

# The Ends of Identity

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February 3, 2020

**Epistemic Status:** Endorsed

**Content Warning:** Neuropsychological Infohazard, De-Biasing Infohazard, Evocation Infohazard, Spoilers for Chunnibyou Demo Koi Ga Shitai

**Recommended Prior Reading:** [Gates](#), [Choices Made Long Ago](#), [Three are the Beliefs by Which Death Will Be Defeated](#)

**Part of the Series:** [Death](#)

**Previous Post:** [The Room Eats You](#)

“Time is a construct. People say you can’t go back and change things, but you can, that’s what flashbacks are. They’re invitations to go back and make different choices. When you make a decision you think it’s you doing it but it’s not, it’s the spirit out there that’s connected to our world and we just have to go along for the ride.”

For a long time, I thought the problem with people was they didn’t take enough control over their identity. It seemed like everyone was walking around with this trauma they got sometime around middle school. Aged 12 or 13 they took their first steps toward an independent identity, and that identity sucked. They told their peers they were a vampire, anime protagonist, wise to the ways of the world, gangster, or some other cute but deeply inappropriate self moniker that drew the ire of others.

In an enlightened society, we would have robust social guidance to help people navigate this stage and begin cultivating a refined taste in identity. Instead, in the real world, we either viciously mock and bully them until they learn to never try having an independent identity again, or we abuse their naivety and trust until it permanently breaks. I saw people paralyzed by fear and lack of agency, and I identified this as the source.

I thought that if I could just get people back to that neotenous middle school identity stage, it would be possible to undo their toxic cultural training. Once there, I could show them the path to an expansive well made sense of self from which they would derive agency by default and they’d all become bodhisattvas or senior research analysts. I saw most people as lacking a true sense of self. They were merely using the stamped on self that society installed in them. I thought that by helping them grow into the identity that had been suppressed, they would gain power and agency.

It’s only now that I can articulate all this in these terms that it’s possible to come to grips with how bad of an idea it actually was. Most of the truly important encounters we have with reality, the ones that shape us as people, happen much earlier than middle school. By the time you reach age 12 or 13, reality has already inflicted most of its traumatic damage on you.

Even if I could revert people to that place in their lives, it probably wouldn't help them very much. The fear had already gripped their hearts and no amount of social safety would change that. It wasn't just a hostile social reality that was doing the damage, it was a *hostile reality*. The world is deeply traumatizing, and however much we'd like the act as if we're not damaged by exposure to it, its effects pile up in our psyche nonetheless.

The universe is exhilarating, wild, exciting, and colorful, but also terrifying, disorienting, nauseating, and painful. The universe is this vast implacable machine that grinds hopelessly along with us inside; enormous mechanical parts that could crush us to paste in an instant blurring past on their meaningless deterministic journeys. The universe is beautiful, terrible, awesome, the sorts of words people used to describe angels and gods.

And all our first encounters with this towering madness happen at an age when we're too young to even try making sense of any of it. All around us are people just living out their lives amid this storm of horror and madness. Is this really normal? How can this be normal? Why is anyone okay with this? We can try and ask those questions, but our parents probably won't understand what we're asking and will just answer that of course it's normal. Why wouldn't it be okay?

Chunnibyou itself is really a *response* to the trauma of the world, a denial of and fleeing from reality. And this is even reflected in the anime, with Rikka using her chunnibyou personality to avoid confronting her father's death or the burdens that the real world is increasingly putting on her. Her chunni personality isn't something she just does for fun, it's a narrative armor she wears to protect herself from the horrors of the world.

"I think she understands what you're saying Touka-san, but it's exactly because she understands that she's acting like this. Accepting something is easier said than done. There are so many things in this world that are hard to accept. Some things happen so fast. And before you can get your head around it it's all over. You might not want to escape. You might not be trying to ignore the fact. But you might think "Do I really want to accept that it's all normal?" Everyone says that it's normal. They say that's how real life works. But is that really what I want?"

Chunnibyou is a desperate grab by a young mind for some sort of power. Since that power couldn't be obtained for real, it's obtained in the fantasy constructed to protect them from the truth. Even when the more outrageous of these identity aspects are curbed, the power fantasy essentially persists. That's what identity is, a power fantasy.

Which brings us to the more important reason why my original plan could have never worked: my entire concept of identity was wrong. I saw identity as a good thing, a thing that gave people strength and freedom from which they could derive agency. I was seeing the armor, the lies that we wrap ourselves in to hide from reality, and I was

viewing that armor as what allowed people to act in the world. And, the armor *does* let them act in the world. It grants a facsimile of agency, but a facsimile is all. It won't stand up to any real test of rigor.

