

The Psychology of Conformity



On Cultivating One's Uniqueness

“To the extent that one is responsible for one's life, one is alone. Responsibility implies authorship; to be aware of one's authorship means to forsake the belief that there is another who creates and guards one. Deep loneliness is inherent in the act of self-creation. One becomes aware of the universe's cosmic indifference. Perhaps animals have some sense of shepherd and shelter, but humankind, cursed by self-awareness, must remain exposed to existence.” (Existential Psychotherapy, Irvin Yalom)

“He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation. He who chooses his plan for himself employs all his faculties.” (John Stuart Mill)

“If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer.” (Henry David Thoreau)

“A man's shortcomings are taken from his epoch; his virtues and greatness belong to himself.” (Goethe)

“And truly it demands something godlike in him who has cast off the common motives of humanity and has ventured to trust himself for a taskmaster. High be his heart, faithful his will, clear his sight, that he may in good earnest be doctrine, society, law, to himself, that a simple purpose may be to him as strong as iron necessity is to others!” (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Self-Reliance)

“To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.” (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

“At your birth a seed is planted. That seed is your uniqueness. It wants to grow, transform itself, and flower to its full potential. It has a natural, assertive energy to it. Your Life's Task is to bring that seed to flower, to express your uniqueness through your work. You have a destiny to fulfill. The stronger you feel and maintain it – as a force, a voice, or in whatever

form – the greater your chance for fulfilling this Life’s Task and achieving mastery.” (Mastery, Robert Greene)

Dangers of Conformity

“The opposite of courage in our society is not cowardice, it is conformity.” (Rollo May)

“No shepherd and one herd! Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same: whoever feels different goes voluntarily into a madhouse.” (Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra)

“People often, and perhaps usually, do not nourish what they have, but instead fall back on what is common, pleasant, easy, or worst of all, expected. They simply fall into step with what others are doing, absorb their values from others instead of creating their own, pattern their lives after the common mold – and then hear with comfort the egalitarian teaching that no one is any better than anyone else anyway. Their own lack of achievement, they conclude, is no fault. The common herd of human being sets the standards and the rules, glorifies them as the very teachings of some god, and those who might, through hard work and the cultivation of their special gifts, try to rise above this herd, to become literally better than these, they dismiss as having failed in advance. If no one is, or can be, any better as a person than anyone else, then there is no point in trying, is there?” (Restoring Pride, Richard Taylor)

“[The masses] are normal not in what may be called the absolute sense of the word; they are normal only in relation to a profoundly abnormal society. Their perfect adjustment to that abnormal society is a measure of their mental sickness. These millions of abnormally normal people, living without fuss in a society to which, if they were fully human beings, they ought not to be adjusted, still cherish “the illusion of individuality,” but in fact they have been to a great extent deindividuated. Their conformity is developing into something like uniformity. But “uniformity and freedom

are incompatible. Uniformity and mental health are incompatible too....
Man is not made to be an automaton, and if he becomes one, the basis for
mental health is destroyed.” (Brave New World Revisited, Aldous Huxley)

“When a person represses his capacity for spontaneity and self-assertiveness, because he wants to be certain that his responses always conform to the moral ideals laid down by his particular authorities, he disowns a part of himself – in the name of protecting his self-esteem.” (The Disowned Self, Nathaniel Branden)

“Every generation laughs at the old fashions, but follows religiously the new.” (Henry David Thoreau)

“Most people are not even aware of their need to conform. They live under the illusion that they follow their own ideas and inclinations, that they are individualists, that they have arrived at their opinions as the result of their own thinking— and that it just happens that their ideas are the same as those of the majority. The consensus of all serves as a proof for the correctness of “their” ideas. Since there is still a need to feel some individuality, such need is satisfied with regard to minor differences; the initials on the handbag or the sweater, the name plate of the bank teller, the belonging to the Democratic as against the Republican party, to the Elks instead of to the Shriners becomes the expression of individual differences.” (The Art of Loving, Erich Fromm)

“In life, what seems like the easy way is usually the hard way, and what seems like the hard way is usually the easiest way in the long run. The individual who looks for the easy ways in life is doomed. He will never meet his potential at school, at work, or in his personal relationships and spiritual life. Life will only get harder and harder for him while he simultaneously makes life harder and harder for others. When we choose the easy way, it eventually becomes the hardest way of all, dragging us down, along with the people nearest and dearest to us. One of the most seductive of the easy ways is conformity. We all sometimes find ourselves trying to be like others in order to stay out of trouble and be accepted. Our

lives get smaller and smaller, and our very selves seem to shrink.” (Guilt, Shame, and Anxiety, Peter Breggin)

