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**A SYSTEMS VIEW OF THE SELF:
HOW ASKING DIFFERENT QUESTIONS LEADS TO A GREATER
UNDERSTANDING OF EVOLUTIONARY CONSCIOUSNESS,
COMMON SENSE, AND WISDOM**

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ABSTRACT

Inherent in evolutionary consciousness is a view of the self that transcends the limitations of the industrial view. The self is a complex, evolving system, but academia fragments the self in studies of psychology, philosophy, religion, medicine, cognitive science, neuroscience, sociology, etc., each with their own approaches to inquiry, vocabularies, schools of thought, and theories. The fragmented approach to the self results in a fragmented approach toward improvement. This paper applies Banathy's three models for viewing human systems to the system of the self: its relationship to the environment; its functions of the senses and perception, thought, emotion, feelings, and moods; and its processes. Functions and processes are drawn from work by Kegan (developmental psychology), Mills and Spittle (psychology), Pinker (cognitive science), Damasio (neuroscience) and Jacobs (neuroscience). Not only is it remarkably easy to arrange these various approaches into a working, systemic whole, but functional definitions for evolutionary consciousness, common sense, and wisdom emerge.

Keywords: systems theory, consciousness, evolutionary consciousness, evolutionary design, developmental psychology

What could a systems view of the self be? Could it have meaning? Can it assist us to develop evolutionary consciousness, the capacity to evolve ourselves and the systems we live toward a sustainable world ?

The university, as the primary source of knowledge in industrial society and a relatively new factory system, controls and contains the flow of information, people, and resources into the pursuit and support of a fragmented, compartmentalized view of human beings. The experience and processes of the self are divided into schools of psychology, philosophy, religion, education, medicine, cognitive science, sociology, and more, and each school has its own systems and standards for inquiry, its own vocabulary, sometimes hundreds of schools of thought, and thousands of disjointed theories.

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At the same time, because they value and encourage academic freedom and the open exchange of knowledge, universities are evolving. The most exciting, current work crosses disciplines. The chemistry of emotion, the Tao of business, and the genetics of morality are examples.

Brain mapping, evolutionary psychology, pharmacology, brain pathology, and genetics lead to new insights into neural pathways and processes. It's no accident that neuroscientists Jacobs (2003) and Damasio (2003) and cognitive scientists Varela (2000) and Pinker (2003) have published and spoken on their expanded views of human nature and philosophy.

We are straddling the industrial and information ages. A fragmented view of human beings and a fragmentation of human systems lead to a fragmented approach to problems (Banathy, 1991). Too often, man as machine and society as factory are the metaphors. If we can only identify the problem, the broken part, then we can fix it. Because being human is complex and human systems are complex, experts are required to do the fixing. Industrial metaphors fly in the face our understanding of systems, yet we do not have a systemic description of what it means to be human, one that forms the basis of our thinking and helps us make sense of what we are experiencing.

In the next three sections, Banathy's (1991) three models for creating a systems view of human systems are applied to the self. A system-environment model, a functions-purposes model, a the processes model are formed from findings from neuroscience, cognitive science, evolutionary design, and principle-based psychology

The final two sections describe what the modeling unexpectedly revealed. Not only was it remarkably easy to put the various findings into a working, systemic whole, but functional definitions for evolutionary consciousness, common sense, and wisdom emerged. Integration of our social, moral, physiological, and psychological view of the self leads to a more cohesive, expansive, and useful view of human capacity and potential.

System Environment of the Self

We, as systems, are embedded in human systems that are embedded in human systems: marriages, families, communities, societies, nations, and an emerging, evolving global system. Human systems are relatively open or relatively closed to their environments and are more or less able to coevolve with the systems in which they are embedded (Banathy, 1991).

At one extreme, a closed human system contains and controls people, resources, and ideas in roles and rules. Life is structured. Exchange with the outside environment is limited and controlled. Control tends to be fear-based and in the form of the power and/or social condemnation based on tradition. Change is difficult and threatens the status quo. Traditional cultures, traditional marriages, and relatively closed corporate cultures are examples.

