

Humanity's Inherent Value Preference for Integral Being

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*"To see the world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower,
to hold infinity in the palm of your hand and eternity in an hour."
(William Blake, Auguries of Innocence)*

Abstract

The world's wisdom traditions claim that it is possible and preferable to experience human interactions as life enhancing with less disturbance by phenomena that threaten human well-being. In addition they assert that this enhanced way of experiencing relationships and interactions with nature is a matter of perception. Asian traditions, Far Eastern traditions and Perennial philosophy have all agreed to the possibility of enhanced human interactions.

Initially, because of reluctance to accept such claims as valid without an empirical investigation, researchers pursued empirical investigations into the factors motivating human behavior and shaping the human experience. The resulting evidence regarding what shapes the human experience of the phenomenal world led to the conclusion that human perception is the basis of how humanity experiences reality. Subsequently certain strands of what have developed into Existential Psychology, Perceptual Psychology and ultimately Social Psychology all support the claim that it is possible to experience enhanced perceptions.

The world's wisdom traditions prescribed how to maintain a perceptual focus on what is essential for human well-being and flourishing. Such a perspective is the key to avoiding what is harmful for human well-being. The world's wisdom traditions have asserted that this is a preferable

perspective from which to view and experience existence. They all also state that the subsequent alteration of this preferable perspective is unfortunate and should be rectified. By synthesizing the insights from ancient wisdom, modern science, philosophy and religion we gain a better understanding of how humanity could enjoy a better-integrated experience (in social interactions and with the environment). This article (based on studies in social psychology, the psychology of perception and neurobiology) complements the insights found in the perennial philosophy of our world's wisdom traditions.

Introduction

Writers in such diverse fields as social psychology, neurobiology, philosophy and religion have all found that the endeavor to enhance the human experience is contingent on addressing the existential and ontological conditions of humanity. In other words, scholars concerned about the social psychological condition of humanity also demonstrate a concern about the ontological nature of Being. This has prompted many scholars-in their effort to help humanity experience greater well-being-to address human nature and the value preferences that motivate human behavior. Results from the body of research on the underlying motivation behind human behavior has lead social scientists to claim that humanity has basic needs for relatedness and also has the need to feel well-integrated within particular social and environmental contexts. Society, according to this social psychological view, has the responsibility of structuring itself to satisfy the human need for experiencing well-being in terms of being well-integrated.

Social Psychology introduced the idea that it is possible to elevate the human experience (this was quite evident in the case of Humanistic psychology). Social Psychologists believe that the key to enriching the human condition lies in the theoretical analysis of the responsibility of society for enhancing human interactions. In other words social psychologists recognize that humanity faces an existential dilemma that is partially caused by a sense of alienation resulting from a Dualistic perspective on interactions. An

exploration of the concepts shaping the development of social psychology along with recent views on neurobiology make it evident that it is possible for humanity to enjoy a more complementary view of human interactions. Thus it is possible for humanity to enjoy an enhanced perspective on human existence and human interactions.

Humanity's understanding of the nature of existence is primarily based on perception. The perception of existence from the Western perspective (for quite some time) has been characterized as Dualistic, resulting in humanity experiencing a subject-other dichotomy (in our experience with each other and a sense of alienation in our connection with the environment). But this perspective on interactions has not always been the view through which humanity perceived and experienced existence and is not the only view through which to formulate an understanding of human interactions. It is possible and preferable to have a perspective that allows taking advantage of opportunities for flourishing while diminishing what would threaten human well-being. Being able to take advantage of this enhanced perspective on existence is a matter of understanding how perception shapes the human perspective on ontology and teleology thus, shapes the human experience of existence.