“This substitution of pseudo acts for original acts of thinking, feeling, and willing, leads eventually to the replacement of the original self by a pseudo self. The original self is the self which is the originator of mental activities. The pseudo self is only an agent who actually represents the role a person is supposed to play but who does so under the name of the self. It is true that a person can play many roles and subjectively be convinced that he is "he" in each role. Actually he is in all these roles what he believes he is expected to be, and for many people, if not most, the original self is completely suffocated by the pseudo self. . .The loss of the self and its substitution by a pseudo self leave the individual in an intense state of insecurity. He is obsessed by doubt since, being essentially a reflex of other people's expectation of him, he has in a measure lost his identity. In order to overcome the panic resulting from such loss of identity, he is compelled to conform, to seek his identity by continuous approval and recognition by others. Since he does not know who he is, at least the others will know – if he acts according to their expectations; if they know, he will know too, if he only takes their word for it.” (Escape from Freedom, Erich Fromm)

Reasons for Conformity

“To be like everyone else – to conform in dress, speech, customs; to have no thoughts or feelings that are different – saves one from the isolation of selfhood. Of course the "I" is lost but so is the fear of aloneness.” (Existential Psychotherapy, Irvin Yalom)

“Sometimes this fear of non-conformity is rationalized as fear of practical dangers which could threaten the non-conformist. But actually, people want to conform to a much higher degree than they are forced to conform, at least in the Western democracies.” (The Art of Loving, Erich Fromm)

“For better or worse, we are emotionally defined organisms whose choices as to what to believe and what not to are motivated in large measure by a relatively simple psychology of reinforcement, security, and comfort. Conventional thinking is the way average people think, not because the majority just happens to think that way but because conformity with convention gratifies many people in terms of reinforcement, security, and comfort.” (Normality Does Not Equal Mental Health, Steven J. Bartlett)

“A traveler who had seen many countries, peoples and several of the earth's continents was asked what attribute he had found in men everywhere. He said: "They have a propensity for laziness." To others, it seems that he should have said: "They are all fearful. They hide themselves behind customs and opinions." In his heart every man knows quite well that, being unique, he will be in the world only once and that there will be no second chance for his oneness to coalesce from the strangely variegated assortment that he is: he knows it but hides it like a bad conscience – why? From fear of his neighbor, who demands conformity and cloaks himself with it. But what is it that forces the individual to fear his neighbor, to think and act like a member of a herd, and to have no joy in himself? Modesty, perhaps, in a few rare cases. For the majority it is idleness, inertia, in short that propensity for laziness of which the traveler spoke. He is right: men are even lazier than they are fearful. . .” (Nietzsche, Untimely Meditations III)

Reading Recommendations

Restoring Pride – Richard Taylor

This is a great book for those looking to cultivate their uniqueness and follow the “path of personal heroism”. As the author Richard Taylor explains *“The theme of this book results from years of observing people and my effort to understand why their lives take the directions they do. Some of these people have been men and women of great creative*

achievement while most, of course, have not. What is it, then, that sets the former apart?”

Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear – Elizabeth Gilbert

This is an easy and enjoyable read written by a bestselling novelist in which she reflects on the creative process. She discusses how to cultivate one's creative ability, how to deal with the anxiety and fears which prevent many people from expressing their creativeness, as well as looking at the immense benefits that are earned by those who tap into their creative spirit. If one is looking for inspiration to begin on their “path to personal heroism” this is a recommended read.

Deep Work – Cal Newport

If one is going to accomplish anything of worth they must learn how to focus – a skill that has been diminished with the rise of modern technology. Cal Newport provides a great guide on how to cultivate the ability to focus so that one can perform what he calls deep work, which he describes as *“professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to their limit. These efforts create new value, improve your skill, and are hard to replicate.”*

Mastery – Robert Greene

This is a fantastic resource for those dissatisfied with their current path in life but who need help moving from a life of passivity to a life more of their own creation. Greene studied the lives of many of history's greatest figures and distills the common practical elements that led these people to such great accomplishments.

Denial of Death – Ernest Becker

This fascinating book explores the hypothesis that the fear of death can be seen as the primary motivating factor behind much of human behaviour.