Open human systems encourage the free flow of information, people, and resources toward collectively held ideals. Roles, rules, and structures are in place only to assure that flow. Authority is grounded in ideals and ethics. These systems evolve with the increasing understanding of people that occurs with a free exchange of information. Expansion and coevolution of individuals and their systems with their environments is

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not only an outcome; it's a primary means of survival. Examples of open human systems are artistic design groups and creative teams, and we can't overlook the United States government. Although big and bulky, the structure was designed from values and ideals. The people within the system evolve because of the continual challenge to the interpretation and implications of overriding, collectively held values and ideals.

Every human system has inherent activities or purposes that can be categorized in terms of governance, social action, esthetics, economics, health, education, and technology (Banathy, 1991). These activities are guided by values and beliefs within each area.

In simpler, traditional cultures, these purposes are achieved within families and villages. In the industrial world, church is for worship, school is for learning, the hospital is for illness, childbirth, and dying, the workplace is for making money, and the home is primarily for immediate families organized to support workers with their specific skills and to rear children to take their places in their industrial niches.

These relatively closed systems of support from the industrial world are becoming increasingly inadequate. Our institutions for education, health care, religion, and business are experiencing change and the people within them are too often being challenged rather than supported (Kegan, 1999).

Kegan (1999) describes how we in open, evolving societies are "in over our heads," being asked to not only parent, partner, and work, but to reinvent how we do it as we go. In the workplace, we are no longer expected to just do our jobs, but we are expected to interact with others to discover what our jobs could be and to reinvent our jobs as we go, sometimes even when that means putting ourselves and others out of a job. In our marriages, we are asked to not only fulfill roles and functions as partners and parents, but figure out what they are as we go.

Relatively open societies provide so much information and so many opportunities that people are no longer served by the closed social structures of the industrial age, but every few of us have the interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive ability—the level of consciousness—required to redesign these systems as we go in this fast moving, demanding new world (Kegan, 1999).

We are relatively closed or relatively open to the systems in which we are embedded. We coevolve with relatively open systems that evolve toward greater understanding and functioning. We may or may not evolve within relatively closed systems.

A few individuals transcend the limitations of their relatively closed societies and make a difference, evolving the systems toward more openness. Others use power to perpetuate relatively closed systems to assure the survival of themselves and the people who share their values and fears.

Functions and Purposes of the Self

Biologically, our purpose is to survive and procreate. We are genetically programmed to function within social groups to assure our survival (Jacobs, Pinker).

Functions of the self can be described in terms of the senses, the workings of the brain and nervous system, and behaviors.

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The self is separated from immediate surroundings and bounded by sensory organs. Sensory input from within occurs also; signals of pain, hunger, etc. are sent to the brain from all points of the body. The brain and body respond to sensory input and transform it into output. Output is in the form of behavior. Behaviors effect the environment and then sensory input, combined with the brain and bodily processing, result in further behaviors.

Jacobs (2003) usefully describes brain functions in terms of the “thinking mind” and the “ancient mind.”

The ancient mind consists primarily of the reptilian brain and the mammalian brain. The reptilian brain is instinctive, concerned with senses and immediate responses—the fight and flight responses required for survival. The mammalian brain is emotional. Programmed for survival in “packs” we not only bond with our young, feel comfort when together and stress when separated, but we detect rivals and competitors as opposed to colleagues and loved ones. We signal emotions through facial expressions and body movements and we are able to perceive the inner workings, the emotions of others, from external clues.

The thinking mind is found roughly in the outer layers of the brain, the neocortex, which is concerned with planning, sophisticated problem-solving, fine sensory and motor behaviors, and language. The thinking mind is linear, abstract, and rational. Because of the thinking mind we are self-aware, preoccupied with past and future, and see ourselves as “subject” and everything else as “object” to be acted upon. We can speak of our emotions and have the feeling of our feelings.

The thinking mind doesn’t only depend upon signals passed to it by the ancient mind from the external world. It is capable of generating signals to create a world of its own, with its own sense of time, space, and self. Anticipation, memory and abstract concepts form what Jacobs (2003) calls the “ ‘internal monologue’ that characterizes modern self-consciousness” (p. 33).