The first segment of the article begins with insights into having a more enhanced perspective of and experience in existence. The first section claims that the human biological system has an inherent value preference for experiencing the various aspects of human interaction as complementarity. This section offers a biological explanation to support the claim that humanity's natural drive to be well-integrated is characteristic of how humanity's biological nature is constituted. The second section of the article goes into more detail on the possibility of enhancing human interactions (with a special focus on nature-human interactions). This section draws on recent research in social psychology that analyzes what contributes to human well-being and research in neurobiology on humanity's inherent value preferences. This section argues that an enhanced perspective on relationships (a perceptual focus on more life enhancing opportunities) would contribute to human

flourishing and aids humanity in enjoying more of what we value. The final section claims that human culture is a manifestation of collective intentionality-thus reflects an effort to realize humanity's inherent neurological value preferences. These claims are supported by social psychology, philosophy of mind, and by the philosophical perspective of Pragmatism. The final section describes the significance that our natural value preference for beneficial interactions has for human culture, the progression of civilization and for improving the nature-human relationship. This section argues that a flourishing culture is built on increasing the range of internal and external beneficial interchanges.

This is followed by a conclusion summarizing the arguments made in the article. The conclusion reemphasizes ontology and teleology (the natural preference for being as well-integrated with as many other aspects of existence as possible). The conclusion-as a summary of the basic argument of the article-claims that a more enriching experience in existence can be achieved when humanity holds a more enhanced perspective on existence and when this perspective shapes the practices of individuals and societies. Such a perspective takes us beyond a sense of dualistic contention into improved connections with the things we need to flourish.

Humanity's Inherent Value Preference for Complementarity in Interactions

Recent research analyzing what motivates human behavior claims that psychology has had a tendency to over-value dispositional or personality-based explanations for human behavior while under-valuing contextual explanations for human behavior. However this has not been true for social psychology. For social psychology a bedrock tenet is that people are affected by their context. By context social psychologists mean both the social and the natural environments. Thus fundamental to social psychology is the belief that in addition to individuality humanity has a primary passion to feel a sense of being well-integrated within an environmental and social context. In other words, a basic tenet of social psychology is that "There is only one passion which satisfies the human need to feel fully integrated within a

particular social and natural environment. It is an experience of communion, which permits the full unfolding of one's own inner activity."¹

This has prompted social psychologists to believe that human behavior is influenced by what are called *Operative Values*. That is to say that human behavior is motivated by value preferences or value predispositions. Basic to both psychology and social psychology is the belief that an individual has a natural biological instinctive impulse to strive toward experiencing a fuller sense of self. A fuller sense of self is realized by being better integrated within the natural and social environments. At an intuitive level people strive to achieve a consistency between value preferences, behaviors, perceptions and cognitions. Inconsistencies will drive a person to adjust outlooks and behaviors in an attempt to achieve better interactions-in relationships with others and between the person and the environment.

Winner of APA's highest awards in all three major academic categories, Elliot Aronson claims that behavior is motivated by the drive to achieve such consistency by reducing dissonance. Dissonance (what psychologists call cognitive dissonance) is an uncomfortable emotion triggered by what seems to be an inconsistency or contradiction amongst one's cognitions. When cognitive dissonance becomes too great it will motivate an attempt to reconcile the discrepancy between the way a person perceives reality, the subsequent way the person conceives of reality and ultimately the way the person acts in interactions. Many scholars believe that the nature-human dichotomy (an aspect of the Western tendency toward a dualistic self-other dichotomy) is one area where dissonance is most problematic for human psychological and social conditions. In other words there can be incongruences between the perception of the nature-human relationship, the accurate appraisal of what is understood to be concrete reality and the social psychological consequences of the discrepancy. The concern for social psychologists, as Aronson pointed out,

¹ Fromm, Eric. (1959) *Values, Psychology and Human Existence. The Literary Estate of Erich Fromm.* Tuebingen, Germany, 2.

is that discrepancies-that can be due to distorted perceptions-are involved in the problem of dissonance.²

The cognitive discomfort was described by John Platt as a "Social Trap" in which people can act to obtain short-term, what are perceived to be individual gains, which in the long run leads to a loss for the society as a whole. Platt describes this as resulting from "Individuals, or even whole societies, getting themselves started in some direction or some set of relationships that later prove to be unpleasant, detrimental, even lethal and that they see no easy way to back out of or to avoid."³ Platt goes on to describe a number of areas where this is evident in various interactions in society and in nature-human interactions. He then proposes ways out of this social psychological dilemma-one of which is the resolve the discrepancy between perception, cognition and behavior.

