

Alone or Together

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The question whether Life arises and exists elsewhere in the universe — not just here on earth, where the necessary preconditions have been favorable in distance from our planet's distance from the sun, liquid water, a regulating moon, protected atmosphere, etc. — has been largely resolved, at least in theory. Modern astronomy and astrophysics have performed the observations, done the math, weighed in, and concluded that the odds are heavily in favor of life existing elsewhere.

Even in the observable universe — which is to say, the cosmos we can confirm through the astronomical technology of optical and radio telescopes developed over the past century — so many galaxies exist (currently estimated at about two trillion), each having at least 100 billion star systems, many of which contain orbiting planets. That means that the total number of planets would be 1 followed by 24 zeros. I'm not sure that there's even a name for such a mind-boggling number. Even if only an infinitesimal percentage of those planets qualify as potentially life-supporting, the probabilities are still so high that it would be utterly absurd to think that life arose only here on earth.

"Intelligent life" in advanced civilizations from other planets remains speculative — except in the UFO community, which believes that sophisticated extraterrestrials not only exist, but have visited the earth, may even have been responsible for creating the human species, are here among us now, and are known to the government and the Deep State. I don't have an opinion about that one way or the other, so I'll leave that issue aside.

Overall, the question of our being alone has been laid to rest. Life quite probably exists throughout the universe. We humans are, however, still learning about our own biology, and for that, our planet remains the primary and best source of information.

Among Mother Nature's fundamental rules is that "*Everything Eats Everything Else*," which is to say that every species is food for some other species. Sometimes this is through predation, with the hunted being killed and eaten by the hunters. Other times it is through the natural process of death and decay. For instance, a significant component of nutrient-rich organic soil, on which we humans depend to grow our plant crops, is the decayed corpses of insects.

Recent studies have indicated an alarming reduction in insect populations, probably due to pesticide use and loss of watershed habitat. 40% fewer insects may seem like a blessing — fewer mosquito bites and flies to swat, right? Unfortunately, that's actually bad news for us, because it means that fertile soil isn't being replenished. So, it's not just the pollinator bees on which we depend for agriculture, but the entire living substructure of the insect world. We can't survive without them. If insects vanish, we vanish too. This means that not only does *Everything Eat Everything Else*, but also that *Everything is Connected*. All the life forms on earth are mutually interdependent. We are, quite literally, one big family.

And yet, many human beings — at times perhaps even most — experience reality as if we are alone and disconnected from all other living entities. Too often, some of us act as if nothing else matters but ourselves. Other life forms seem to mean little or nothing to us. We use all that the earth provides, manipulating environments and extracting resources, based solely on our own values, without respect or reverence for the rest of life teeming around us. Now that so many people exist and the scale of our industrial and economic activity is so vast, that disregard has gotten us into deep trouble.

In addition to our apparent insensitivity and lack of regard for other life forms on earth (and for the earth itself), we are also disconnected from our own kind. The sympathy and empathy for other human beings that would seem natural are often absent. One has only to observe civilization to see that this is so. It's as if human beings are fighting among ourselves to determine who wins and who loses, and the rules are extreme. Winners take all, losers get nothing.

How has such a terrible and potentially catastrophic state of affairs come to pass within humanity and civilization? Has our species always been so disconnected from the experience of Oneness, or is this attitude increasing in modern civilization? Does something in our nature cause such disturbed alienation, or have we somehow failed to nurture empathy and belonging, essentially preventing their development in ourselves? Are we defective or just crazy? Can the condition be changed, improved, or healed within us?

These are questions for which I do not have authoritative or verifiable answers. Anything I write here will be simply sharing my thoughts and speculations on what is, to me at least, a very worrisome matter.

Most of the major spiritual traditions established over the past four millennia have attempted to address this situation through differing explanatory narratives. Christianity speaks of the "fall from grace" and original sin. Buddhism has its "Wheel of Samsara" to describe the illusions of embodied life in physical manifestation. Those and most other spiritual traditions emphasize the importance of love, forgiveness, and/or compassion in countering the negative effects of human actions provoked reactively by our fear and alienation.

In addition to spiritual traditions are the mythological stories from cultures past, as well as the evidence from history and the more recent revelations from the modern disciplines of biology, anthropology, and psychology.

A common thread runs through all the information, from whatever source, whether scientific, mythic, or religious. While individuation is a natural and necessary part of our evolution, it has downsides in various shadow aspects. Sometimes, more separateness leads to increasing alienation and isolation. When that occurs, our individuation doesn't produce the positive feeling of uniqueness in good fellowship with others, but rather the painful experience of being alone and separated from everyone else. That has become a serious side effect of modern civilization.

The sense of belonging in families or communities has always presented problems — too many families are not loving, and some communities are small-minded and closed. The modern world has dramatically increased those problems, however, in part because of we live now in a technological world that encourages impersonal connections. The Internet, with its forums, chat room, and virtual communities of online social media, are very seductive and may seem to give us a sense of belonging, but virtual anything is not the same as real something.

In addition, consumer culture based on advertising further divides and dehumanizes us. Yes, advertising routinely displays happy people enjoying abundant social interactions, but advertisers use those images of "togetherness" to convince us that buying their products will enhance our experience of belonging. The target-marketing algorithms that select which pop-up ads any individual sees online do not care about us as humans. Their sole interest is to promote sales of whatever the companies paying for those ads are hawking.

While humanity has always struggled with the paradoxes of belonging and togetherness versus individuation and separateness, it's becoming more and more obvious that we're headed in the wrong direction collectively. Alienation is increasing, and both true togetherness and positive uniqueness are diminishing. The challenge for humanity to make civilization more humane has hit a major roadblock. We're struggling through a time when the most disruptive forms of us versus them are rampant. This won't be remedied through greater conformity, for that superficial sameness has never truly brought us together. Conformity may make some people feel safer, but it doesn't enhance their appreciation of personal uniqueness.

Belonging/Togetherness and Individuality/Separateness are not exclusive (either/or), but inclusive (both/and). They may seem contradictory, but they're actually complementary. To be meaningful and positive, Togetherness needs the balance of Separateness. Belonging in group identity succeeds as a loving bond

only when Individuality is recognized and allowed. The converse is equally true. Separateness and Individuality are incomplete without the complementary experiences of Belonging and Togetherness. Too much of either side is damaging to the psyche.

Hope for our future lies in the enlarging of social family and the evolution of pluralism in real communities, where Belonging and Togetherness are accompanied by acceptance of Individuality and celebration of Uniqueness.

My next commentary, "The Other," will discuss racism, xenophobia, and tribalism, all ancient problems that continue to divide us and must be, if not completely transcended, at least diminished if humanity is to survive and prosper.