

## First talk

# Western Self in Time of Existential Void

Editor in chief:

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The "self" occupies a central and complex role in modern Western thought, emerging as the most intricate aspect of contemporary civilization. It has evolved from being a theoretical concept confined to philosophy and psychology to becoming the very lens through which knowledge is interpreted, values are evaluated, and the world is restructured. However, this centrality, once celebrated as the ultimate expression of human freedom, soon revealed its darker side. The self now appears burdened by its own existence, overwhelmed by an excess of responsibility, and conflicted in its relationship with both the world and itself.

The modern Western self emerged in a historical context that promised complete freedom: freedom from the sacred, from higher authorities, from inherited traditions, and from any power imposed in the name of truth, morality, or purpose. In this perspective, reason appeared as a self-sufficient reference point, capable of creating a fully rational world governed by clear laws, granting humans unprecedented control over nature, society, and history. Yet, what began as a path toward liberation ultimately led to placing the self in an unanticipated position, the position of being the sole reference and sole responsibility in a world gradually stripped of any meaning beyond it.

This is where the issue lies, not as a later flaw in application, but as a fundamental problem within the very conception itself. When the self is positioned as the center of everything, the question shifts from how much freedom or knowledge humanity has gained to the existential cost of this centralization. Can the self, no matter how aware or capable it becomes, bear the burden of meaning on its own? Can a person live a life worth living if they

are expected to be the source of their own values and goals, without anything beyond themselves to rely on?

The term “crisis of the self” should not be understood as describing a personal psychological condition, nor as expressing a nostalgic longing for past ways of living. It points instead to a civilizational crisis that unfolds on multiple levels. This crisis does not appear suddenly or as a total collapse but gradually seeps into the structure of modern life, manifesting in questions that the dominant discourse cannot answer or even dares not ask. What makes this crisis even more complex is that the very tools of modernity, reason, freedom, and individualism, are simultaneously the tools that expose the crisis and the limits of overcoming it.

However, this does not mean that the entire modern Western experience should be reduced to failure or exhaustion, nor does it suggest that its intellectual and scientific achievements have lost value. Rather, it indicates that this experience has reached a point where deep, internal questioning is required. The model that shaped the relationship between the self, meaning, and the world is no longer capable of explaining its own outcomes or containing its contradictions. When the gap widens between what the self is expected to be and what it is truly capable of living, this tension becomes a permanent state.

Thus, the need arises to reconsider the assumptions that accompanied the rise of the modern Western self, whether the assumption of self-sufficiency, the neutrality of reason, or the idea that freedom is automatically achieved simply by removing restrictions. These assumptions, which historically played a role in dismantling old systems of domination, have not been sufficiently tested in their ability to create a balanced human being, one capable of reconciling freedom with meaning, independence with inner peace.

What the Western individual experiences today cannot be understood through a single discourse or field of knowledge. The crisis is distributed across interconnected levels: the structure of the conception of the self, the nature of the relationship between freedom and authority, the manifestations of anxiety and emptiness, and the inability to imagine a horizon beyond the management of the present. Therefore, addressing this crisis is not fruitful if it is limited to describing its symptoms or if each phenomenon is treated in isolation from the framework that produced it.

Thus, approaching the Western self in the time of existential void requires tracing the formation of the crisis, revealing its internal logic, and observing its various manifestations. It also requires pausing to consider the limits of the model that produced it, in an effort to achieve a deeper understanding of the conditions for a less exhausting human life. The central question posed

by this crisis revolves around: What conception of humanity led the self to this level of exhaustion?

In fact, these questions emerge from the awareness that when a crisis reaches such depth, it is an opportunity for rethinking, not for denial or superficial fixes. This is where the analytical process begins: an attempt to understand the dialectical development of modern humanity as it unfolded in the Western experience, where the self was placed at the center of the world and left to face the consequences of this centralization on its own.

### **First: Diagnosing the crisis: From the Centrality of the Self to Its Internal Fracture.**

The crisis of the modern Western individual gradually took shape at the heart of the very project that placed the "self" as the central focus of existence, knowledge, and values. From the moment the focus shifted from transcendent references to the human self, it seemed that humanity had regained control over its destiny, having freed itself from long-held external authorities. However, this transformation, which was promoted as the peak of human maturity, contained within it a hidden tension that soon became apparent.

