

The Story of Separation with Charles Eisenstein (Part 1)

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Commune with Jeff Krasno
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The myth of the separate self underlies our entire civilization, says philosopher and author Charles Eisenstein. This dualistic view of the world pits people against each other and turns nature into something we want to control. But we can choose another story — one of interdependence and connection. By doing so we become able to solve “impossible” problems, from political polarization to global warming.

Today on the show I have the distinct privilege of interviewing author and philosopher, Charles Eisenstein.

Born in 1967, Charles describes himself as a very sensitive, intellectual, and dreamy child. He graduated from Yale University with a degree in Mathematics and Philosophy, but his scholarly development brought him no closer to the truth he really cared about. After college, he went to Taiwan, learned Chinese, and soon found himself working as a translator. He spent most of his 20s there, educating himself in Eastern spiritual traditions and reading voraciously on topics from health to psychology and spirituality.

After an extended period of searching, Charles birthed his first book *The Ascent of Humanity* where he originally articulated his theory of separation which would serve as the philosophical underpinning for much of his work.

We do talk about this in the interview but I feel compelled to outline the basic idea here as it is so fundamental to Charles’ work.

Human kind has developed a story that we are discreet, separate individuals amongst other individuals living in an external universe that is separate from us. This duality influences our spiritual and scientific stories: the separation of the spiritual from the material, the separation of the mind from the body, evolutionary biology that frames life as a competition where only the fittest will survive.

This dualistic view of the world not only pits people against each other but also positions humans as separate from nature ... it gives dominion over it. And we are experiencing the ramifications of that now.

Much of Charles' work focuses around changing this myth the upholds our imagined order. We can choose another story of interdependence and connection to can address so many of our salient issues from loneliness, to income inequality to global warming.

Charles has also penned Sacred Economics which explores a new cultural story as it applies to the world of money, economy, and gift. And most recently he wrote The More Beautiful World our Hearts Know is Possible.

A note to listeners, this podcast is split into 2 episodes which are ideally meant to be listened to together but, ironically, we have separated them into 2 episodes to make them conform to commutes, workouts and whatever else you're doing while listening.

We touch on a lot of issues from the sacred nature of the material world, the fundamental nature of consciousness, the failing political system, climate change and the emergence of a new cultural story.

My name is Jeff Krasno and welcome to Commune.

Jeff Krasno: So as we were eating nuts in preparation for this conversation, I was telling you about sort of a bit of an emotional process that I'm going through right now, where we have a house that's been in the family for a hundred years, that is a lovely beautiful house, not that far from where you live, and my daughter was actually born in that front room on a stormy day in August, and the skies cleared, and a rainbow appeared, and the blue fish started jumping, and all this beautiful bucolic kind of scene, and we've had so many memories there, but it's a completely irrational thing to own and to have and to maintain.

Jeff Krasno: So to satisfy sort of our rational brain, we've been sort of pathetically trying to sell it for a long time, in an effort really not to sell it, and then sort of lo and behold, someone came along and did purchase it, and we're just going to contract now, and dealing with this idea of letting go of something in the material world that does legitimately hold, I guess, what you might think of as some you might define as something sacred. I guess my question would be, when do things in the material world hold a symbolic value that is real and important, and not just kind of fleeting and ephemeral?

Charles Eisenstein: It's not just a symbolic value. You could ask the same question about your old dog. This dog, well, I have a sentimental attachment to it, it's been in the family for a long time, but it can no longer do the work that the dog used to do to corral the chickens or whatever it did. So rationally, there's no reason to keep maintaining this dog. Why don't we just put it down?

Charles Eisenstein: We wouldn't do that for a beloved dog or your grandmother or something like that. For a house, that's okay, because this house is not a being, it's just a material thing. This devaluation of materiality, I think, is a problem. It's not to say that you should treat a house the same way you should treat a dog or a human being, but it's to ask, what is the right way to treat the house?

