

Sources of the Self

A college is a collection of people. But... there are all kinds of people-collections, so which fits best with a college: A mob, a gang, a tribe? A club, a society, an association? A company, a corporation / A charity an organisation? A community, a body, a church?

Like many decent questions, the question, What is a College? – has an uncanny way of turning into, “Who’s asking?” “Who are you? And why?” And that’s quite a big question. So... here’s a couple of possibilities.

At one extreme there is a view of the human self which has – in recent decades – eclipsed every other model of selfhood:

The expanding circle view of the universe, has the individual Me at the centre. Me – Family – Tribe. And if that seems too tribal, then you can expand the circle to include all humans, all animals, all plants, all forms of life and so on. And yet, it is ME at the centre. The captain of my own ship, the maker of my own destiny. Now, there’s nothing new about this radically me-centred universe – but today, it is the dominant model of understanding our place in the universe. We are, after all, at the centre of our own lives. The I, the ego, the ego-centric self – and I mean egocentric, positively!

And there are good moral guidelines that come with the healthily egocentric self. Because we know there are limits to our ego. Freedom to swing my fist ends where your nose begins! (Unless you are the senior tutor of Clare Hall come to sample therapy boxing – then she just enjoys unlimited freedom... ask Jonny?)

A very different view of the self – A view of the world that recognises, from the moment of birth – we are all of us, completely dependant on a you! A you who will feed us and nurture us and help us. Then we

discover there are others. A they... and then, quite late in the day, we discover a me. So that the self is far from the centre – but almost on the periphery. And there are still cultures where the self, is still very much its own self, but is consciously dependant on a network of people from whom identity is derived. That is, an outside-centred self, the exo-centric self as opposed to ego-centric.

Egocentric. Exocentric. And these are only two examples of understanding selfhood, and they don't have to be mutually exclusive.

The expanding circle around a me. The interpersonal discovery of a me.

Self at the centre of an expanding circle. Self on the periphery. An identity rooted in inward reflection. An identity rooted in a community.

Egocentric. Exocentric. Both, it seems, are necessary.

So, for instance, in a me-centred world – I decide who I am, how I want to be perceived, what my name it and so on. And whilst it might be tempting to think, stupid young generation – reinventing their identities without reference to others... it's nothing new! Yesterday, I visited my dad in hospital in Birmingham. At 87 years old, he was the youngest on the ward... but at the top of his bed, was the name Graham. And I sat there with my sisters, asking 'who is Graham?' Well, it's my Dad's real name, but at the age of 3 – yes 3 years old – he decided he did not want to be called Graham, refused to answer to Graham, rebuked anyone who called him Graham – and decided his name, was Bill. And that's who he is! And that's how he's known. He decided his own identity, during an era that was a lot less explicitly ego-centric than his grandchildren's generation.

But... where we might see a difference in the generations is that if you asked parents of my generation, what they want for their children – they want their children to be happy! Nothing wrong with that, but

the prioritization of happiness in an individualistic world – is likely to lead to anything but happiness. If you asked parents of my father's generation, what they wanted for children – they would say that they want their children to be good. That does not mean culturally compliant, morally submissive unreflective herd animal. It meant, being rooted in a community and in a healthy state of relationship to others. Knowing that if you prioritize that, happiness is likely to be a regular but unplannable and spontaneous experience.

The prioritization of happiness is very much the product of the me-centred world. The prioritization of goodness assumes a self derived from mutually self-giving relationships.

So there you have it: two very different but equally valid views of the human self.

The self in glorious isolation and self-invention; and the self as a glorious product of wider human relationships.

The expanding circle around me and what I want and my responsibility and how I want to be perceived; and the self as a being that receives itself back from belonging to something bigger.

And individual – in self-contained identity; A person, with a communal identity.

Now in the me-centred world, identity is what makes me unique.

In the other-centred world, identity means sameness, I share it with others.

The me-centred world, I identify AS

The other-centred world, I identify WITH

And so we come back to identifying AS and WITH a college.

On the me-centred worldview, a college exists to provide me with what I need. And that is valid and crucial and to be celebrated.

On the other-centred worldview, the college is a community of which I am a member, literally, a limb, I am joined to it, with its blood and its

pulse pumping through my being – and its identity is expressed through me!

And, given that in contemporary climate, the ego-centric view of the self is dominant, I wonder if its worth reflecting on how an exo-centric view of the self affects what is a College?

With the ego-centric self, the College is an association of mutual self-interest.

With the exo-centric self, the College is a body with its own pulse. And a College surely needs both. It is rooted in human relationships, no matter what other dynamics may be at work here. Because this, at root, is how love works – right?

You are attracted to a person out of self interest – YOU find THEM attractive, in whatever sense of that word. Ego-centric.

But if you love them, there is a self-giving, Exo-centric element – so that you receive yourself back from that person, more fully your own self than you could otherwise be.

Isn't that what makes a College? For each member, you chose this college. And this college chose you. You give yourself to a college so that your identity is expressed through who the College is. And that the College's identity is somehow expressed through you.

So, what is a college? You are! Whatever else you are, as a member, you are a representative of this College. And it's you and me, every one of us, that makes this college what it is.

of his generation, what they wanted for their children – they wanted their children to be good!
There is a communal dimension here, that is quite sophisticated.

but at 87, he remembers the second world war, he remembers bombs dropping around him at night, he remembers being evacuated. He is of that generation. And

Freedom to swing my fist ends where your nose begins! (Unless you are the senior tutor of Clare Hall come to sample therapy boxing – then it's just unlimited freedom... isn't it, Jonny?)

Member, is a limb...

Identity -not something you claim for yourself, but something you identify *with*

As with any person that you love – you love this person, these people for who they are – and you love them so much that they affect who you become.

In defence of ivory towers...

1. Organised fun ... produces a generation of people who can only thrive under an organizer!
2. Colleges in oxford – mutual self interest.
3. Colleges in capitalistic education : where we use phrases like, USP, Human Resources, College a place where humans are saleable commodities? PR!!!!
4. Where measurability of the unmeasurable is necessary to justify our existence.
5. To comply rather than conform – and yes, we all know how to use the language of thinking outside the box, defy convention,
6. Dad's name