The ancestral mind—the reptilian brain and mammalian brain—is emotional, intuitive, and nonverbal. Grounded in the physical and primarily unconscious, it is receptive to the present and emotionally connected. The ancient mind processes huge complexity of sensory information, linking it all to long-term memory, a sense of right and wrong, emotion, regulatory hormones, and the thinking mind.

The thinking mind is consciously aware, detached from experience, and separate from nature. Caught up in a sense of time, living in the past and future, and eager to control, it is focused on explanations and cause and effect. The thinking mind, since it is linear, is unable to process the complexity of social situations alone and requires the ancient mind to deal with the complexity of social interaction.

Emotions, feelings, and moods have been mapped physiologically in the brain. (Damasio, 2003; Jacobs, 2003; Pinker, 2003a) Emotions are the unconscious and rapid physiological responses that involve stress responses, facial expressions, and body language, and that are based in the ancient mind. Feelings are the conscious expression of emotions that are tied to memory and thinking, with clear pathways between the ancient mind and thinking mind. Moods are probably the result of emotions and feelings and are an overall “coloring” of experience, more diffuse and global, that often can’t be explained (Jacobs, 2003; Pinker, 2003a).

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The ancient brain is essentially moral and ethical in nature. Although we do not have an ethics center in our brains, we are genetically programmed to perpetuate our survival in social groups. (Damasio, 2003; Pinker, 2003a). When we do bad things, things that go against the love and cooperation required for survival of the “pack,” we feel bad. When we do good things, things that perpetuate love and cooperation, we feel good (Pinker, 2003b).

The thinking mind has interpreted this moral and ethical core into thoughts and ideas, into structures for traditions, rules, and enforcement, while the ancient mind is preprogrammed for a natural cooperation among people “like us,” people in our “pack,” and a natural defensive or aggressive response to people not “like us,” people not in our “pack” (Jacobs, 2003; Pinker, 2003a)

Sensory input is transformed in the self. Behavior is the resulting output that influences the outer systems in which the self is embedded.

Processes of the Self

We have negative feedback processes that maintain us and we have positive feedback processes that evolve us.

Negative emotions, fear and anger, are part of a negative feedback system that protects us from threat to our well-being. Sensory input becomes qualia in the ancient mind where it is linked with long-term memory and an innate sense of right and wrong. When sensory input is organized in the ancient brain as “threat,” the ancient brain puts the entire self on alert. Fight or flight chemicals are released throughout the body. Senses and perceptions narrow to the point of danger. The thinking mind is “short circuited,” with perspective limited to the point of danger. Thinking becomes negative, circular, and repetitive.

The thinking mind can generate fear within the body by sending signals to the ancient mind, regardless of signals from the environment. The thinking mind anticipates trouble and sends danger signals to the ancient mind. The ancient mind responds to that danger in the same way, but to different degrees, as it responds to immediate environmental threat.

Positive emotions are a life-enhancing positive feedback system. When sensory input is organized in the ancient brain as “good,” or beneficial to survival, the chemistry of the mind opens the neural pathways between the thinking mind and the ancient mind. Perspective expands as sensory input is allowed to flood in. Pathways between the innate sense of good and bad and the thinking mind are open. Intuition, new connections between sensory information and long-term memory, all linked to an innate “morality,” flow out of the ancient mind into the thinking mind. Thinking becomes more open, creative, and intuitive. Thoughts of possibility flow.

Positive emotions not only signal that we are safe, they indicate an openness to sensory input, a wider perspective, a relatively higher awareness of right and wrong, and a higher, more functional quality of thought. We are open to learning and expanding our view of who is “like us” and shrinking our view of who is “not like us.”

Values, ideals, and ethics are part of a guidance system for linking the self and the human systems in which we live. When we do good, our perspective opens and possibility expands. When we look for good with others, we expand together. Human

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systems that are guided by ethics, values, and ideals link this inner expansiveness into synergy.

