

The First-Person Point of View

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Introduction

In the previous chapter we looked at human nature from a third-person point of view, a point of view that any competent observer could adopt in order to confirm or disconfirm the assertions made about humans. The goal was to find out what human nature consists of in order to determine what is good for humans and hence what would constitute a fulfilling life, a life of *eudaimonia*. The goal of this chapter is the same, but I describe human nature from the first person point of view, the point of view that each of us has uniquely.

The uniqueness of the first-person point of view is that each of us has his or her own, and nobody else has it. For example, when I see a certain object from my own perspective and you see it from your perspective, we can agree that we are seeing the same object, but I do not see it as it appears to you, and you do not see it as it appears to me. We each have our own experience of it, not anybody else's. To put it another way, the experience each one of us has is private, not public. Each of us has experience of public things, objective things, but one's experience itself is private, subjective. (And, of course, one has experience of private, subjective things as well.)

Why is this important? After all, the triumphs of the scientific method are triumphs of third-person objectivity, the result of observations that have been publicly replicated, justified by evidence that any competent observer can verify. If one sees a snake but everyone else says it is a rope, one would be better off taking another look. If a chemical process requires something to be heated to a certain temperature, one gets better results using a thermometer, which anyone can see, rather than relying on one's subjective sense of how hot it is. There is no question that the third-person point of view has given us valuable knowledge of what it is to be human, so much so that some

philosophers rely on it alone.¹ But to ignore the first-person point of view is to fail to take into account an additional source of information, which turns out to be equally valuable.

The importance of the first-person point of view is this: in a very real sense, it is the only point of view we have! The only contact each of us has with anything, subjective or objective, is through his or her experience. The point of all knowledge, whether rigorous science or practical know-how, is to make sense of what we experience. When several researchers independently verify the reading on an instrument or the results of an experiment, each of them sees the reading or the results and communicates their observation to the others. Seeing is a modality of experience. Were there no experience, there would be no possibility of any sort of knowledge. The whole of science is the successful attempt to make sense of regularities in our experience of the world, experience that each of us has, individually and privately, and that we communicate to others.

(This is not to judge whether or not there is a real world independent of our experience, by the way, although the assumption that there is seems to work pretty well. It is true whether or not we assume that an objective, real world exists.)

Our experience gives us first-hand knowledge of things. When evolutionary psychologists tell us that emotions are mechanisms that set high-level goals, programs that orchestrate other cognitive and behavioral subprograms, it makes sense to us only because we know what they are talking about from personal experience. We know how it feels to have an emotion, to be under its influence; we know how anger feels, for instance, and how that is different from fear or elation.

There is another reason to pay attention to first-person experience: we can learn things that are not obvious from the third-person point of view. In this chapter I cover some of those things.

Phenomenology

One way to examine one's experience is to pay attention to purely private objects of consciousness, such as dreams and reveries, or purely personal traits such as one's taste in food or sense of humor. Doing so gives valuable knowledge about an individual person, oneself, but we are interested in more than just idiosyncratic or autobiographical details. That I like cabbage but not coconut is not relevant to an account of human nature to help everyone figure out how to live well. But what liking is itself might well be relevant. We are seeking an account of the universal, structural characteristics of human beings. One of the things that humans do universally is experience the world. Hence, a good place to start is to describe the subjective structure of experience itself. This is the task of the philosophical discipline called phenomenology, founded by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl in the early twentieth century. Phenomenology attempts to discover the essential characteristics of

¹ Dennett, *The Intentional Stance*, p. 7: "I propose to see ... just what the mind looks like from the third-person, materialistic perspective of contemporary science." See also Hardcastle, "The Why of Consciousness: A Non-Issue for Materialists."

being conscious that are common to all human beings or indeed to any conscious being whatsoever.

