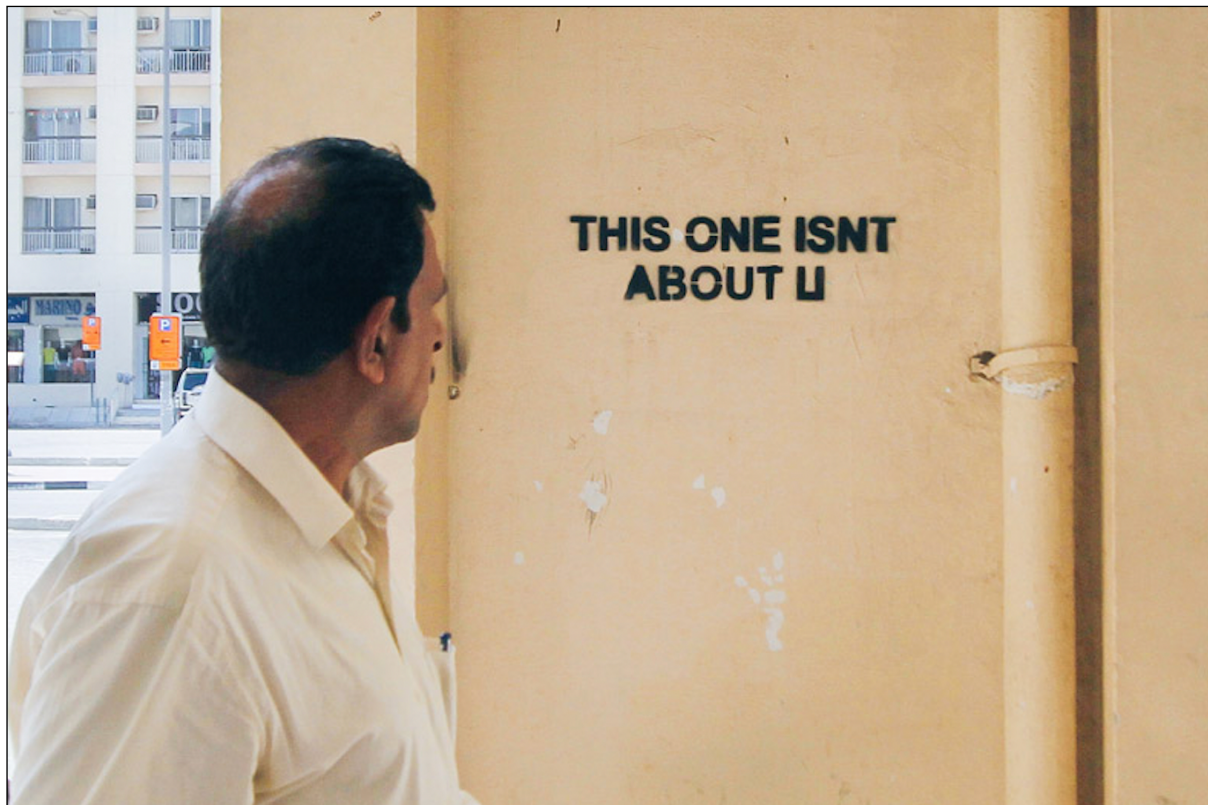




Not About You

*We all love ourselves more than
other people, but care more about
their opinion than our own.*

Marcus Aurelius (121-180 CE)

STUDIES CONFIRM THAT IN THE vast majority of suicide cases, victims killed themselves because of *other people*.

Ponder that for a moment: The unbearable despair of people who commit suicide typically relates in one form or another to what other people think about them—or more ironically, what they (often mistakenly) *think* other people think about them.

This exaggerated concern about other people's opinions about us is tragic, and something rarely worth the immense mental energy most people habitually devote to it. (As one wise person put it: "If you wouldn't allow someone into your bed, why would you allow them into your head?")

It's true that concern about the opinions of others is a driving—and often a positive and creative—force in society, spurring people to pursue discoveries and achievements that ultimately benefit everyone, as well as acting as a restraint for those who might otherwise commit harmful crimes and indiscretions.

The fact is that humans are hard wired to care about what others think of us. This makes sense from a survivalist standpoint, because for most of human history, failing to perceive or to perform the actions expected by the group, even if they were contrary to one's own, could be fatal. (To cite one example, the term *fired*—which now simply connotes the unfortunate but temporary loss of one's livelihood—originated in a time when, along with being ostracized from your tribe or village, social rejection could result in your house being burned down.)

The recent explosion in communication, in particular now-ubiquitous social media, have greatly exacerbated our tendency to care about what other people think.

But in a world where the dread of being kicked out of one's home and cast out into the wilderness has been replaced by the anxiety of merely being downvoted—or at worst, 'canceled' by a collection of complete strangers that don't even know you—one has to wonder if this evolutionary survival mechanism isn't overdue for a rethink.

Of course, the fundamental problem isn't technology so much as it is psychological insecurity. A self-confident, well-adjusted adult might understandably desire the approval of others, but doesn't *require* it if it conflicts with his own view of what is true. (In Stoic philosophy, this dispassionate attitude is known as *preferred indifference*.)

But even assuming strangers would have a lower opinion of you if they were thinking about you, the fact is they probably aren't. Most people are self-absorbed and pay little attention to others except when defending their own opinions or casting judgement.

Next time you are feeling self-conscious, notice that you are thinking about yourself, and you can safely assume that everyone around you is doing pretty much the same.

This points to another very useful insight: Other people's opinions of you usually have very little, if anything to do with *you*. One might even go so far as to say their opinions about you are none of your business.

Most people are largely unconscious of their own thinking process, and as a result project their own inner space onto the outer world. If someone, for example, is rude for no reason, it's rarely a personal affront, even if you may have said or done something to unintentionally trigger their upset.

What may be right for someone else isn't necessarily right for you. Just as other people don't know your personal experience and circumstances, you don't know theirs. You can assume that they are struggling with their own problems and insecurities, and *that*, not *you*, is the source of their reactions.

Recognizing that other peoples' behavior is about them, not about you, is a powerfully liberating insight, shielding one from being at the mercy of other people's approval, as well as eliminating the need to constantly—often unconsciously—judge other people.

More importantly, relinquishing the time and effort we might have spent trying to please others frees one to ask deeper, more useful questions, like "*Who am I, really?*"

Eastern philosophies (as well as modern neuroscience) teach that what we think of as our 'self' is an illusion, and there can be no distinct, personal 'self' that exists in any moment or persists throughout a human life.

This illusory sense of self is, in fact, the primary cause of our mental suffering, the main driver of our incessant need to judge others and to fear being judged *by* others.

We can seek to be liked or we can seek to be authentic, but not both. Much of the anxiety, loneliness, and suffering in the world stems from failing to see that we are all ultimately alone in ourselves, and can only truly meet another when we speak and act out of our authentic selves. Only then can we be seen and loved for who we are, rather than for fulfilling the projections of others or our own ideas about how we *should* be.

The Taoist sage Lao Tzu once said, "Care about the approval of others, and you become their prisoner." Rather than being something we should fear, they may just be three of the most liberating words in the English language: It's *Not About You*. ■