The centrality of the self did not merely imply the recognition of human capacity for thought and choice; it established a situation where the self was tasked with being both the origin of meaning and its goal at the same time. As the overarching frameworks that once provided order and significance to existence began to dissolve, the self found itself facing an emptiness it was unprepared to bear. To be the ultimate reference meant carrying the burden of foundation alone, and facing the question of meaning without anything beyond it to rely on. This is where the crisis began to emerge, not as an external conflict, but as a silent internal rupture.

The promise of sovereignty turned into a perpetual test, and freedom shifted from a potential path to liberation to an existential burden. Every choice now carried the possibility of failure, and every meaning became temporary, subject to revision. As the realm of possibilities widened, the sense of certainty shrank. The self no longer defined itself by what it belonged to, but by what it chooses in every moment and what it might abandon the next. This shift from relative stability to constant fluidity resulted in a self that became increasingly fragile.

What distinguishes this crisis is that it infiltrates the details of daily life. The modern Western self may appear outwardly confident, independent, and capable of managing its affairs, but deep down, it experiences a constant tension between what it is expected to be and what it can actually achieve. This tension generates a persistent feeling of incompleteness, as if existence

itself has become an unfinished project, never allowed to settle. The pursuit of self-realization thus transforms from a path of growth into an endless cycle of exhaustion.

This internal fracture deepens when we observe that the centrality of the self has led to new, more complex forms of control. The individual who has freed themselves from traditional authority finds themselves subjected to new systems that do not operate through direct coercion, but through standards of performance, success, image, and constant evaluation. Demands now come in the form of “be” rather than “do.” In this continuous demand for self-formation, the self loses its ability to ground itself, living in a split between a self that is presented and a self that is drained.

Thus, the growing feelings of anxiety, emptiness, and loss of meaning cannot be seen as isolated psychological symptoms. They are indicators of a deeper flaw in the Western conception of the self. When the self is reduced to being a functional center for producing meaning, without that meaning being rooted in a broader horizon, life turns into a series of tasks, rather than a meaningful journey. Without purpose, the future becomes a source of anxiety instead of a realm of hope.

The fracture of the modern Western self does not mean it is incapable of action or thought; rather, it signifies its internal depletion. It is a self that works continuously, yet never finds peace; it always chooses, but never settles; it generates meaning, but never trusts it. This fracture does not manifest in a single discourse or theory, but is spread across all fields: in philosophy, which declared the end of metaphysics without finding a unifying alternative; in psychology, which faces symptoms beyond its reach; and in culture, which celebrates freedom but struggles to answer the question of purpose.

Thus, the crisis of the modern Western self is a natural outcome of an unchecked centrality, and a freedom detached from any higher purpose. It is a crisis of a self that was asked to be everything, only to end up feeling threatened by nothingness. From this initial diagnosis begins the understanding of the dialectic of modern humanity in the West, as a sign of a civilizational impasse that can no longer be ignored.

### **Second: Liberation, Control Dialectic: When Promise Turns Against Its Maker**

The modern self was shaped under the banner of liberation, as the path it later followed reveals a stark paradox. The more the proclaimed freedom expanded, the more the forms of actual control became complex and hidden. The constraint no longer comes from the outside in its classical form, and authority is no longer exercised through overt coercion or direct prohibition.

Instead, it reproduces itself within the very structure of freedom. Thus, a subtle dialectic arose between liberation and control, built on deep interconnections, where liberation itself becomes a medium for regulation, and choice a tool for reshaping the self.

In its foundational moments, Western liberation seemed like a decisive break from traditional forms of dominance. Human beings were liberated from the church's power, from forced conformity to societal norms, and from the rigid constraints of tradition. However, this liberation did not mark the end of authority, but the beginning of its transition from the external to the internal. When transcendent authority was displaced, the need for organization did not disappear but rather found a new home within the self. The individual was no longer subject to an externally imposed command, but became responsible for regulating their own desires and behavior in alignment with new, more abstract systems.

The danger of this transformation lies in the fact that control now appears less coercive and is framed as optional. People believe they are choosing freely, yet these choices are made within a dense web of unspoken norms: success, competence, adaptability, and alignment with market demands and technological rhythms. In this way, freedom is redefined as the ability to comply intelligently.

