

Navigating States

Make your future not what you encounter, but where you chose to go.

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“I may not have gone where I intended to go,
but I think I have ended up where I needed to be.”

— Douglas Adams

Something that's entirely an object has all its aspects defined. To be entirely objectified mean no aspect escapes consistent, repeatable, accurate, and complete measurement. The opposite of the pure object is the pure subject. The pure subject is something that only you can know and about which others can only guess.

Altered States

Your state is altered whenever things cannot be understood in whatever state you consider normal. There is no one “normal state” common to all of us, and there is no one boundary that separates us from each other.

The very notion of “a state” is inadequate because there is no objective normal. We can take measurements and make judgements, but there is no common baseline. If we say one state is normal and another is not, we’re judging based on perceptions and responses.

When things proceed normally, we say things are normal and assume we agree. Sometimes we do agree, but we rarely know what we’re agreeing on. When we go beyond our superficial agreement regarding perceptions and responses, we find that we don’t all agree. We don’t agree on what we saw and we don’t agree on what we felt. When things are not proceeding normally, consensus falls apart. Psychology is a clinical art and a fictitious science.

Subjective States

Our subjective state is the configuration of our moods, attitudes, and temperaments underlying our memories, associations, and thoughts. Each of us has different moods, attitudes, temperaments, memories, associations, and thoughts which shift depending on our circumstance. It’s possible that two of us might share the same subjective state, but it’s most unlikely. We generally cannot see these shifts from within our own point of view. It’s as if we were composed of many separate narrators each of which claim to be the only one.

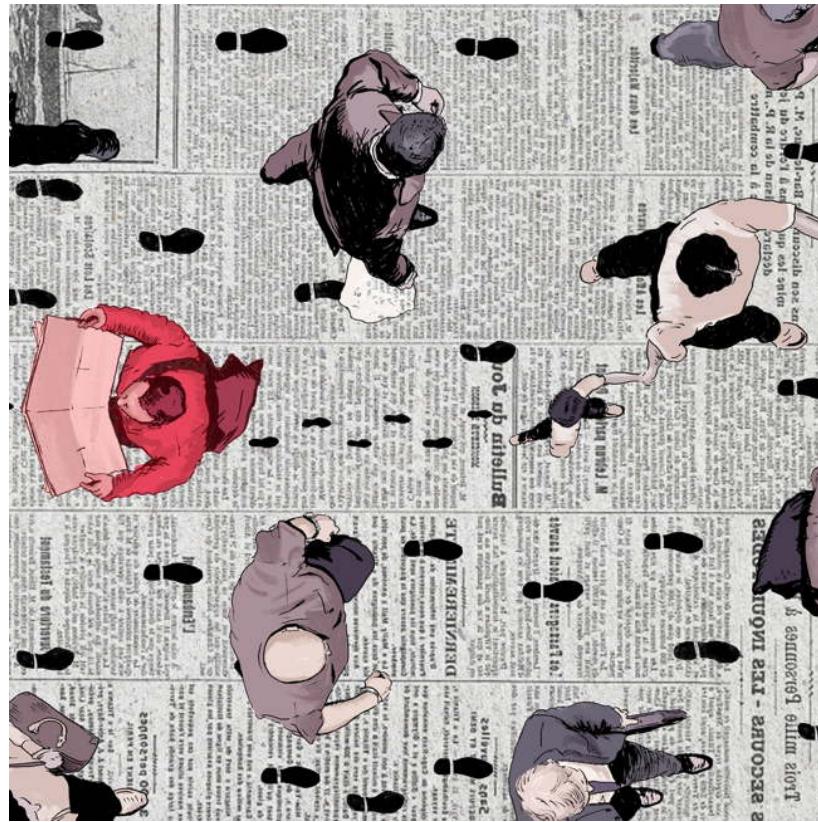
In order to say something that empowers each of us to have greater control over our state, we have to define the state we recognize as ourself. Outsiders may not agree with what we’re calling our stable, normal state. From their point of view, our normal state is neither stable nor shared by others. We can only understand and hope to control what we can see. If we don’t attempt to restrict ourselves to making one kind of sense, then we’ll have a better claim to understanding ourselves.

There are aspects of normality that we agree on, more or less. There are aspects of ourselves that are beyond our ability to describe or communicate. The indescribable aspects of ourselves may be our most important states because the things that define us most deeply are not describable.