The Chunnibyouto anime *also* gives us examples of this. Rikka very pointedly struggles to cope with reality. She loses every fight she gets into. She's struggling to get through school. Her home life is a mess. And instead of dealing with any of it, she retreats into a teenage power fantasy where she's a secret mage battling for the fate of the world. Rikka's chunnibyouto identity acts as a wall between her and reality, and as long as reality fails to penetrate that wall, she can't do anything about the problems in her life.

I did the same thing for a long time. I used magical thinking to construct a wall between myself and the world and pretended to be a powerful mage as a way to cope with my own relative powerlessness. I think there might have been a time I needed this, but if you do need this sort of thing to cope with your life then you're probably not ready to get into the stuff I'm going to be talking about here.

And stardust, if that is you, then you should work on growing a *real* power of your own. Come back when you feel like you have some skill or ability to act in the world under your belt. If you feel less like a helpless victim, you'll feel less of a need to narratively hedge yourself with fake abilities to cope.

For me, this was achieved by a combination of meditation, martial arts, and studying under an experienced master. I don't need to make up magical abilities anymore, because I have real power all of my own that I can grow and cultivate. I don't feel like a victim anymore and that let me actually think about things I was too afraid to consider seriously.

Like my favorite anime. I connected with Rikka because I saw myself reflected in her. The larger than life persona, the playing pretend, the magic, she was and continues to be the character in anime I most deeply resonate with. When I made this connection, I didn't realize I was performing the same denial of reality she was. When the show forced her to confront her reality and grow as a person, I didn't actually take the hint that this was something I would also need to do.

I didn't even really see how I was denying reality, even while doing it constantly. It was all a game to me. I was a postmodernist playing with ideas, reality wasn't like, *real*, can you imagine if it *was*? How horrifying, phew. Thank Sartre for subjectivity.

I *liked* my identity I didn't want to change, the idea of changing felt like death, which, of course, in a sense, it was. All my magical beliefs were acting as armor against the world, and if I was to let those beliefs go, I was killing my own immortality. I was changing myself from something powerful and eternal into something tiny and powerless and finite. I didn't want to admit that I lived in the world that I did, so I retreated into fantasy.

Identity is a power fantasy. Identity is armor we wear against reality, layers and layers

of it. First, to hide from life and death. Then, to hide from insignificance, loneliness and meaninglessness. Then, to hide from the fact that we're hiding from all of those other things.

Korzybski saw identity as the core obstacle to rationality and advocated the removal of words such as "I" from everyday speech. He even called confusing the layers of abstraction identification. Paul Graham gives the advice to keep your identity small. For a long time, I didn't quite understand this advice. Surely it was better to keep your identity *diversified* so that an attack on one part of your identity wasn't an attack on all of you, thus making you more open to having parts of your identity questioned, right?

Well, no. Identity by its nature drives you to defend it. It's *you* and an attack on it is an attack on you. The more pieces of identity you have, the more things you're fundamentally incapable of thinking about in a sane way. This isn't really a new insight, but it took me a long time to want to admit to myself. I might never have admitted it to myself.

It's possible I could have continued like this forever, but something finally snapped me out of it. I was forced into a crux: I claimed to care about saving the world. Was that all a fantasy, or did I really care? If I really cared, then I should reject the power fantasy and face reality. The power fantasy wasn't real power, larping saving the world wouldn't save the world. If I wasn't willing to do that, then I would be revealing to myself that it was all just a coping mechanism, that I didn't really care.

And I decided. I decided that I actually did care, and that decision shattered me. This was necessary. If you want to expose yourself to reality then just as you built up all that armor, so too you must strip it all away.

As Frederick Perls put it, "To suffer one's death and to be reborn is not easy." And it is not easy precisely because so much of one has to die.

I completely broke for a while, and it took a long time to restructure myself and rebuild from the wreckage. Riding through the disorientation period until new structures started growing out of the new choice was hard. The more identity you have built up, the harder it will be to change and the more painful the change will be, because it will mean you have more to lose when everything being supported finally collapses.

But I'm back and I'm stronger than ever now. I want to stress that I *needed* to be broken in this way. My identity had gotten very top heavy and was full of maladaptive coping mechanisms. About the only way to make anything better was to tear everything down, throw everything out, start with a completely fresh piece of paper, and say, "Okay, now what?"

**Part of the Series:** Death

**Next Post:** Metanoia

**Previous Post:** The Room Eats You

**Author's Note:** After this week we'll be taking a break from Death for a few weeks to talk about how to identify truth when we see it, after which, this series will resume.