The Western modernity replaced the concept of obedience with performance. Now, individuals are expected to achieve self-fulfillment according to pre-set criteria. Success is no longer a moral or human state, but a series of measurable indicators, evaluations, and achievements. In this context, the self becomes a continuous project of development, because stopping is interpreted as failure. Here, a new face of control emerges: a self that is not allowed to be complete, because once it is, it exits the realm of continuous improvement.

The market is one of the most prominent expressions of this soft control. The market enforces its rules not through coercion but through seduction. It tells people, "You deserve this," instead of saying "You must." Thus, desires are reshaped through continuous stimulation. Everything becomes consumable: the body, relationships, emotions, and even identity. As the logic of the market spreads, the self no longer owns its desires, but has them managed. What appears to be a personal choice is often a response to a carefully designed model, where the individual feels that what they want is what they have chosen for themselves.

Technology also plays a key role in deepening this dialectic. Promised as a tool for liberating humans from effort and constraints, technology has instead become an all-encompassing framework for reorganizing time, attention, and

behavior. Technology is now the environment in which people live. Value is measured by response speed, the ability to be constantly present, and the readiness for continuous updates. In this context, consciousness itself is reshaped, where thinking is reduced to quick reactions, contemplation is replaced by notifications, and attention is drained by an endless flow. Control works through this inundation.

The most dangerous aspect of this dialectic is that the individual is drawn into playing the role of guardian of their own self. The modern individual monitors, evaluates, and compares themselves to others, feeling guilty if they do not meet the prevailing standards. Thus, authority no longer requires an external observer, because surveillance has been internalized. This internalization makes control more effective, as it is practiced in the name of individual responsibility. Therefore, failure is not attributed to the system, but to the individual, who is accused of negligence, weak will, or poor management.

In this framework, the very idea of liberation begins to erode. Freedom, defined as the ability to choose within a closed system, becomes a movement within a vast cage. The individual is offered an overwhelming number of choices, yet is not granted the ability to question the conditions that produce these choices. Here, the paradox becomes clear: the more alternatives there are, the more the sense of the ability to make a radical choice diminishes. Continuous choice consumes existential energy, turning freedom into a mental and psychological burden.

This reversal is also evident in contemporary psychological discourse, which is often used to adapt the self to the reality rather than question it. Instead of asking whether the system is just or the pace imposed on individuals reasonable, people are asked to develop coping skills, manage stress, and enhance positivity. Thus, therapy becomes a tool for maintaining the status quo rather than liberating the individual from it. Control here takes the form of care rather than coercion.

As collective frameworks decline, the individual is pushed to bear their fate alone. Failure becomes a personal failure, amplifying the feeling of isolation, severing the connection between individual suffering and the broader context. Each self suffers in silence, believing that their crisis is unique, when in fact it is part of a broader pattern. Control reaches its peak when suffering is divorced from its causes.

However, the dialectic of liberation and control does not mean that modern individuals have lost all capacity for action or resistance. Rather, it reveals that liberation, when detached from questions of purpose and meaning, becomes susceptible to containment. Freedom, without knowing why it

is liberated or where it is heading, becomes easy to direct. In the absence of a moral or purposeful horizon, freedom becomes a circular movement, revolving around the self without ever transcending it. This circularity deepens exhaustion.

Thus, the crisis of the modern self cannot be understood apart from this dialectic. The self is neither a victim of external authority nor a completely free agent, but a product of a complex relationship between proclaimed liberation and hidden control. The more the dominant discourse ignores this complexity, the deeper the crisis becomes.

In fact, the promise that turned against its maker was one made without full awareness of human limitations. A self left without an horizon in which it can transcend itself is drained in managing itself, losing its capacity for historical action. Here, the dilemma becomes clear: any liberation without meaning will lead to control without coercion, and control without coercion will produce an exhausted self that appears free on the surface, but is, at its core, constrained by a logic it no longer recognizes.

What can we conclude from this? We conclude that the formation of the dialectic of liberation and control has inverted the crisis of modern humanity. The crisis lies not in the fact that this dialectic represents a deviation from the project of modernity, but that it is one of its logical outcomes when the human being is reduced to an isolated self with no roots, an instrumental mind without purpose, and freedom without horizon. From here arises the need to rethink the very meaning of liberation, as the ability to build a responsible relationship between the self and the world, between choice and meaning, and between "the human" and "what transcends the human".

