Shared States

Essay [1] / Juste Jonutyte [2] June 25, 2021

We live at a time of accelerating inequalities, a physical and mental health crisis, and extended social isolation. During such times, it might be tempting to point fingers and blame others, denounce "society" altogether as Margaret Thatcher once did, and affirm the tenacity of the individual. If others aren't looking out for me, one might think, why am I to invest myself in them?

The urgency of relating is now as ripe as ever. However, as equally important as proactively relating to others is recognizing the always already related state we are all in. From psychology to popular culture, from medicine to existentialist philosophy, an image of a person as an individual pervades: as if each one of us is a separate being, who "comes together" to form groups, societies, and other entities, a Hobbesian Leviathan of sorts. In recent decades, such a perspective has been furthered by pervasive neoliberalism, where each person is expected—morally and practically—to be self-sufficient and independent first, and only then a part of something larger. However, such individualism is peculiar both culturally and historically, and much ethnographic and other research demonstrates the deep embeddedness of individuals within their social, material, and cultural contexts. It goes so far as to challenge the idea of individuals' emotional worlds—often thought of as one's most intimate interior—as exclusively "inner" and private. That is, what we feel, how we feel it, in what situations, and how we express it, is shaped by our culture and society or, differently put, is shared. Such shared emotional worlds might be rather scary, challenging our deep-lying image of independent self, but also powerful, offering perspectives of radical togetherness and belonging.

Anthropologists have gone so far as to suggest that at least in some cultures, persons are not perceived as individuals, or indivisible, autonomous wholes, but rather as dividuals, or as amalgamations of relations. As Marilyn Strathern (1988: 13) writes for Melanesia: "Far from being regarded as unique entities, Melanesian persons are as dividually as they are individually conceived...Indeed, persons are frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produce them."1 If personhood is not bound to separate, distinct, unique individuals, neither is what we think of as their inner world. Let's consider one part - emotions. We may think that we feel as individuals but shared emotions have long been a topic in sociology, anthropology, and other disciplines. The sociologist Arlie Hochschlid, for instance, writes of emotions as in large part social and normative: we know what we are supposed to feel in certain situations, and we may even police such appropriate feelings in ourselves as well as others. We may also share embodied reactions to transgressions, be it cringing in distaste of other's excessive sensitivity or, as Paul Heelas writes of the Chewong in Malaysia, becoming dizzy upon stingy behaviour - examples of how emotional lives may be shared in culturally-specific ways rather than universal. To the cultural theorist Sara Ahmed, emotions are essentially cultural practices rather than psychological states. She writes of emotions as, in a sense, existing in between people rather than within them, providing a kind of social cement which binds communities while simultaneously excluding others from them.

So people are related in underlying ways that usually go unseen. Such human emotional relatedness might at times be bound - or concealed - by cultural difference or desired exclusion. But might it also be extended beyond the human? Proponents of the "extended mind" theory and more narrowly of its "extended emotions" strand would say yes. They argue that cognitive and mental processes including emotive ones "extend beyond the natural confines of the body and incorporate some external entities, be it physical utensils, technological devices or even other individuals, supraindividual systems, or groups" (León, Szanto & Zahavi 2019: 4848).2 Examples of this might be a seemingly unified and unidirectional ritual milieu or the ways in which music partakes in our emotional atmosphere through, say, cheering us up or guiding the shift in emotions as a tracklist progresses. More than simply triggering emotional responses, the surrounding world can mediate, absorb, intensify, regulate, co-create, and seemingly partake in them, to name just several of its affordances.

This special issue thus seeks to explore the potentialities of shared inner worlds – human and more-

than-human – asking what they mean in the contemporary world, and how they might unite or divide. We propose that exploring individuals' inner worlds as always already shared has implications for understanding the present moment marked by polarization, conflict, neoliberal individualism, and isolation, but also increased interest in community and ecology. The photo essay by Gerda Paliušytė [3], created for this special issue, explores the enmeshment of the urban and the natural, as they partake in intimate but deeply mundane settings of urban growth. Video work by Amir Yatziv [4] tests the limits between different species: where does the human 'end', and the avatar 'begin'? The topic of visibility and perceived worlds is also a crucial one: what do we see with our eyes, and what is left inside? What, from the inside, spills out into the exterior, and how does it affect others? Chen Tamir and Markús Þór Andrésson [5] explore the links between interiority, expression, and reception. They ponder a new-found sincerity in art, and discuss how it (dis)connects artists, subjects and viewers, and how it responds to, and ultimately also influences the context of contemporary art and culture. Post Brothers [6] and Artūras Tereškinas [7] both discuss the potential of negative emotions for the social and political realms. While Tereškinas concludes that disappointment hardly motivates people for political action, Post Brothers sees potential in "shared emotional fury", which may inspire new forms of togetherness and action through friction. Eglė Kulbokaitė & Dorota Gaweda [8] look into the emotion of fear, tracing how it develops alongside the inside/outside dichotomy, whereas in Rojute [9]'s work the topics of fear and anxiety are uncovered through the study of language (mother-tongue). Finally, in their text, Yates Norton and David Ruebain [10] bring up the question of interdependency (or, as they put it, "mutual reliance and flourishing") through exploring disability, relationship-building and inclusion, thus circling back to the main topic of this special issue. Rather than being solely private, therefore, inner worlds are inherently communal, producing shared states amongst and often beyond people.

Sharing is difficult; it entails as much vulnerability as it does fortitude. Amidst a social crisis in the overheating world, it might be more than this predicament that we share.

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- 1. Strathern, Marilyn (1988). *The Gender of the Gift. Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*.
- 2. León, Felipe, Szanto Thomas & Zahavi Dan (2019). "Emotional Sharing and the Extended Mind." *Synthese* 196.

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