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THE POTENTIALS OF METATHEORY

FOREWORD

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THE POTENTIALS OF METATHEORY

In the late 20th century, the knowledge explosion not only continued, but continued to accelerate. Just how much it accelerated is shown in the calculations of Eric Schmidt (2010), the CEO of Google, who estimated that “There were 5 exabyte’s [of information] created between the dawn of civilization through 2002, but that much information is now created every two days and the pace is increasing.” One exabyte is 10^{18} bytes, and that is a LOT of data. No wonder we feel inundated with information and drowning in data.

There were several kinds of response to this avalanche of information. One was intellectual fragmentation as knowledge disciplines became increasingly dissociated. Another was increasing specialization as individuals focused ever more narrowly, knowing more and more about less and less. This fragmentation and specialization were obvious across multiple domains such as the sciences, the humanities, and medicine.

Yet another response was reductionism, both within and between disciplines. For example, within psychology, successive schools claimed that their unique focus offered *the* supreme explanatory principle by which the overwhelming complexity of behavior could be best understood and modified. Behaviorists argued that behavior was largely determined by reinforcers. In making this claim, the behaviorists aimed to replace the psychoanalysts who focused on understanding and modifying unconscious psychodynamic forces. Yet the behaviorists were replaced in turn by cognitive therapists who emphasized the primacy of thoughts.

Large scale reductionism between disciplines also thrived. Scientific materialism became the largely unquestioned de facto philosophy of science, while social constructivism thrived in the humanities. Likewise, E.O. Wilson advanced sociobiology as a sweeping evolutionary

explanation of individual and social behavior, while neural eliminative materialism claimed that psychology would soon disappear by reducing explanations of behavior and mind to neuroscience (Churchland, 2013).

Theories are powerful, and reductionistic programs such as these hold enormous implications for our understanding of reality and humanity. For reality, Whitehead (1967) lamented that scientific materialism reduces nature to “a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colorless; merely the hurrying of material endlessly, meaninglessly....(p. 69). However, he went on to point out that “this position on the part of the scientist was pure bluff.”

The effects of reductionism on our views of human nature were even more painful. Humans were downgraded to mere machines: the stimulus-response machines of behaviorists, the “wet computers of artificial intelligence,” and for evolutionary biologists “a peculiarly baroque example of the lengths to which nucleic acid is prepared to go to copy itself”(Chedd, 1973, p. 606).

Francis Crick (1994) added to these reductionisms with his own brand of neuronal reductionism which he called “the astonishing hypothesis.” Its central claim is that:

You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. As Lewis Carroll’s Alice might have phrased it: “You’re nothing but a pack of neurons” (p. 3).

Of course many people pointed out the multiple problems with reductionism. Back in 1964, the psychologist Gordon Allport wrote that “by their own theories of human nature, psychologists have the power of elevating or degrading that same nature. Debasing assumptions

debase human nature, generous assumptions exalt them.” Speaking more generally about the problem of reductionism, Edgar Morin argued that:

The reductionistic approach, which consists in relying on a single series of factors to regulate the totality of problems associated with the multiform crisis we are currently in the middle of, is less a solution than the problem itself (Morin & Kern, 1999, p. 128).

Several schools emerged to counter these reductionistic forces, and within psychology, two of these schools—humanistic and transpersonal—were forerunners of integral theory. Humanistic psychology emphasized unique human experience over abstraction, potentials rather than pathologies, and central human concerns such as meaning and purpose rather than simple behaviors and mechanisms. Transpersonal psychology went further and attempted to integrate ordinary and alternate states of consciousness, psychological and spiritual dimensions, as well as Eastern and Western perspectives.

Both schools had their influence and provided doors through which professionals could explore issues outside the rather narrow and reductionistic confines of academia. However, neither made major inroads into academic or intellectual culture.

The unfortunate result is that today reductionism rules much of academia. Scientific materialism provides the usually unexamined and unquestioned worldview dominating science. In the humanities, the excesses of postmodernism and social constructivism dominated in many places, but are now fading. In the mental health field, neuroreductionism reigns, and the answer to almost every ill is a pill, while lifestyle factors—often remarkably powerful and important—are largely ignored (Walsh, 2011).

Reductionistic approaches tend to explain “away” uniquely human endeavors such as art and religion in terms of lower order phenomena. A century earlier, Karl Marx had interpreted art and religion in economic terms. Now they are repeatedly interpreted, and often interpreted away,

in neural and/or evolutionary terms. For example, Francis Crick—who received a Nobel prize for identifying the structure of DNA, but who was obviously ignorant of the massive differences between conventional and postconventional religions—reportedly dismissed religion as the unfortunate product of a mischievous, mutant molecule he named “theotoxin.”