Studies in perceptual psychology and neurobiology reveal that humanity's inherent perceptual preference for experiencing interactions is complementarity.⁴ Nobel Prize-winning neuroscientist Gerald Edelman implies that complementarity explains the fundamental connection between nature's biological principles, humanity's biological nature and the value preferences naturally triggered as human cognitive skills developed. Research in complementarity, conducted by physicists, biologists, psychologists and sociologists makes it clear that the concept explains the link between the biological aspects of human behavior, how individuals self-organize, the structuring of culture and the human relationship to the environment.⁵

Edelman believes that the whole body (including human cognitive abilities) is a biological self-organizing system that interacts (with others and with the environment) in ways that

² Aronson, Elliot. & Tarvis, Carol. *Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts*. Orlando, Florida, Harcourt, Inc., 13-15.

³ Platt, John. (1973) Social Traps. *American Psychologist* Volume 28, (8), 641.

⁴ Gibson, James J. (1986) *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. New Jersey, Lawrence Erlbaum, 127.

⁵ Berntson, Gary. & Cacioppo, John. (2008) A Contemporary Perspective on Multilevel Analyses and Social Neuroscience. *Interdisciplinary Research*, 36-37.

shape out of interactions possibilities that best complement its organism. For that reason it is important to remember that the perceptual perspective motivating interactions and the consequences of the interactions (interpersonal and with the environment) are linked together in a way that creates what Buddhist call co-dependency or mutuality.⁶ That is to say that Edelman's theory of neural value preference explains why a complementary interchange is the preferable way to think of the interactions occurring between individuals, in society and between nature and humanity.

Edelman explains that a healthy individual attempts to shape experiences into perceptions that are unitary or integrated.⁷ This means that humanity has the preference for perceiving interactions as an experience of seamless unified wholeness (unbroken or undisturbed continuity). Any aspect of interaction that upsets this flow of seamless continuity is found to be disturbing to human anticipations. The feeling of unified wholeness (seamless continuity) is the basis of an organism's feeling of integrity and in the human situation helps the individual experience a fuller sense of self. Edelman claims that humans are "hard wired," with a neurobiological, value predisposition that developed with the intent to "reinvent" internal-external ecological equilibrium.

Philosopher of mind John Searle agrees that organisms-interlaced with elements of nature in a particular way-are predisposed by nature to continuously seek integration (within their particular environmental context) in an attempt to maintain being well-integrated.⁸ This process (of creation shaping aspects of reality into conscious beings aware of the self in need of perpetual interchange or interaction) is a basic feature of nature's ontology. The fact that nature's primordial elements structure themselves in a way that prompts this natural organic urge could be described as nature's

⁶ Merleau-Ponty, (2005) *The Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge, 373.

⁷ Edelman, Gerald. (2004) *Wider than the Sky*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 7.

⁸ Searle, John. (1983) *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 46.

fundamental biological force manifesting an intention to motivate or promote being more fully integrated. Thus intentionality is a special feature of the human effort to incorporate various elements into an integrated system that will contribute to the human endeavor to achieve a well-integrated life experience.⁹

Searle states that this “special feature” highlights the significance of human interactions by giving them intention, value and meaning. In his recent book *Rationality in Action* he explains that rational decision making is a matter of selecting means that enable fulfilling human ends. The ends are a matter of values. We come to the decision-making situation with established value preferences and rationality is a matter of figuring out the means to our ends.¹⁰ *The Place of Intentionality in Nature* is to direct human perception toward affordance opportunities. “Just as it is a biological fact that certain sorts of organisms have certain sorts of mental states, so it is equally a biological fact that certain mental states function causally in the interactions between the organism and the rest of nature and in the production of the behavior of the organism.”¹¹

