

Overcoming Self-Consciousness

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Self-consciousness is a destroyer of authentic Christian experience. We've all been singing in church when all of a sudden the thought races by: "Look at me here singing. I'm enjoying this." And from that moment on your joy in singing is somehow less real than it was before.



C. S. Lewis helps us understand why when he exposes the following dilemma:¹ we cannot really examine our experiences because whenever we stop to look at them, we stop having them.

This is our dilemma . . . as thinkers we are cut off from what we think about; as tasting, touching, willing, loving, hating, we do not clearly understand. The more lucidly we think, the more we are cut off: the more deeply we enter into reality, the less we can think. You cannot study Pleasure in the moment of the nuptial embrace, nor repentance while repenting, nor analyze the nature of humor while roaring with laughter.²

So the moment we step outside of the experience we are having, the experience stops. You're with a group laughing at a good joke and then you think, "look how I'm laughing at that good joke" and a fake smile is left plastered on your face. Lewis writes, "You cannot hope and also think about hoping at the same moment; for in hope we look to hope's object and we interrupt this by (so to speak) turning around to look at the hope itself."³

¹ I am indebted to John Piper in his sermon "Lessons from an Inconsolable Soul: Learning from the Mind and Heart of C. S. Lewis" for brining these quotes and this concept to my attention.

² *C. S. Lewis: Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*, ed. Lesley Walmsley (London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2000), p. 140.

³ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, pp. 218–219.

The danger of too much personal analysis

For a long time I've felt discouraged by my own apparent lack of Christian experience (joy, fellowship with God, faith, and so forth). I've even wondered sometimes if I'm really one of Christ's—if maybe my experience is just a manufactured knock-off of what everyone else is experiencing. All this leads me to examine myself more and more in a vain search for something more "real."

Yet, as it turns out, it is just this examining, this self-consciousness, that has made my experiences seem so insincere. This is because my examination of the experience makes the experience stop, so that all I can see is a fake-looking sediment that the experience has left behind.

How ironic. In my very quest for authenticity, I destroy what truly is authentic.

What can we do?

So how can we break free of our self-consciousness? Remarkably, simply recognizing the dangers of self-consciousness has given me incredible freedom. I've realized that my experiences aren't inauthentic at all; rather, my over-analysis of them makes them *seem* inauthentic. This gives me the freedom to stop analyzing.⁴

Instead of examining my joy in Christ, I can simply enjoy Christ. Instead of rating how real my trust of him is, I can simply trust him. We can be liberated, in other words, to focus our eyes on Jesus rather than ourselves. We can cease to be discouraged by how we perceive our experience of Christ and start to be encouraged by Christ himself.

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⁴ There is certainly a time for self-examination. Not all experiences are real and our patterns of experience should be evaluated by scripture and New Testament precedent. This is very different, however, from stepping back to evaluate each experience as we have it.