Charles Eisenstein: You can't, by analogy, give it the same treatment you would give your grandmother, but to even consider that there is a right way to do it, that takes into account the house as being, and not just as a symbol, what it means to you, but to actually be in a relationship to it. What I was proposing to you before is that you understand this potentially as a breakup, like a breakup with someone that you really love, and how do you go about that breakup, and why would you break up with somebody? Maybe you are ready to go your separate ways, but I think that whether or not ... And maybe you're not ready to break up, maybe you realize ... Either way, if you do understand it as a breakup, then you'll be able to go through whatever ritual or process you need to so that you feel okay with it.

Jeff Krasno: Right, and I suppose that my individual plight, my petty little life is just back on the top of a pinhead, but this notion of letting go, of moving on, I think anyone can see their story in that. Is there ways to essentially instill these things with meaning? For example, you talk about something, inanimate objects or material objects that we can sort of almost toss them away as if they don't really matter, but actually, they have a life to them. Right? What is that process of grace in a breakup?

Charles Eisenstein: Yeah. I think it's a pretty bad habit to treat the material things of the world as if they don't matter, because collectively, as humanity, we are now treating the planet as if it were some material thing that doesn't matter, and this ideal of the separate self kind of floating above materiality and, "Yeah, I've moved from this house to that house, and I'm not attached. I'm not attached to this thing. I'm not attached to anything material." This is a conceit. This kind of independence is a conceit, because you could apply it to human beings, and there are, I think, distorted spiritual teachings that counsel us to avoid attachment, but I think that to avoid attachment is to avoid being fully alive, and that real life isn't about protecting yourself from the pain of loss, but it's really going in there and fully loving and knowing that you're going to lose everything that you love, and being willing to go through the grief of that.

Jeff Krasno: Oh yeah.

Charles Eisenstein: Then you've lived.

Jeff Krasno: Yes. I read that Erich Fromm wrote something about this, which is, there is a way not to grieve, but the only option not to grieve is also not to love, and who would want that life? But then that brings up something for me that I really have been grappling with, which is this notion of non attachment and that on some level that ... This speaks directly to Buddhism, I suppose, that we are all constantly distracted by desire, and this sort of incessant desire is at the core of suffering, like I'm fidgeting around in my chair just to always kind of elicit some sort of pleasant feeling all the way up to, "I need my McMansion in the Hills," and that essentially you can cultivate practice to sort of separate yourself from this desire and find what I guess one might call consciousness, something outside of your thoughts, feelings, objects that you perceive through your limited five senses, and that then in this kind of seat of the soul, in this true self, there is this awareness.

Jeff Krasno: One of the things that I have been trying to grapple with is this. Is the fundamental nature of consciousness good, or is it neutral?

Jeff Krasno: Essentially, if you can cultivate that true awareness outside of feelings, emotions, objects, is that characterized by love, compassion, empathy, or is it something that is just purely neutral and focusable on good, fear, evil?

Charles Eisenstein: The default state of existence is bliss, and everything else is a temporary excursion away from that, which doesn't mean that these excursions are a mistake. Ultimately, they feed an evolutionary process where life and the universe become more and more alive, and being becomes more and more existent, more and more complex, more and more related, more and more full.

Charles Eisenstein: So the question then becomes, okay ... Yeah, desire births suffering, but maybe this whole journey into suffering, this whole excursion is happening for a reason.

Charles Eisenstein: Another way to look at it is ... Okay. So yeah, say desire causes suffering, but what are you going to do with that information? Can you exercise your will to suppress desire?

Jeff Krasno: Yeah.

Charles Eisenstein: Or could it be that desire needs to be fulfilled and exposed for its false premises before you can even transcend it? And that doesn't mean you're transcending all desire. Maybe it means you're just transcending this desire. I think that the problem isn't desire. The problem is that the primal energy of desire gets diverted onto false objects that don't actually meet the desire, like the McMansion in the Hills. What's the real desire there? It's probably not for the McMansion in the Hills, because if it were, you would live happily ever after if you had that. The same hunger that is grasping for the mansion in the Hills isn't satisfied by the mansion in the Hills.

Jeff Krasno: Right? Yeah.

Charles Eisenstein: Maybe what it really wants is the feeling of being at home in the world, but I don't know how to get that, I don't even know what that is, so I'll go for the mansion, but maybe even to realize that that is what I wanted all along requires that you first get the mansion.

