

A general theory of biological and psychological functioning

The theory in a nutshell:

Life's fundamental motivation: to live.

Three foundational activities that result from the motivation to live: survive, grow, reproduce.

That is, life wants to stay alive, become more alive, continue living.

How? By meeting four basic needs:

- safety/security
- pleasure/displeasure
- growth
- connection.

Two strategies for meeting these needs:

- approach/open to that which is life giving
- avoid/close to that which is life taking.

We constantly utilize these strategies in our current physical situation to optimize the present moment and prepare for the next one.

We also think about our life and similarly adjust to our mental scenarios (whether or not we're consciously aware of them).

Emotion is the state of our whole organism as it functions to optimize and anticipate.

Feeling is the occasional awareness of our emotional functioning.

To the extent our needs are met, we are happy. When our needs are not met, we are unhappy. The kind of happiness or unhappiness depends on which needs are or aren't met.

Therapy is helping people adopt better strategies to meet their needs. Growth is more completely meeting the needs.

Anything biological or psychological can be basically understood this way.

About the theory:

Life is inherently, by its very nature, unstable. It has to operate on the universe, lest it fall back into non-life, the material ground of the universe.

To do that requires consciousness. Life needs to assess its situation and adapt to it in order to stay alive.

Life is the part of the universe that has conscious experience. Consciousness arises with life, with caring to remain alive. The more complex the life form, the richer the experience it has. But even the simplest living beings are conscious. All living things register what's happening and try to continue living.

This distinguishes life from nonliving matter like a stone, which reacts to what happens to it, but not in a way that preserves its integrity. It

gradually falls apart with continual heating and cooling. But it doesn't try to escape that fate or put itself back together.

In other words, consciousness appears in the universe as an emergent property in living things in order to help them stay alive. Living things, unlike nonliving matter, care to remain alive. Consciousness is fundamentally *caring*.

Life differs from the nonliving universe in that it has *motivation*. It wants something. And that something is to stay alive and experience being alive. This conscious activity of life underlies all its actions. Even the simplest life forms work to stay alive and reproduce life.

As life gets more complex, it spends more time and energy maintaining and being alive and less in reproduction. Growth, becoming more alive, is its predominant activity. But, since life hasn't yet figured out how to stay alive indefinitely, sooner or later it focuses on continuing life by reproducing.

In the sequence *come to life – survive – grow – reproduce – die*, the simplest life forms such as viruses spend the least time growing and experiencing being alive. As life forms become more complex, they spend relatively more time in growth and experiencing life. In higher animals, this experience frequently is one of enjoyment and appreciation. Life exists, I believe, for the experience of living.

I think it's quite possible that the plants in my garden enjoy and appreciate their life. I know my dog does. But my computer, no matter how smart, doesn't. Very smart, but not conscious. At least not yet. And maybe never.

Happiness and unhappiness are whole-organism responses to life situations, both actual and imagined. The organism is constantly experiencing the present and preparing for what's next. In each moment, it's deciding, "Do I open or close, approach or avoid? And how best can I do so?" This is emotion, energy in motion, which is always happening and ever changing. When we become aware of this process, rather than being lost in thought or focused on a sensation, we have conscious feelings. But emotion is always occurring, whether or not we are consciously aware of it.

The basic emotional decision making is straightforward: like – dislike, embrace – reject, advance – retreat. But in creatures with a rich mental life, this generally involves a complex patterning, an adjustment to several aspects of the present and preparation for a number of eventualities. I react to my current physical situation in all its manifoldness, as well as to the scenarios in my mind. I'm in a safe place physically, but what's that sudden noise? And my daughter is sick, my stocks are tanking, and the world is imploding. On the other hand, I'm feeling well-rested and well-fed. My emotional state is highly complex and continually shifts as I give more or less attention (both conscious and non-conscious) to each factor. My emotions are like a constantly permuting piece of abstract modern art, eternally changing color and form.

The kind of happiness or unhappiness I experience depends upon which needs are or aren't being satisfied. If I feel a momentary burst of joy tasting something delicious, my need for pleasure is addressed. If I enjoy reading an interesting book, I am fulfilling my need for growth. A rewarding conversation with a friend serves my need for connection. And making money helps me feel better about survival. When all my needs are satisfied, I experience full well-being.

Similarly for the varieties of unhappiness. Fear is feeling unsafe, as is anxiety. Anger is defense against attack. Sadness is reaction to loss of security and connection and the wish to replace them. Jealousy is alarm at potential loss. Guilt and shame result from inadequate ability to connect. And depression is perceived inability to meet the basic needs.

