will. A society with tight bonds and extensive social norms will limit this ability, this way of self-realization.

The boundaries of social conformity are an obstacle in the discovery of our true self.

It is an existential right to be able to define your own “self”. Through rationality you should, theoretically, be able to cultivate your own ego and identity. Actions are not the whole truth, because actions are devised and committed in relation to others, which can be argued is less relevant for the idea of your own “self”. How are we, if we were to follow Žižek’s reasoning, able to grasp the truth of ourselves? Through others? How can we be certain they are not biased, or completely wrong, with their fairly different perception of reality. Anyhow, it is certainly an existentially problematic process if we were to thrust others with the truth of ourselves.

Slavoj Žižek presents an interesting argument for the self-delusional justification of our immoral actions, but the statement cannot be understood solely as an argument that other people may grasp the truth of who you are, whilst you yourself are unable to. Perhaps his citation can be interpreted as if saying that there is no way to understand the truth of ourselves because our mind and self-image is biased, but so is other people, with different perceptions of reality and agendas of their own. Perhaps the only solution is to read philosophy like the one of Žižek’s in order to be aware of our own lies.

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