Jeff Krasno: Yes. Yeah, and it's funny, I saw a heat map of one of these McMansions, of where people actually spend their time in the McMansion.

Charles Eisenstein: The breakfast nook.

Jeff Krasno: It was clustered in the breakfast nook and the bed, and then there's 10,000 square feet of space that never get used, and because they never get used, they never get used, because it feels so foreign, and that, yes, I think what you're saying, and I think what we might agree upon is that we are essentially always chasing, pursuing happiness through the accumulation of goods and services that will never really serve us.

Jeff Krasno: I want to go back, because something that I feel that is so fundamental to your philosophical approach on the human condition is separation and the separate self. So I wonder if you could just ... I'd love for you to talk about kind of what that means and sort of how we got there, and then play that forward into modern society. What are the implications of it? How do we address it?

Charles Eisenstein: Yeah, the separate self is the myth that underlies our entire civilization. All of our systems and institutions tap into the myth of separation, and I mean myth not in the sense of some fantasy, just some ridiculous things.

Jeff Krasno: Yeah, Aeschylus.

Charles Eisenstein: But a myth in terms of a story that explains the world. So the story of separation explains who you are. You're a separate individual. You are a soul encased in flesh. You are a Cartesian moat of consciousness, et cetera, et cetera. It answers the question, why are you here? It's to survive, to reproduce, to maximize your self-interest. There's really almost no why you're here in this story. It answers the question, what is the way to live, and what are human beings for, and what constitutes progress? It is that humans are separate from nature, destined to rise above nature, to dominate nature, to transcend nature, to harness natural forces, to someday no longer need nature. It also says what the nature of reality is and how change happens in the world. What are the ruling powers of this world, its forces in the story of separation?

Charles Eisenstein: I could go on and on, and often what I do in my work is I say, "Okay, how exactly does that basic paradigm inform our medical system or our economic system, or our spirituality or our politics?" You can see the traces of separation in all of these institutions.

Jeff Krasno: Yeah. Well, essentially, what are the means by which we can address our growing sense of separation and individualism, even just to become aware of it?

Charles Eisenstein: Right, right, right. It speaks to this helplessness that I hear so often of, "What are we going to do about this?" As if it were up to us.

Charles Eisenstein: So you inquired, "How do we launch a movement to reverse the tide of separation?", because it seems like it's going to take some mighty effort to accomplish this turnaround. But you know what? The current story did not result from a mighty intentional, purposeful effort to ... It's not like we got down and said, "Okay, things aren't going very well. Let's launch the story of separation."

Charles Eisenstein: The alternative understanding is that we are carried by a process and a movement that is much, much bigger than anything that we can create or intend. That is to step back from this anthropocentrism.

Charles Eisenstein: Our future is not fundamentally what we are consciously creating, and this goes against a lot of spiritual teachings where you become the conscious creator of your reality. Where did we get that arrogance? I think it is an extension of the technological mindset, which is that we're going to put the human stamp onto the disordered, chaotic, wild world outside of ourselves. So we want to do the same individually through the spiritual practices, and collectively by creating a vision of the future, and stamping that onto the future.

Charles Eisenstein: I think that's just as necessary as it is for a fetus, a baby that's being born, to make sure that that birth happens.

Charles Eisenstein: It's not that the fetus has no role. It's easier to give birth to a live baby than to a stillborn, because the livingness of the baby responds to the contractions, the birth process of the mother, and that response is itself part of the process. So right now, like a baby being born, we are subject to what we experience as titanic forces, and we don't know what's happening to us, and we don't know what to do, but we respond to those in whatever way that we know how. We understand those in the way that we understand them, responding accordingly, we have no idea, really, what's going on here. Part of our response is to make meanings and to try to impose them onto what's happening, to try to control what's happening. It's not bad to do that. That itself is part of the response, and to say we're not going to try to control it is itself a form of control, and this search for, "Okay, what are we supposed to do now?" It taps into the lineage of, our role is to be the doers.

Jeff Krasno: The doer, yeah.

Charles Eisenstein: That is necessary when, sorry to run on here, but [crosstalk 00:00:22:48]-

Jeff Krasno: No, no, this is good.