More about consciousness: it is the presence of internal models of the external world in order to govern behavior *for the purpose of staying alive*. A thermostat has a model of the world: when the temperature reaches this level, turn off. When it falls below that, turn on. But it doesn't strive to remain alive, and so, in my view, isn't conscious. Merely smart.

A bacterium, on the other hand, has a similar, purely physical, fixed model: find a host and reproduce. But, in my view, it is minimally conscious, because it strives to reproduce life.

An ant also has a model but one that's more complex and adjustable by learning. So it's more conscious. A dog has a quite complex world model that is very influenced by learning. So it's much more conscious. And it even has an internal mental life to which it reacts. My dog has a thought about one of her toys and goes searching for it.

The more complex the modeling, the more conscious the living creature. But have no doubt: all this complexity is in the service of one project, remaining alive. And thereby experiencing life. And since that can't go on forever in any one life form, creating new life.

To wax philosophic for a moment: One way to look at life is as the universe becoming aware of itself. From this premise, life is so

precious a development for the universe that it tries, in any way it can, to stay conscious. It creates the great variety of living things, both plant and animal, to continue being self-aware. Life is basically one phenomenon in many different forms: life. All living things are unified in the service of life's desire to remain alive and to experience being alive. This is the universe recognizing and celebrating itself. Through life, the universe becomes more varied and complex, i. e., more of itself. And through life, the universe becomes appreciative of that growth process.

So, from this point of view we can say that fundamental to the universe are growth and appreciation. The universe has become alive and aware (i.e., conscious) for a reason. There is a creative intelligence behind all this. Maybe the universe is basically conscious, and creates life as way to relate to – maybe even to love – itself.

Or maybe there's no underlying reason. Maybe life and the consciousness it has are simply an emergent property of nature, something that just appears at some point. Looked at this way, there's nothing behind life and consciousness causing them to happen. They just do, once some level of material organization is reached. It's simply nature's nature to become alive and conscious.

Back to the real world: there's nothing physically wrong with the great majority of people who are experiencing psychological distress. Their brain is working just fine. But their life isn't. Rather than considering them sick, we should term them *mistaken*. They are either misperceiving aspects of their life situation, or they are perceiving correctly but reacting incorrectly. Therapy should be mostly about re-education, either helping people to correct their misperceptions or to change the strategies for getting their needs met. Maybe they are using a strategy that used to serve them at least somewhat

successfully but now isn't doing so. Their basic motivation to fulfill life needs is always correct. But their way of doing so may need alteration. Regarded this way, they are *students of life*. Aren't we all?

The four basic needs: these are the first four chakras of the Hindu chakra system (the way I construe it). Humans certainly need all of these to survive and thrive. Most animals and plants do, too. The need for safety/security is obvious. But why pleasure/displeasure? Because creatures need to approach that which gives life and avoid that which takes it. Pleasure/displeasure is the sensory response that initiates approach or avoidance. Smells good? Eat it. Smells bad? Stay away from it.

In nature, this is always reliable. Only humans have invented pleasures that fool the organism. They feel good initially, sometimes unnaturally so, but lead to bad consequences. That's where the prefrontal cortex of our big brain comes in. It not only allows us to create unhealthy pleasures, it cautions us to eschew them.

Plants also feel pleasure/displeasure, I believe. They open to the light and close to the night. Or they grow toward the sun and bend away from the shade. And they certainly seem filled with joy as they shoot upward in the spring.

About growth: this is my overall interpretation of the third chakra, the belly area. It's where food is digested so growth can happen. You may also hear it talked about as the solar plexus, the seat of will. This too fits my understanding. Will motivates us to get what we need in order to grow. If you look at what most living things are doing most of the time, they are growing. It's life's predominant activity. For humans, once physical growth is completed, we don't just procreate and die. We continue to grow psychologically, so we can better

appreciate life and contribute to it. We don't simply have kids and raise them. We also enjoy life and make as much of a contribution to it as we can. People who don't have children similarly nurture life in the way they live it.

And connection: we don't relate to others just so we can survive. We also do so so they can survive. We care for others, we help them. Our goal is to support life in general. This is the basis of the morality that guides our actions. If it helps others, do it. If it hurts them, don't.

What about the fifth, sixth, and seventh chakras – in my view, expression, understanding, and unification? They are composites of the first four. Expression, for example, can serve survival: "Stop that!" Or pleasure: singing. Or growth: artistic creation. Or connection: a conversation. Similarly for understanding and unification.

I use the chakra system (as I interpret it) because I consider it the best model of all the aspects of our functioning as living beings. It covers the ground more completely and more succinctly than any contemporary western model I know of.

In sum, life wants to live. And strives to do so. That's what we're basically doing. Biologically and psychologically. All the time. Any aspect of our functioning can be understood as stemming from this. And its health can be judged by the extent to which it succeeds.

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