



Mistake of Immense Proportion, by Jacob Needleman

Since the beginning of recorded history, man has been haunted by the intimation that he lives in a world of mere appearances. In every teaching and spiritual philosophy of the past we find the idea that whatever happens to us, for good or ill, is brought about by deeper forces behind the world that seems so real to us. We are further told that this real world is not accessible to the senses or understandable by the ordinary mind.

But, and this is a point that is not usually understood, we live in a world of inner appearances as well. We are not what we perceive ourselves to be. There is another identity, our real self, hidden behind the self that we believe ourselves to be.

It is only through awakening to this deeper self within that we can penetrate behind the veil of appearances and make contact with a truer world outside of ourselves. It is because we live on the surface of ourselves that we live on the surface of the greater world, never participatingâ€”except in rare moments which do not last and which are not understoodâ€”in the wholeness of reality.

It is this all-important second aspect of the ancient wisdom, the aspect that speaks of our inner world, that modern thought has been blind to. And the question about the meaning of life is inextricably linked to the need for contact with the real self beneath the surface of our everyday thoughts, emotions, and sensations.

Without this contact, the external world of appearances assumes for us the proportions of an overwhelmingly compelling force. We cannot see the real world because we are not in contact with the deeper powers of thought and sensing within ourselves that could perceive it. Because of this, it is inevitable that we experience the external world as the strongest force in our lives. This is the meaning and the origin of materialism.

The error, or, to use Christian language, the â€œsinâ€• of materialism has at its root nothing to do with greed or possessiveness. Nor does it involve, at its root, some philosophical view about matter and spirit in their usual meanings. No, the error of materialism is an error of reality perception, based on lack of experiential contact with the inner world. What we know as greed and possessiveness, with their attendant traits of cruelty and human exploitation, are results of this ignorance of the inner world. We turn to the superficially perceived outer world for that which can only be obtained through deep access to the inner self. Materialism is not a â€œsinâ€•; it is a mistake.

But a mistake of immense proportions, and with deadly consequences. It is like searching for water on the surface of the moon to search for meaning in the external world. Like grasping a picture of food and trying to eat it. Not only meaning, but also health, safety, service, love, and power can be obtained only through turning to reality. The unreal world can never yield these things to man.

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