Charles Eisenstein: That's necessary when there is no larger doing that we can participate in, and what I'm offering is at the current stage right now ...

Charles Eisenstein: Not to stop doing and stop responding, but we are being carried by an inconceivable, mysterious process.

Jeff Krasno: Right? Yeah. That's interesting because in some ways it defies the instinct that I have of like, we need a spiritual awakening. That we... I just read, it was Martin Luther King day on Monday, I took a little bit of time to actually read, imagine that, the letter from a Birmingham jail where he essentially is addressing a bunch of clergy in Birmingham that are essentially speaking out against marching against passive resistance and nonviolence in everything that the Southern Christian leadership conference was doing with Martin Luther King. And so he writes this response from the Birmingham jail, which is essentially like, "We are all connected. That essentially, if my daughter can read but your daughters can't, then I am poor." And you've heard many of these, essentially, interconnected, interdependent spiritual messages come to the fore that have over time addressed the salient societal problems or issues.

Jeff Krasno: If you look at slavery, the abolition movement had its roots in Quakerism. I mean, oftentimes when we hit these loggerheads that the answers tend to lie in our spiritual underpinnings. And I want to talk about politics because I don't think the change is going to come from there. But I think what's interesting about what you're saying is that you're like, "Jeff. No, no, no, don't wait." Jesus is not going to roll in and say like, "Oh, everybody we've been misguided here, again, are your

universal truth. Everyone get back in line. Capitalism's built some nice plumbing for society to function, but we're pumping shit through it. You've got to work through a lens of these values and you'll be cool." But what I'm hearing is that, that's not going to come from us, necessarily.

Charles Eisenstein: It is being born within us and from us. It's not something that we can engineer. Our engineering efforts are part of it, but it is self beyond our engineering. It's beyond our contrivance. It's beyond our understanding. We can understand it maybe in retrospect. Maybe in hundreds of years now we can name, here's what the transition was. But from where we are now, we cannot map it out. We cannot plan it. And therefore current politics in terms of, "Okay. Let's form some policies that are going to bring us through this transition." All of those will fall woefully short of the task. However, we can also sense that there is a destination. Otherwise we would have no hope.

Charles Eisenstein: The hope doesn't come from any rational projection that we can make it through the current emergency. Because what we need to make it through doesn't even exist in the vocabulary of reason as society accepts it. I'm not saying it's irrational, but according to the premises of that the old story of separation establishes it is impossible. According to what we... I mean that's part of the myth. The myth tells us what's possible and what isn't. According to what it says is possible, there's no way. There's no way anything's ever going to change. I mean, is it possible for there to be true peace in the Mid East. Say, between Israelis and Palestinians? I'm not talking like a ceasefire.

Charles Eisenstein: I'm talking about brotherhood. I'm talking about-

Jeff Krasno: Fraternity.

Charles Eisenstein: Forgiveness, redemption, healing. I mean, it's not even like the most modest peace proposals seem to be politically naive. So it's impossible according to what we have established in our common perception as possible.

Jeff Krasno: Right.

Charles Eisenstein: So that means that anything that we can constitute politically won't reach anywhere close to the destination that we paradoxically know exists. Therefore, to get to that destination, we have to accept a different guidance. A guidance that lies outside the realm of what we have agreed is possible. We have some help in this journey. Because most people, that I meet anyway, have in fact experienced the impossible. They've experienced things that the old story embodied in science tells them is possible. Oh, it tells me it's impossible. And these anomalous experiences, it's as if they are coming from the future. And each one that we experience creates a thread linking present with that particular future. These are the signposts, the breadcrumbs that we can follow to reach a place that we don't know how to reach.

Thanks for listening to today's show with Charles Eisenstein. Remember that this is a 2-part episode. If you are interested in learning more about Charles, his books, podcasts please go to <https://charleseisenstein.org/>. We'll have a new Commune course coming soon with Charles – so keep an eye out

That's it from the Commune for this week. Please subscribe and leave us a review. And, more importantly, email me at Jeffk@onecommune.com I always love hearing directly from you.

That's it from the Commune for this week. I am Jeff Krasno and, in honor of Ram Dass, in love, include me.

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