Enhancing the Perception of the Nature-Human Relationship

The world’s wisdom traditions claim that it is possible to have a better integrated connection with nature (that is not only a source of nourishment and growth but also the basis of a heightened sense of well-being and harmony). The world’s earliest wisdom traditions all spoke about humanity’s initial-naturally ordained-inclination for being well-integrated within the environment. The belief was that humanity’s initial immersion in nature was characteristic of the way humanity’s biological nature is constituted. Thus, the earliest conceptualizations of the nature-human experience reflected a

⁹ Ibid., 46.

¹⁰ Searl, John. (2001) *Rationality in Action*. Cambridge, Mass. A Bradford Book, MIT Press, 1.

¹¹ Searl, John. (1984) Intentionality and its Place in Nature. *Synthese*. Volume 61, Number 1, 10.

prescription for experiencing “at-one-ment” with the natural order.

C. S. Pierce claimed that patterns of natural interchange are evidence of biological elements intentionally participating in efforts to cooperatively form structures of beneficial exchange (the very basis of life for the human organism and for human society is the ability to form structures of cooperative interchange). Flourishing depends on being able to recognize and participate in opportunities for cooperative interchange. Peirce added that the recognition of ambiguity in nature is not due to environmental conditions alone as perception is contingent on the perspective of the *experiencer*. Peirce argues that reliable knowledge reduces the disturbance of nature’s ambiguity by increasing the probability of anticipation becoming experience.

As human cognitive skills developed reliable knowledge was shaped by the human neural network “firing” in patterns aligned with the neural value preference. The value preference favored relating to things in nature in ways that shape environmental interactions into outcomes that are beneficial for individuals and cultures. Such knowledge was key to human survival and the effort to organize flourishing cultures. In other words the thriving of humanity and culture was dependent on realizing that in spite of nature’s threats culture could produce accumulated knowledge of how to recognize nature’s signaled opportunities for growth and how to effectively manage the disturbances that would threaten the flourishing of the culture. Many of the world’s wisdom traditions have asserted that achieving the natural value preference for life-enhancing interactions with nature sparks regeneration, benefits health, increases human vitality and heightens mental abilities.

Both myth and science agree that the human inherent value preference has been shaped into conceptions of what will satisfy natural biological drives. What has been ordained by existence was shaped into the earliest and most cherished cultural concepts of humanity. Western and Eastern belief systems claim that the perceptual perspective-that initially afforded humanity a harmonious view of the relationship

between self and nature-was shaped by the primordial forces of existence. In both Western and Eastern traditions the harmonious view was believed to be due to the human natural ability to sense compatibility between nature, self and culture. There was recognition that nature's abundance provides resources to shape the development of the culture in desirable ways. In other words the drive for complementarity or for continuous reintegration (evident in the processes of nature and humanity's biological make-up) can be thought of as "the tie that binds" all of existence into integral relatedness.

Today social psychologists are convinced that consideration of the importance of increasing the range of cooperative-beneficial-interactions is important to individual and social well-being. James Hillman anxiously tries to bring this to our attention by claiming that the historical emphasis of psychoanalysis on the atomistic individual has perhaps diminished the effectiveness of the discipline-in a reality where it is increasingly apparent that we exist in socio-economic interdependence.¹² Resolving the increasing anxiety that the nature- human dissonance causes and the social crisis that is impending if the nature-human dissonance isn't properly addressed demands what Theodore Roszak-at the 1994 conference on Ecopsychology-describes as becoming fully Holistically integrated human beings. In other words research on human behavior agrees that human physical and mental performance are improved as a result of holistically developing the full capacity of the human potential.