### **Third: Manifestations of Crisis, Self, Identity, Meaning**

If the crisis of the modern self has been formed in its deep structure, it does not remain confined to philosophical theory or conceptual analysis, but manifests clearly in multiple aspects that affect daily human experience. The crisis, in its contemporary form, is embodied in growing psychological imbalances, widespread identity anxiety, and a general sense of meaning eroding. These manifestations are intertwined expressions of a single predicament: a self that no longer knows how to inhabit the world without being drained by it.

At the psychological level, anxiety stands out as the most prominent feature of modern humans. However, this anxiety is not just about specific fears or clear threats, but takes on a broader existential form. It is anxiety without a fixed focus, anxiety about failure, inadequacy, missed opportunities, and the future as an open field of uncertain possibilities. This anxiety doesn't



arise from the individual's weakness, but from being in a world where one is expected to constantly achieve without ever being given a final standard for what achievement truly means.

Here, anxiety turns into a structural condition. The individual lives under constant pressure to be the "best version of themselves," without ever knowing when they have reached that version. As the sense of purpose erodes, efforts feel unfulfilling. Every success is temporary, every sense of stability is fragile, and every moment of satisfaction quickly fades as new demands appear. Thus, the self enters a cycle of endless striving, where fulfillment is postponed indefinitely.

This anxiety intersects with the rise of depression, which is the flip side of the crisis. While anxiety expresses an overload of tension, depression represents the moment of breakdown after being drained. It is the hopelessness of being unable to create a coherent self-narrative. In this sense, depression becomes an expression of the self withdrawing from a world that no longer feels worth the existential investment. When existence becomes an empty function, withdrawal becomes the silent response.

At the level of identity, the crisis takes on an even more complex form. The modern self now defines itself through constantly shifting personal choices. Identity is no longer something to be discovered, but a project that is continually constructed. On the surface, this change might seem like a sign of liberation, but it deepens the sense of fragility. Every definition of the self is temporary, every affiliation can be altered, and every self-narrative is threatened with fragmentation at the first sign of disturbance.

This fluidity of identity generates a constant feeling of incompleteness. The self lives as a series of disconnected moments that are difficult to link together into one coherent, meaningful story. With the lack of a unifying narrative, human experience loses its deep temporal dimension, and the past becomes a burden, the future a source of anxiety, and the present a moment of consumption. In this frame, identity becomes yet another burden to manage.

This predicament worsens when identity becomes linked to the logic of presentation and evaluation. The self is now defined by what it shows to others: image, digital presence, external recognition, all of these factors contribute to shaping the sense of self. Here, identity becomes dependent on the external gaze rather than the internal experience. This dependency creates a gap between the self as it is lived and the self as it is projected, further amplifying the sense of alienation. A person might succeed in marketing his image, but he fails to reconcile with themselves.

The meaning is the space where all these manifestations converge.



The psychological and identity crises are simply reflections of a deeper breakdown. After the deconstruction of grand narratives and the skepticism of all-encompassing stories, humans find themselves in a world without clear direction. There is no longer a final question that organizes the smaller ones, nor a higher purpose that gives actions their existential weight. Meaning does not suddenly disappear, but rather erodes gradually, until it becomes a purely personal matter with no connection to the world.

These three manifestations, psychological, identity-related, and meaningful, are not independent of each other, but feed into one another. The loss of meaning deepens anxiety, anxiety destabilizes identity, and identity confusion heightens the sense of emptiness. Thus, the self enters a closed loop, difficult to escape through partial solutions. Psychotherapy, no matter how advanced, cannot solely address the crisis of meaning, redefining identity, no matter how appealing, will not resolve the existential void, and effective time management cannot replace the absence of purpose.

These manifestations reveal that the predicament is not in the individual *per se*, but in the framework that has been imposed upon them. The modern self has failed because it has been burdened with the impossible task of being the origin of its existence, the purpose of its life, and the measure of its value. When it fails at this role, it is blamed for inadequacy rather than questioning the framework that placed it in this position. Understanding these manifestations aims to recognize the unity of the crisis behind its various forms.

Thus, the crisis of the self, identity, and meaning are different aspects of the same question: How can a human live a meaningful life in a world that has stripped itself of any horizon beyond the present moment? This question, with all its weight, should be answered by rethinking the conception of the self, its place in the world, and its relationship with what gives it meaning. Without this horizon, manifestations of the crisis will continue to multiply, and the self will remain trapped in a crisis that lacks a clear resolution or identity.

