

On the mechanism of attachment

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Attachment is a concept often examined in psychology, especially when such connections result in mental health problems or financial manipulations. In the context of religiosity, attachment is often viewed as a quality of worldly existence and should be overcome to reach enlightenment. We are quite familiar with the notions of being attached to certain objects, people, events, ideas, emotions, sensations, etc. The ultimate attachment in religious contexts is often referred to as the sense of self or the sense of living.

In essence, attachment is a fundamental mechanism that creates subjective values. A new piece of information received into the mind must be attached to a meaning (connected to other stored pieces) in order to be evaluated. Attachment, in the normal sense, is the generation of connections between a piece (or a set) of information and the self as a mental construct (ego). Since the ego is the central node in one's mental network that is naturally prioritized over most other values, a strong connection to the ego will increase the prioritization of such information as well. This is why people often favor and protect their personal attachments in a biased manner. It shares similar properties as the trust mechanism in terms of information processing (Le et al., 2022).

On a social level, attachments are easily observed in the case of acculturation where formerly familiar values are protected against new competing values (Jin et al., 2023; Q. H. Vuong & Napier, 2015). Similarly, identities and political ideals are also attachments that clearly show how values closely connected to the "self" construct receive a higher degree of prioritization in people's assessments (Jin & Wang, 2022). Regardless of the levels of expression, attachment is a crucial component that enables human thinking with duality-based perceptions.

Beyond the information aspects of the mechanism of attachment, let us take a look at its implications from a humanity/spiritual perspective. I use some metaphors as follows.

A man is falling down a deep pit. This gravitational force (and correspondingly, the desire not to fall) is the attachment to life. He manages to reach out his hands and grab onto a tree branch on the wall of the pit, which makes him feel grounded and secure. This is the attachment to worldly values, including the tangible (the branch) and the intangible (the sense of security). Following the law of impermanence, the tree branch dies and rots after some time. The man's hands are rotting together with the tree. He wants to pull out his arm, but part of his flesh is painfully ripped and stays behind with the dying branch. This is the severing of attachments. The man then tries to find another branch to hold on to, waiting for it to rot.

When the pain of life from attachments becomes unbearable, he finally lets go of all the branches and falls down further, only to find out that during all that time, he has grown wings. He thanks the branches and flies up the pit. These contradictions (the force, the ability, the gratitude, etc.) stem from the attachments to the unseekable values (also commonly called the divine) (Le, 2023).

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