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CONSTRUCT OF REALITY - STATIC OR EVOLUTIONARY?

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If the fundamental construct around which life has been shaped, falls flat, then all that has happened in the past is questionable, can we deal with this predicament? This article explores this question by examining two personalities.

"If I can't manage the fundamentals of my business on a regular basis which is cost, revenue, profit and cash flow on my own then I have no right to call myself an entrepreneur"

"The idea of becoming a part of top team of a new venture means that you have to stretch consistently and fulfill the need of the customer always, whatever it takes"

"Who can take 5 days leave if its viral? this is a luxury we can't afford"

"In a country like ours to succeed and grow professionally, evenings are only for the weekends"

"We are a sales organization; we only understand numbers and therefore anything soft will be outrightly rejected"

"Business development in our kind of industry eventually boils down to old boys club"

These are some of the sentences that I hear when I interact with professionals as a part of Leadership Development assignments. The interactions start as a part of a conversation where the professional or a team is either facing a challenge or anticipate a challenge. As we go deeper into the discussions, many a times, we realize that the strength of the statement is based on a construct of reality which is created by the individual, more strongly s/he shares it with his/her facts and personal experiences, chances are more likely his/her decisions are governed by it. At some stage as the conversation progresses, there comes a point of choice where an individual is willing to genuinely explore possibility of another construct or walk out (well not always literally!) of the situation with his/her prevailing construct.

Inspector Javert's predicament, Les Misérables

Whenever I meet people who belong to the second category, I am reminded of Inspector Javert from Victor Hugo's classic Les Misérables. Javert developed a construct in which life is black and white, respect and following the law reigns supreme and individuals specially criminals at the core remain static. He lives this construct all throughout his life, however there comes a time when the protagonist Jean Valjean makes a choice that questions and crumbles the foundation of Javert's construct of reality. Unable to understand and perhaps reconcile he takes the extreme step of committing suicide. Javert thus symbolizes the predicament, If the fundamental construct around which life has been shaped, falls flat, then all that has happened in the past is questionable perhaps a lie and with this burden and with no other anchor to rely on, life loses its significance. This is an extreme case, however in degrees of moderation we may encounter this phenomenon when we hear sentences like the ones I shared above. The ability to engage in a dialogue to explore possibilities of alternate constructs can be challenging, nerve racking, suffocating or liberating. How strongly one identifies with the construct, usually determines the challenge of being open to look for an alternative. In case of Javert he identifies completely with his construct and therefore holds it very closely and reacts strongly whenever he finds anything even slightly challenging it.

"Reform is a discredited fantasy. Modern science tells us that people are by nature, law breakers or law abiders. A wolf could wear sheep's clothing but he's still a wolf." -Inspector Javert Movie Les Misérables 1998

The challenge in his case is not about a situation distant from him, the challenge is linked to the ideals on which his existence rests, therefore it becomes necessary to react strongly for the reasons of self-preservation.

Can someone who identifies so strongly with a certain construct of reality truly question, explore and even agree to accept another construct without committing suicide (literally or figuratively)?

Mandana Mishra a Hindu Philosopher

While there may be many characters real or fictional, the one that comes to my mind is Mandana Mishra a Hindu Philosopher (around 8th century) who studied and practiced the **Purva Mimamsa** (loosely translated as ritualism) philosophy. His level of immersion in this philosophy was so strong that it was said even the parrots outside his house would recite lines from the philosophy that he subscribed to. He was challenged by Adi Shankaracharya who was again a great Indian philosopher who subscribed to the Advaita Vedanta (simple translation non-duality) philosophy and was on a mission to unify India in a certain way.

Realization and acceptance

This incident is often discussed in India, in which after a lot of twists and turns Mandana Mishra (who was much older to Adi Shankaracharya) accepts his defeat. In his whole lifetime he has not only subscribed to and lived by the Purva Mimamsa philosophy but also defeated a lot of other intellectuals who believed in other philosophies and had a huge list of disciples. After he realizes the limits of his philosophy by debating with much younger Adi Shankaracharya, he becomes a disciple of Shankaracharya. He was one of the four main disciples of Shankaracharya and was the first head of Sringeri Mutt, one of the four mathas that Shankaracharya later established.

There were definitely some conditions that the two had agreed with respect to the loser, before the debate. However, to accept that the construct of reality that one has lived, propagated and worshipped for decades has its own limitations and then to imbibe and teach a new way of life, is really remarkable. This exemplifies, no matter how deep the identification with a construct is, one can choose to at-least consider another construct provided one is clear that the construct and the individual are not one and the same. To exaggerate the point, we can say -Death of one doesn't amount to death of the other and therefore it is not an existential crisis.

To help individuals and team discover their level of identification with a construct of reality that they have created, is an amazing journey. The moment people realize it, many a times, they also see the inherent fallacies/limitations in it, and thus starts a new journey. A journey that Mandana Mishra took centuries ago and Javert couldn't.

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