Consciousness from a Systems View of Self

Defined in systems terms, consciousness is the relative awareness of the relationship between thought, emotion, and one's shifting levels of openness and closedness. In higher levels of consciousness, emotions are positive, thoughts are clear, and one is open to the environment. In lower levels of consciousness, emotions are negative and protective, thinking is busier, circular, and negative, and one is relatively closed to the environment.

Three levels of consciousness emerge:

- The incidental expansion from good feelings and higher moods
- The intentional cultivation of higher levels of consciousness
- The design of human systems that will raise moods and expand consciousness of one's self and others in the process of living together.

Each level indicates a different level of understanding of the relationships and processes of mind, thought, and shifting awareness.

We all go through shifting levels of awareness. When we feel good and clear, we are in higher states of consciousness. When we feel threatened, afraid or angry, we are in lower states of consciousness.

The intentional cultivation of higher states of consciousness through practices like prayer, meditation, the martial arts, and positive thinking quiet the mind and open one's senses to the environment.

As one becomes increasingly aware of ability and propensity of the thinking mind to create its own reality, one relies less upon thought and more upon feeling. Emotions become a guidance system. Understanding that the conscious cultivation of good feelings smooth flow of information to and from the thinking and ancient minds, one develops the ability to step back from fear to use one's full processing capacities.

In such diverse areas as therapy, policing, drug rehabilitation, community development, and teaching, practitioners of principle-based psychology focus on raising the moods and feelings of their clients. Focus is not on diagnosis and treatment but on creating the space for people to experience and understand the dynamics of thought, mind, and shifting consciousness so that they can access their own wisdom and solve their own problems. When people understand the principles of thought, mind, and consciousness, they are able to access their own healthy functioning and turn even the most dysfunctional lives and communities around (Mills and Spittle, 2001).

Evolutionary consciousness is the process of evolving both ourselves and the systems in which we live toward higher functioning. When we intentionally design ideal images of a system, we link the values and ideals of the outer human system with the values and ideals of the inner system of the self. The gap between the ideal and current reality becomes a design space. The exploration of possibility and the focus on ideals results in an upbeat, synergistic process that taps in to the natural mental health of those involved. It brings people together, making even the most diverse people recognizable to

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each other as “like us,” rather than “not like us.” In safety and in a spirit of openness and creativity, people thrive. The result is a natural evolution of the people within the system and of the system itself.

Common sense and wisdom are definable and accessible processes. Common sense and wisdom is a way of being in all of us that emerges when the thinking mind flows with the ancient mind, thinking is positive and clear, perception is the broadest and possibility the greatest, and actions are aligned with what will improve life for others and ourselves.

Leadership can be framed in these terms. Those with the most capacity for higher levels of consciousness are the wise ones, recognized as the leaders in thought and emotion, who can move whole social systems forward. Leaders who lead through fear maintain closed systems that perpetuate lower states of consciousness.

Implications of the Systems View of Self

Banathy (2000) described the agenda: Traditional social systems are breaking down and, with our evolving consciousness, we can now design the systems in which we live.

The agenda involves abandoning the “person as machine” metaphor. Rather than trying to fix and control people, rather than diagnosing, treating, teaching, and managing, we collectively design our social systems so that we learn and develop together. We discover unique and interesting possibilities that emerge from the free flow of information, resources, and people toward a vision of a better life. We learn to trust in the innate goodness and creativity that flows out of people in upbeat, expansive environments.

The old division of the self into the spiritual, psychological, philosophical, and physiological becomes archaic and counterproductive. Our emotions and ideals become guidance systems that we can depend on to show the way.

The industrial age distinctions between brain and mind, intellect and spirit, caring and practicality, reason and emotion are now integrated. The emotions are no longer extraneous interference to reason, but tools and indicators, part of feedback processes that tell us whether we are going the right direction or not, that remind us that it is time to pay more attention, that it is time to look around more openly with all of our faculties synchronized. Emotions have a logic linked to a vital, essential good.

The systems view of the self with its simple description of surrounding systems, purposes, functions, and processes, shows us how we are all the same, that everyone is “like us.” It transcends belief systems that divide us, links our inner functions with universally held values and ideals, and gives us a clear means for increasing our own consciousness and the consciousness of people of the systems in which we live.

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