### **Fourth: Model's Dilemma, Possibility of Thinking in Different Horizon**

The crisis of the modern Western self reaches its peak when it becomes clear that what people are experiencing is not just a problem that can be fixed within the same framework, but rather the logical result of a model that has reached its limits. The issue lies in the very concept behind modern values: the idea of the human being as a self-sufficient subject, capable of creating meaning on their own and carrying the weight of existence alone. When this concept collapses, partial solutions are no longer enough, because the crisis

runs deeper than what can be fixed with just technical solutions.

One of the most dangerous aspects of this dilemma is the inability to imagine a real alternative. The modern self, despite being aware of its fatigue and exhaustion, finds itself trapped within the very horizon that created its crisis. Every attempt to move beyond it is rephrased in the language of the same model, more individual freedom, more choices, and more adaptability. However, the fundamental question remains untouched: Is it enough for the self to be the center of everything in order to live a meaningful life? Is the very centrism the source of exhaustion?

In this context, critique becomes an existential necessity. It is not about destruction for the sake of destruction, nor about replacing one closed belief with another, but about exposing the limits of the current framework and reopening questions that were shut down in the name of progress or realism. When questions about purpose are dismissed as metaphysical, or when the question of meaning is rejected as relative, humans are left to manage their lives without truly understanding why they live them. This imposed silence on life's big questions is one of the key aspects of the crisis.

Thinking within a different horizon should mean reconsidering the idea that humans aren't complete on their own. To be balanced, the self needs something beyond itself: meaning that it doesn't create entirely on its own, a purpose that isn't reduced to performance, and values that are measured by more than just utility. Without this broader perspective, freedom becomes aimless, reason becomes a tool without wisdom, and existence becomes a shallow management of time.

This alternative horizon also requires rethinking the relationship between the individual and the collective, as well as between the private and the shared. Absolute individualism has created a more isolated self. Humans are relational beings by nature, formed within a network of shared meanings, not in isolation. Restoring this perspective means freeing the individual from the illusion of self-sufficiency and from the burden of carrying existence alone.

On the cognitive level, this horizon calls for moving beyond the reduction of reason to its purely instrumental role, and restoring its function as a tool for understanding rather than just managing. Reason that is not allowed to ask fundamental questions, or to go beyond immediate utility, loses its ability to illuminate, even if its knowledge grows. The crisis of meaning is the result of reducing reason to a technical function that separates knowledge from wisdom.

The dilemma of the modern model clearly points to the need for a deep rethinking. Human experience does not progress in a straight line or simply through the accumulation of achievements. When a model has reached its

limits, insisting on it becomes a form of blindness, not rationality. The troubled self, burdened with anxiety, exhaustion, and emptiness, serves as a warning signal to society.

From this point of view, the crisis can be seen as a revealing moment. It shows that humans cannot live in a framework that reduces their existence to just choice and performance, nor in a concept that separates freedom from purpose. This moment, painful as it is, opens up the possibility of rethinking what it means to be human and what conditions are necessary for a life worth living.

Overcoming this dilemma requires intellectual courage to acknowledge that the self is not enough on its own, that freedom is only truly meaningful when tied to purpose, and that reason loses its humanity when it is cut off from ultimate questions. At this point, the question becomes open once again, as a horizon: What kind of human beings do we want to be, and what kind of world can we inhabit without breaking from within?

However, in this tenth issue of "Oumam: magazine, we have chosen to dedicate it to discuss on the troubled self of modern humans in the West.

In the section of "Focus", a group of distinguished scholars have addressed different aspects of the self's crisis. They are, in order (with titles preserved): (Dr. Ali Al-Khatib - Egypt), (Dr. Mahmoud keeshana - Egypt), (Dr. Bahaa Darwish - Egypt), and (Dr. Aqil Sadiq - Iraq).

As for the "Foundations" section, (Sheikh Shadi Ali - Egypt), has written about the human being from a Quranic perspective, moving from servitude to vicegerency.

In the "Studies and Research" section, we have selected a paper prepared by (Dr. Hiba Jamal El-Din - Egypt).

For the "Book Review" section, we have chosen the book by (Sheikh Abdullah Jawadi Amuli) on human vicegerency in the Quran, which was reviewed by (Sheikh Ghassan Al-Asaad- Lebanon).

As we present this issue, we hope it will receive the readers' appreciation, and we eagerly look forward to their valuable feedback.

**Praise be to Allah, first and last.**