What admits description is often trivial, just as defining a person trivializes them. We can’t rely on reason alone to define, identify, navigate, or control our states of mind. We’ll get farther by recognizing our emotions.

It is tempting to define ourselves rationally, but that is doomed from the start. We know reasoning is our most recently developed state. In both evolution and state of mind reason comes last. In terms of brain function and thought, reason is shallow and weakly rooted.

It is the combination of flexibility and structure that makes reason so useful. Reason is something we extract from the noise of our environment. Our minds are literally built from chaos; by understanding this chaos we can understand ourselves.



Consensus States

“A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.”
— William James, psychologist

There are some things we agree on, like the meaning of the present, past, and future. States of mind that dwell on the past, engage in the present, or project into the future are recognized as different. We agree that we share the extreme emotions like fear, disgust, joy, and infatuation, at least with regard to what it looks like to an outsider. We deceive ourselves in equating different experiences of complex emotions like love and hate. We agree on certain uses of verbal language, body language, and social behavior.

Our notion of normality is a communal spider’s web. We perceive its main strands, navigating along them in order to define a common web. Most of this web is empty space, and most of what we see is one-dimensional. Our options are constrained to what’s right in front of us. Social interactions occur at the intersection of several strands. We stay on the web to keep things normal.

When someone behaves abnormally we assume their state of mind is altered. The presence of another person in an altered state alters the states of those around them. There are a multitude of abnormal

states that range from the quaint or odd to the insane or hysterical. Yet, from the perspective of the abnormal person, every state makes its own internal sense.



Awareness

Control does not mean restraint, it means having the ability to navigate. Anyone in motion needs to be able to navigate. That motion could be through a social, spiritual, or chemical landscape any of which could be dangerous to those who are lost.

Each of your states defines a territory only some of which you know. The awareness you need is determined by the territory you explore. If you aim to cross into unknown consensus territory, then you'll need to be well-versed in what's less culturally familiar. This would be the situation of a world traveler moving between cultures all of which share a similar and interconnected environment. A skilled traveller quickly learns to communicate and picks up cultural cues.

A psychonaut plans to visit foreign states of mind, places where the culture maybe inhuman and the reality different. A skilled psychonaut learns spiritual grounding so as to be able to retain or reestablish a sense of self. We can refer to this as lucidity, which means a level of understanding beyond minimal awareness.

Navigation

If social skills are one dimension of awareness, then lucidity moves at right angles to it. The socially adept traveller moves within the culture. He or she is aware of patterns, actions, and consequences. Cognitive skills make sense of things.

The traveler who navigates toward greater lucidity moves from within a culture to a position outside of it, to other worlds. Outside the culture could mean understanding worlds that are abnormal, imaginal, or alien. The key to navigating lucidity is being able to locate yourself in unfamiliar realities. Having a grounded sense of self is the first step, to recognize your grounded self.

A basic goal of contemplative traditions is to recognize your essence, to step back from being inside your mind and gain a vantage point that will allow you to see how your mind works. Through contemplative practice—be it mindfulness, therapy, psychedelics, or prayer—you recognize there is not just one person calling the shots, but several. You have various connections to them. Not all of them can be trusted.

One learns to establish a safe zone where you can reassemble yourself. Once you're grounded in self, you next need awareness and discernment.

If you have ever been mentally lost, then you have experienced the need for navigation. If you have ever been aware that you were not yourself, or become lucid not knowing where you are, then you've felt the need for the kind of navigation I'm talking about.

As a mountaineer, I had a few experiences of terror. I once fell so far, spinning so rapidly, that I lost contact with my environment. In one case I had a panic attack, in another I had vertigo. In each case, I recovered my wits while still experiencing these states. Self-control is really a question of navigation. You may not be able to change the situation, but you can locate another state of mind.

Learn to navigate before journeying into inner-space. In hypnotherapy and psychedelic medicine work you can find guidance in the hypnotist and the shaman. In psychedelic-assisted therapy, therapists may be available to guide you.

A person should have a guide or mentor before journeying in altered states. Someone more than a guardian who just holds the space. You should have a person who can talk to you along the way and who can shape the energy. Someone who knows what to do with the experience you're having. This is what the shaman does, but there is not yet any role of this kind in modern Western culture. This is what I'm working on.

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