

Self Perception and the Other

Man's perception of himself is usually shaped by his own cultural background, education and life experience. And because every man's cultural background, education and life experience is different from that of others, no man should allow his perception of himself to be shaped by others, especially strangers. People pass judgments on their own acts and behavior based on their values, belief systems and life objectives. And since values, belief systems and personal objectives tend to be different from one person to another and from one society to another, any man's judgment of others' acts and behavior can never be accurate; it may never be fair as well. In fact, most peoples' values and belief systems and cultures and life objectives are likely to contradict with one another rather than be similar to each other. Our inability to realize these facts and acknowledge the role they play in our lives have caused our world to be plagued by misunderstandings and conflicts that seem to have no end in sight.

One day I found myself in the company of four business people who had made fortunes working in countries other than their own; two of the men had made their fortunes working as contractors in an Arab gulf state, while the third had made his in banking and finance; the fourth businessman had made his fortune trading, particularly with Africans. When they began recounting the unethical tactics and dirty tricks they used to bribe and corrupt officials and consequently cheat the countries that hosted them, I was shocked; I felt dizzy and disoriented, as if being placed suddenly out of place in a dark, vast space. And while I was trying to digest what I had been hearing, the highly regarded businessmen were laughing and bragging about their tactics; proud of themselves and the methods they used to entice the greedy and corruptible to cheat their countries and countrymen, and thus lead them to participate in exploiting the poor, the ignorant and the less fortunate.

The fourth businessman who made his money in Africa is a very decent, likable and generous person. Yet, one of the stories he told us was shocking; it was as outrageous as any crime could be. He said that after the Italians had left Ethiopia in the wake of their defeat in the Second World War, chaos erupted in the Ethiopian capital and traders with

whom he used to do business asked him if he would be interested in buying the copper wires that carried electricity in the city. After he agreed to buy the copper, they cut the wires and sold it to him. Following the conclusion of the deal, and because of the tremendous profits he was expecting to make, he went to the church to pray and thank God.

It is clear that what they had done is unethical and unjust and unacceptable to people like me who spent most of their lives in the academia searching for the truth and helping their students succeed. But for them, what they had done and how they did it was not just acceptable but smart. Therefore, cultures and the values they instill in people and the objectives they teach them to seek make us different, and thus deny us the opportunity to fully understand the other and accurately and justly judge their acts.

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