

The Face Game

What's it Really Like Being You?

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“You never enjoy the world aright, till the Sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars: and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world, and more than so, because [others] are in it who are every one sole heirs as well as you.”

—Thomas Traherne

I came into the world, from my own point of view at least, with nothing, as nothing.

I didn't know what I was like and could only take cues about that from the world around me. I was wired to be like a thirsty sponge for information about myself.

At first, it even took me a while to realize which parts of my experience belong to my body and which parts don't. This is something I had to learn—how to be a thing in a world of things and to identify as an encapsulated mind.

Because it happened at a pre-verbal stage of my development it only dimly forms part of my personal narrative, but I can see from observing the process in others that it must have happened to me too. Because of being unconscious of my “enthingment”, I have assumed that I've always been behind a particular face, in a body, fundamentally separate from the world I inhabit. It took me some time but I became convinced that the one in the mirror, the face and body I see there is actually and exclusively who I am

I suggest something like this has probably happened to you as well.

The thing is, it's a very important achievement. It fixes in our minds the conviction that we are what we appear to others to be and it's crucial to our human development that this happens. It's not some kind of mistake or fall from grace. Without it, a whole range of psychological development, including our socialization, our ability experience agency, to relate to others, feel empathy not to mention navigate the physical world, would have been impossible.

But it comes at a high and potentially tragic price. Once we become a fully committed “ego in a skin bag” (to use Alan Watts' lovely term) we find ourselves suffering what is often referred to as the human condition: stressed out and alienated from the rest of existence, up against adversity, subject in fact to “all the ills the flesh is heir to”. On the foundation of that initial accommodation—that is, accepting the view of our physical selves that others have is the truest one—the whole edifice of necessary but problematic self-image is constructed. When the



process is complete, we find ourselves in quite a pickle—one that I'd suggest has inspired most of our species' mythology, religion, spirituality and psychology, both as explanation and purported remedy.

Douglas Harding identified this process as "[The Face Game](#)" and in collaboration with Eric Berne noted that it forms the basis for all the other games that the discipline of Transactional Analysis addresses.

Briefly put, the "Face Game" is a profound examination of human identity and perception. It begins with the understanding that we identify ourselves with the face we see in the mirror or the face others see when they look at us. This identification is a learned behaviour, starting from a young age when we begin to associate our sense of self with our appearance. This external identification is, of course, quite limiting, as it anchors our identity to a physical form that others perceive, rather than the true nature of our being.

This is, I've found, a very pivotal and practical way of understanding what ails us. It suggests that the way through it might involve, essentially, *a shift in our perception* to recover that original, "pre-face" condition, rather than piling on more concepts, precepts and practices.

That's not say though that coming to believe that we are behind a face is not some kind of spiritual error but a natural and necessary stage of our development. Rather that, in the tertiary stage of the game we recover our original, uncontained innocence, that is timeless and boundless, from which we are free to engage fully with life, with all its challenges and joys, without being bound by the constraints of the face we present to the world, and that this is not something esoteric or special, but is a natural stage of human development. What if The Face Game is ultimately not about simply rejecting the face others see but integrating this understanding into a full view of oneself, where one accepts that in a very unique and important sense one is the unique individual seen by others and at the same time the spacious awareness from which one perceives the world.

I'd suggest the way *out* is simply to be reminded, *experientially*, that we've never been *in*. I mean this not as a psychological prescription or more non-dual pabulum, but to suggest the need for a non-conceptual shift of perception.

Most of us have spent a fair bit of time on wild goose chases as spiritual seekers. I can certainly hold my hand up with respect to this. When we're trying to find out what the real story is, what it is that's "wrong with this picture", in our different ways most of us have covered a lot of ground and explored a few rabbit holes. Seeking out authorities who can help us with our quest—experts who seem a bit further along the path, or maybe even at the end of it—doesn't seem unreasonable on its face. This is certainly what we quite sensibly do in other areas of our lives, from medicine to mechanics. Why would finding out who we really are be any different?

Well, it turns out that the issue of authority, with respect to this particular shift in perception, is absolutely crucial. In my experience, the main obstacle to really looking for yourself is likely to be taking *someone else's* word for what it's like where *you're* looking from and discounting your own experience in favour of what it's "supposed to be", according to some book, teacher, guru or even a well-meaning friend.

So, want to give it a go and take a fresh look? It won't take long and is deceptively accessible.

OK. So right now, on your own authority and on present evidence, what do you see where others see your face? It can help to point into the scene before you, take a relaxed look at what it's like and then turn your finger at 180° and point back at where other see your face.

What is the direct, unmediated experience of the place you're pointing at, the location you're looking from?

Does it have any shape, colour, opacity or texture?

Do you find any surface separating you from the scene presenting itself or do you find yourself, as I do, built open and not actually encapsulated as a thing of any kind?

Is there a boundary where you end and the world begins?

Is there any edge to your experience?

What size are you?

Are you any kind of thing?

These are questions you can check directly for yourself. You are the only authority.

Too hard? Too easy? Do see the value of it?

If so, you may find you can sit with this and effortlessly return to it at will, in any situation. While obvious when noticed, this and other Headless Way experiments can be powerful tools for self-discovery and liberation. They can allow you to see beyond the superficial identity tied to your face and embrace an expansive sense of freedom and peace, while learning to live from your true nature, which is always present and accessible. The Face Game is ultimately not about rejecting the face others see but integrating this understanding into a full, 360° view of oneself, in which one is both the face seen by others and the spacious awareness from which one perceives the world.

If this sparks your interest, you can explore more first-person awareness experiments on the [Headless Way website](#). There's also a [Headless Way app](#), Headless Way material on Sam Harris's [Waking Up app](#) and very engaging and useful content on [Richard Lang's YouTube channel](#).

There's also now a growing international headless community which is a vibrant and inclusive group of individuals exploring and sharing the experience of living from our true, spacious nature, often connecting through online meetings and resources to support one another in this unique journey. There's no guru, no subscription fee, no stages of initiation and no spiritual training prerequisites. You're most welcome to join us and contribute your unique perspective whenever you'd like and to the extent you feel comfortable.

Check out meetings and workshops worldwide here: <https://headless.org/workshops-worldwide.htm>

There are also online meetings. <https://headless.org/english-new/hangout>

If you, like me, find yourself to be boundless, awake emptiness, full of the world and interested in exploring the social aspect of your homecoming, you're warmly invited to drop by.