

What is Ego and how to tame it?

[Anil K. Rajvanshi](#)

anilrajvanshi@gmail.com

Since time immemorial humans have been intrigued by the idea of who am I or the nature of ego, 'I', etc. Philosophical and psychological tomes have been written on it. One of the tenets of Indian philosophy is to reduce or eliminate the ego so that liberation from cycle of birth and death takes place.

Ego is very important part of human personality. It allows us to focus, gives us drive to achieve our goals and makes us understand the world. It also gives us a sense of reality. Without ego we will be dead and dissolution of ego therefore is the final process before death.

Yet ego has created the greatest conflicts in the world and is the major cause of friction among humans. Preservation of self, which is mediated by ego, leads us to control events and resources and is the cause of friction. So if we can control ego then the world will be a better place to live in.

Ego is composed of sum and substance of person's memories. When a child is born he/she has no ego. At the age of about 2 years the child becomes aware of his/her existence and self and that is when the ego starts to develop. As we grow older our added experiences and memories add and change our ego.

However, we still do not know what ego, 'I', etc is, and where in the brain it is located. Recent discoveries in brain research may be able to provide a possible answer to this riddle and may help us in its control.

Recently scientists have been able to identify a small part inside the frontal portion of brain as the seat of ego, consciousness and sense of self. [According to them in the areas called Anterior Cingulate Cortex \(ACC\) and Fronto-insular Cortex \(FIC\) lies the sense of ego or awareness.](#)

In these areas are also found densely packed von Economo Neurons (VENs). These neurons, named after the German scientist Constantin von Economo, were discovered in late 1920s. But only recently have they been thoroughly studied and [scientists believe that they might help to give us a sense of 'I', empathy and to organize and monitor other parts of brain.](#) These neurons (which are just few hundred thousand in numbers) are like a symphony director and direct our thoughts and help in our concentration. Just like a symphony director who does not play any instrument himself but directs other players, **VENs do not produce any thought themselves** but direct other thoughts.

The VENs are different [and much bigger \(50-200%\) than the other brain neurons.](#) They are characterized by having a single branch (dendrite) through which the signal flows. In the other neurons there are many branches emanating from each of them which attach to other neurons and hence the signals flow through all the branches to form neural pathways, memory and thought. The single-branched, bigger VENs on the other hand allow much more rapid transfer of information and processing since they are faster conducting than the regular neurons and also the signal goes only through a single branch.

The frontal portion of the brain where ACC and FIC are located are also very well-connected to sensory inputs and areas related to automatic control, decision-making or awareness. Thus the rapid processing of information from these areas by VENs therefore allows them to act as policemen and “reality checkers”. They do this by constantly comparing the signals from the sensory organs with those emanating from the brain. This constant

comparison of information from outside world and within gives us a sense of reality!

As ACC and FIC areas of the brain are densely populated by VENs, it is possible that these neurons maybe acting as a group. We can therefore call them von Economo Neuron Group (VENG). ***VENG could be the initiator of ego.***

Ego therefore results when VENG synchronizes the information and signals emanating from the sensory organs and memories. It is similar to music being produced when the symphony director directs individual musicians. Thus ego is like music!

VENs start forming just after birth and reach their maximum number of [2-4 hundred thousand by the age of eight](#). This is also the age by which time a complete sense of self is ingrained as brain map. Thus it is possible that this early brain map/VENG interaction gives rise to ego. With time the deep personal memories together with experiences add to this ego. Also as each person's brain is unique, depending on their memories, experiences and genetic makeup, their ego is also unique.

The line of reasoning of VENG helping in ego production is validated by observing the effect of [hallucinatory drugs like LSD on brain](#). When LSD-type drugs are taken, VENG signaling is reduced [resulting in unchecked production of thoughts, hallucinations and visions](#). Some call this rich experience as creation of heightened reality and vision of god but almost all report absence of ego and self-awareness during drug-taking episodes!

The brain with its 100 billion neurons when left to itself, and without the direction of ego or 'I' can create a myriad of thoughts, hallucinations and visions. The VENG acting as a director gives the brain a certain order and keeps the hallucinations in check. It is as if in the absence of cat, mice have free reign! Ego (mediated by VENG) helps in controlling these hallucinations.

This experience of heightened reality is also obtained in a controlled manner by advanced yogis in [Samadhi](#). In fact the definition of Yoga, according to [Patanjali, is suppression of thought waves](#). Thought waves cannot be suppressed because a brain devoid of thought is a dead brain. I therefore think that Patanjali and other ancient Indian rishis intuitively knew about VENG and how its control could bring calmness to the mind.

Also the [Samadhi](#) experience of controlling VENG activity is more useful and powerful than drugs since it allows controlled activity of other parts of brain by will. Thus the rich experience of heightened or altered reality is enhanced and lasts for longer time than the psychedelic experience.

The control of VENG leads to increased concentration and is the first step in producing [Sanyam](#). With its control it has a great ability to direct various signals from the brain and keep them in vision field for a long time. This is the basis of meditation.

Ego production by VENG may also explain the old brain riddle of why people with brain damage to certain section still retain their identity. I feel VENG simply directs the brain signals from the remaining brain-map to give a sense of a new ego. Just like a music director with fewer musicians cannot do justice to the music composition similarly the damaged brain produces an ego below par.

But how is VENG controlled? I think it is an autonomous self controlling process where VENG and brain signals control each other to form a stable ego. When [there is a mismatch then either the ego gets inflated leading to conflict and strife or gets deflated leading to depression and low self-esteem](#). The ancient Indian yogic system of concentrating for a long time on a single thought and on the center of forehead might also be a mechanism of taming and controlling the VENG since its location is in that area.

The nature of VENG also throws light on anger emotion. I think anger emotions result when there is conflict between the reality validated by VENG and the brain map. Thus when somebody shouts at us or says harsh things, there is a conflict between our sense of self and the reality (insult by others) which results in our getting angry.

Similarly when we do not get what we want (again a conflict between our ego and reality) we get angry and so forth. The reduction of anger and calmness of mind comes when VENG is controlled by Yoga and conflict resolution takes place. This resolution happens when the brain map can be resolved through reasoning and [is the genesis of wisdom.](#)

Reasoning can also take place when VENG makes it possible for the brain to modify its map according to the reality so that minimum conflict results. Thus conflict resolution is one of the very important aspects of an evolved human being and comes from the calmness of the mind and wisdom. ***This is also the genesis of humility.***

Thus there is no single place in the brain where ego or anger rests but is a dynamic process mediated by VENG. This is just like music which one can never say where it is, but when played by musicians exists!

[HOME](#)

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