For example research in perceptual psychology, cognitive psychology and in neurology affirm that individuals perform best in attempts at problem solving and addressing pressing issues when drawing from the full capacity for experiencing (the sensing, intuitive faculties, and cognitive faculties). With such a fully embodied perceptual view (or with an integrative perceptual perspective) the full capacity of the human perceptual and cognitive potential is engaged. Such a perspective is best for creatively addressing and resolving the

¹² Hillman, James. Venture, Michael. (1992) *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy--And the World's Getting Worse*. San Francisco, Harper-Collins Publishers, 3.

issues that are currently resulting in individual and social cognitive dissonance. The world's wisdom traditions have long asserted that such a Holistically embodied approach to living benefits health by sparking healthy cell regeneration, increases human vitality and heightens mental abilities.

Science, philosophy and religion all agree that the integrity of complex organisms is enhanced by fulfilling the inherent urge to become more fully integrated and in the human situation helps the individual to experience a fuller sense of self. Cooperative interchange can be thought of as a natural biological value preference that establishes the inclination for social cooperation and culture. This natural value preference has been expressed by the world's wisdom traditions as the conviction that harmonious interaction is consistent with what was ontologically ordained to be best for human well-being and for the human experience in nature.

Eastern and Western perennial philosophy claim that viewing and experiencing existence from the perspective of humanity's inherent value preference is personally beneficial, mentally beneficial (heightens cognitive abilities), and is socially beneficial. Such a realization is more likely to result in the experience of a more enhanced sense of being. Perennial philosophy has claimed that the fundamental biological principles of creation have been encoded into the organic elements of nature with the intention that this can be decoded by humans into an understanding of the teleological significance of existence. From the perspective of the world's wisdom traditions the teleological significance of existence is realizing how to enjoy the sense of "elevated being."

Increasing the Range of Beneficial Cooperative Interactions

Humanity's value preference accounts for what Searle calls the cooperative and coordinated character of collective intentionality. Searle adds that this value preference is rooted in the biological structure of the human organism thus stems from the ontological nature of "how the world in fact is." In other words collective intentionality and cooperative behavior are displays of natural functions. "For the individual there is a

value in survival and reproduction, and for a culture there is a value in continuity. But natural function takes place only within a set of prior assignments of value (including purposes, teleology, and other functions)."¹³

That is to say that there is an inherent drive for growth and increased complexity imprinted into organic organisms by nature's underlying biological principles. One way to appreciate what this entails is to survey a few representative types of organism-environment couplings, starting with single-cell organisms and moving up by degrees to more complex animals. "In every case we can observe the same adaptive process of interactive coordination between a specific organism and recurring characteristics of its environment."¹⁴ Thus it can be argued that humanity has been predisposed with a neurological (cognitive) inclination that prompted shaping human cooperative interactions into cultural forms of more complex structured cooperation. Humanity has learned that culture, as an extended network of complex cooperative structures, supports thriving in spite of the challenges the culture is confronted with.

Contemporary science affirms that we witness intentionality as a part of the interaction dynamics of organic organisms-at the smallest cell level and at the more complex scale of social interactions and social structures. Reliable knowledge-insight into the connection between humanity's inherent values, human intentionality and the human social psychological experience-is indeed a conceptualized understanding of how to align action with the neural value preference. Knowledge provides understanding of how diversity can be shaped into cooperative unity. Humanity's fundamental cognitive experience began with a learned response to environmental stimulus. These cognitive abilities have been a special capacity that has played an important role in formulating our response to the challenge of unpredictable

¹³ Searle, John. (1995) *The Construction of Social Reality*. New York, The Free Press, 6 & 15.

¹⁴ Johnson, Mark. & Rohrer, Tim. (2007) *We are Live Creatures: Embodiment, American Pragmatism, and the Cognitive Organism. Body, Language and Mind, Volume 1: Embodiment.* (Ziemke, Tom. Zlatev, Jordan. & Frank, Roslyn. Eds.). New York, Mouton de Gruyter Publishers, 24.

encounters. This ability, if not a special gift of nature, certainly was developed to help humans have a better experience with nature as well as with each other.