THE NEED FOR METATHEORY

Clearly there is a need for Big Picture metatheories that can address these major intellectual issues. Such metatheories would serve what Zachery Stein in his excellent chapter calls a “discourse regulative function” for opening intellectual inquiry and individual disciplines to more fruitful and less reductionistic perspectives. More specifically, effective metatheories of human nature and behavior will perform at least ten major beneficial functions:

- 1) They will include and integrate multiple perspectives and disciplines, thus providing a fruitful metaperspective.
- 2) Effective metatheories will embrace epistemological pluralism, and employ epistemologies appropriate to each discipline and domain.
- 3) They will encompass the ever growing complexity of scientific, social, global, and ecological systems.
- 4) Fruitful metatheories of human nature will include a developmental dimension. This will allow them to incorporate the vitally important findings of developmental psychology which recognize different levels of adult psychological maturity. For example, there are enormous differences in the cognitive capacities, processes, and worldview of someone at the concrete operational level of cognitive development, as opposed to someone at the more mature postformal operational level. Likewise, in ethics, there are enormous differences in the values and attitudes of people at conventional and postconventional levels. For example, at the conventional “maintaining norms” schema level, whatever “God” or the law says is unreflectively assumed to be true and sacrosanct. However, for people at the postconventional

schema level, values are open to questioning and evaluation (Thoma, 2006). I emphasize this developmental dimension for five crucial reasons:

- Once adult development is recognized, then it becomes apparent that conventional “normality” is not the ceiling of developmental possibilities, and that postconventional potentials await us.
- The recognition of postconventional potentials can encourage us to foster them individually and collectively (Walsh 2014).
- A developmental perspective enables us to make sense of many contemporary challenges—such as cultural conflicts over issues such as abortion, racism and feminism—which reflect usually unrecognized developmental differences.
- The significance of development is often underappreciated, even in sophisticated metatheories such as Critical Realism and Complex Thought.
- Metatheorizing may require postconventional and postformal levels of cognition such as James Baldwin’s *aesthetic imagination* and *theoretical intuition*, Aurobindo’s *higher mind* and *intuitive mind*, Edgar Morin’s *complex thought*, and Ken Wilber’s *vision logic*.

5) Full metatheories will include religion without inappropriately pathologizing it or reductionistically dismissing it (Wilber, 2006). By employing a developmental perspective they will recognize the enormous differences between for example, *conventional religion*—which centers on believing a narrative—and *postconventional* (or better *transconventional*) religion, which centers on psychological and contemplative practices for producing healing, transformation, and maturation.

6) Corrective metatheories will counter the recurrent tendencies—that seem to be part of our psychological make up—to fall into inappropriate oversimplification, reductionism, and mistaking the part for the whole.

7) Metatheories can also serve a eudaimonic function that help us reflect more effectively on the nature of a good life, and ways in which it can be fostered.

8) Socially valuable metatheories will offer tools and perspectives that foster effective social and political critiques. Specifically, these theories will help social analysts unveil inefficiencies, injustices, and pathologies built into our social and political systems, and offer in their stead constructive alternatives.

9) A crucial function for contemporary metatheories is to address the great social, global and ecological crises of our time. Our species and our planet are imperiled, and effective metatheories must help us navigate these perils to avert the very real prospect of ecological and civilizational collapse.

10) Finally, helpful metatheories will help us recognize and explore both individual and collective potentials, and thereby foster them so as to support individual, social and global flourishing. Only in this way can we mature—individually out of our conventional limitations, and collectively out of what is probably our evolutionary adolescence—into the further reaches of human possibilities (Elgin, 2000).

CONTEMPORARY METATHEORIES

The recognition of the need for encompassing metatheories is certainly urgent, but is also not new. As Zachary Stein points out, as far back as the 19th Century, two great thinkers—Mark Baldwin and Charles Sanders Peirce—saw the need, and constructed sophisticated systems that were impressive in their scope. Peirce, who was not known for his intellectual humility, wrote that he hoped:

To make a philosophy like that of Aristotle, that is to say, to outline a theory so comprehensive that, for a long time to come, the entire work of human reason, in philosophy in every school and kind, in mathematics, in psychology, in physical science, in history, in sociology, and in whatever department there may be, shall appear as the filling up of its details (Peirce, 2000, p. 168)

But the world was not yet ready for such metatheories and their impact was limited. Now the time is ripe, and towards the end of the 20th Century, big picture metatheories began to reappear.

One that received significant publicity was E.O. Wilson's (1998) theory of consilience, meaning the convergence of evidence from diverse sources. It focused primarily on the sciences and was still largely reductionistic in its attempt to explain human behavior.

Around the same time, three more comprehensive and less reductionistic metatheories began to emerge: Roy Baskar's *Critical Realism*, Ken Wilber's *Integral Theory*, and Edgar Morin's *Complex Thought*. In response, researchers such as Mark Edwards (2009) began to outline a new field of theoretical studies to formally examine the nature, creation, and criteria of metatheories. Now these three great systems are meeting formally for the first time. What will happen?

When different theories meet there seem to be five major possibilities:

- Defensive dismissal of the validity and value of alternate theories
- Mutual enrichment, which will hopefully always occur
- The identification of common factors: What ideas, dimensions, levels and epistemologies do the theories hold in common?
- Assimilative integration: In this response, elements of one theory are assimilated into another theory. This is something that metatheories do routinely, and thereby enrich and enlarge themselves.
- The formation of a novel integrative theory that effectively synthesizes and integrates the elements of the original constitutive theories.

Thanks to the editors and contributors to this volume we can already see that the first alternative of defensive dismissal will not dominate. Rather, this book is a model of mutual respect, enrichment, and the identification of common factors and differences.. Beyond this, chapters such as that of Paul Marshall, with his remarkably wide-ranging scholarship and formidable synthesizing abilities, point to integrative possibilities.

This book is an enormously important contribution, and helps advance metatheory as a crucial intellectual contribution to the 21st Century. On behalf of us all, I thank the creators—Ken Wilber, Roy Bhaskar and Edgar Morin— for creating the three metatheories meeting here, and the editors and contributors of this fine book for bringing them together for our benefit.

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