John Dewey believed that a cultural worldview represents an accumulation of knowledge of how to manage interactions in ways that promote the flourishing of the culture. Human culture was spurred on by the realization that cooperative interaction is not only basic to maintaining individual integrity it is essential for the integrity of all structured units. This means that the worldview of a flourishing culture must be based on expanding its scope of internal and external cooperative interactions. In other words to promote a thriving culture neural value preferences must be shaped into conceptual understandings of how to extend the range of cooperative interactions.

Dewey understood that there is a certain contingency that human culture faces in relationship to nature that creates precarious nature-culture interactions. Dewey claimed that the ability to survive in the natural system depends upon an ability to foresee possible dangerous consequences. The ability to enjoy that system depends upon the perceptual ability to foresee nature's opportunities for satisfaction and fulfillment.¹⁵ Dewey recognized that because humans, like all animals, adapt to the environment in ways that effect the environment; "any disequilibrium of an organism in its environment, encompasses both organism and environment."¹⁶

Dewey argued that nature's biological principles have encoded organisms with life enhancing tendencies. These biological intentions are evidenced in the impulse toward cooperative interaction. An extended range of cooperative interchange is necessary because the life principle is built on organic elements participating in beneficial interchanges. This

¹⁵ Scheckler, Rebecca Klein. (2000) *Weaving Feminism, Pragmatism, and Distance Education*. Doctoral Dissertation in Philosophy. Published by the Education Dept. of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 35.

¹⁶ Dewey, John. (1929) *Experience and Nature*. London, George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 253.

interchange is the only means for nourishment and growth.¹⁷ Dewey proposed that cultures are ethically obliged to align their mega organic structure with humanity's natural biological predisposition.

Conclusion

Humanity exists with an anxiety resulting from the correlation between how nature is affected by human perceptions and how nature itself shapes perceptions. Because of the "feedback" or "looping" relationship humans have with nature we are continuously both a product of nature and producing feedback of the human perception of nature. In other words humans are ontologically bound to an inescapable naturalness. The human neurological value preference is testimony that the human organism prefers to be integrated within the environmental econiche in a way allowing for a complementarity between ourselves and nature.¹⁸

We have come to value the nature of harmonious interchange because our sense of self, as we prefer to be, is enriched by increasing beneficial interactions. As admonished by the world's wisdom traditions, by adhering to the human value preference we can achieve a desired state. **The advantages of achieving this desired state prompts religion, philosophy and science to promote cooperative interactions.** In other words, there is a human value preference for achieving unity as a self, to have a unique center and to find common ground and relation or unity with others. "That is to say, human beings strive for unique individuality or fulfillment of capacities with a unique angle of vision and, at the same time, to improve the quality of their associations and to establish new common ground in friendship and communication."¹⁹ Recent research in neurobiology affirms that humanity has been "hard wired" by a natural biological principle urging harmonious, cooperative interactions as a selective value preference.

¹⁷ Dewey, John. Ibid., 277-278.

¹⁸ Edelman, Gerald. (2006) *Second Nature*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 24-25.

¹⁹ Ziniewicz, Gordon, L. (2006) *Essays on the Philosophy of John Dewey. Adventures in Philosophy*, 4.

One of the old maxims that motivated much of our behavior toward nature (as well as with each other) was “only the strong survive!” The strong would flourish and the weak would diminish. This led many people to presume that the weak would be dominated by the strong. I believe that we are now beginning to conceive of the possibility of a new maxim: Existence prefers those who create complementarity in interpersonal and environmental interactions. Existence prefers those who are well-integrated with as many other aspects of the environment as possible. The preference of the forces of existence is to restrict or eliminate beings based on the extent to which they damage other aspects of existence. We are all aware of the fact that existence can and certainly has at times eliminated those beings not appropriately integrated with the environment.

For Further Reading

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