Husserl set out to examine consciousness itself, in the sense of ordinary experience, rather than the objects of consciousness known to science and to logic and mathematics. He investigated how one comes to be conscious of whatever one is conscious of, seeking the structure and composition of consciousness itself, or as I prefer to say, of experience itself. (The term "consciousness" is used in so many different ways that it is easy to fall prey to ambiguity and equivocation, so I prefer the term "experience." See the chapter on "[Consciousness and Experience](#).") When we are conscious, what exactly is going on? How is being conscious of physical objects different from being conscious of logical objects? How is direct perception different from memory, anticipation or imagination? Husserl's great insight was that one can pay attention, not only to the objects that one experiences, but to the experiencing itself. In doing so, one discovers structural characteristics and contents of experience that one typically overlooks when engaged solely in the objects.

Method

The method of phenomenology is unusual. It is *critical examination of experience, free from bias as much as possible*. The goal is to take nothing for granted, to describe one's experience exactly as it is experienced, without importing concepts or beliefs from other disciplines or from the uncritical natural attitude that we all occupy in our everyday life. To free himself from bias, Husserl used a technique called *epoché*, a Greek word meaning suspension or cessation of judgment. The particular judgment to be suspended is the belief that the object of one's experience actually exists independently of one's experience of it. One does not assert that it does, nor that it does not. One merely notes that the belief is there and operative in the experience being examined.

To understand why this is important, consider a hallucination. Before we realize that nobody else is seeing it, we see something and believe that it exists independently. That experience is no different from seeing something that actually does exist. The fact of independent existence is irrelevant to the experience itself.

Therefore, the ... phenomenological description of a perceptual experience should be independent of whether ... there is an object it represents or not. Either way, there will at least be a perceptual *content* It is this content that Husserl calls the perceptual *noema*. Thanks to its noema, even a hallucination is an intentional act. Phenomenological description is concerned with those aspects of the noema that remain the same irrespective of whether the experience in question is veridical or not. Thus, our phenomenologist must not employ – he (or she) must "bracket" – ... belief in the existence of the perceptual object.²

By systematically putting aside the belief in the independent existence of the objects of one's experience, one is more easily able to notice the structure of experience itself.

² Beyer, "Edmund Husserl."

This is an unusual thing to do. It entails taking an objective stance toward something that is inherently subjective, trying to see it for what it is without preconception or bias, just as one would try to take an objective stance toward some emotion-laden state of affairs – an argument, say, or an interpersonal drama of some sort – without letting one's personal feelings interfere. It takes practice, and is not something accomplished easily or right away. It bears some resemblance to Buddhist mindfulness meditation, in which one simply observes the contents and activity of one's mind without trying to make anything happen.

By the way, regarding the term "noema" above, Husserl's works are full of unusual terminology. Terms like "noesis" and "noema" are curious in themselves, and he uses other terms, like "synthesis," "constitute" and "intentional" with peculiar meanings. He does this to overcome a methodological difficulty: how to describe what is purely subjective in terms meaningful publicly. When we speak of the public world, we have ways to verify our meaning, chiefly that we see others behaving toward things as we ourselves behave toward them. It is not possible to know for sure how the color red appears to anyone else but oneself, but if everyone treats red things the same way – by using the term "red" to describe them, by stopping at red lights, by eating red apples that are ripe but not green ones that are unripe, for instance – then it does not matter; we have some assurance that we all mean the same thing by the term "red." But if one speaks of something purely private – that one is thinking of a red apple, for instance – there is no way for anyone else to verify it. More fundamentally, if one wants to speak of purely private things for which there are no common words – things such as the structural elements of experience – then one must make up one's own words or use ordinary words in new and unusual ways.

Putting aside belief in the existence of the objects of one's experience is certainly not something that people normally do, nor is it something philosophers are in any way obliged to do. But if one does, one finds out some interesting things.

Findings

The first thing one finds is the fundamental fact of all experience: "intentionality," or aboutness, meaning that when we are conscious, we are always conscious of something. The term "intentional" here is used in a special sense. It is derived from a Latin phrase meaning to aim at, and does not mean one's determination to do something. Instead it means that in every act or instance of being conscious, there is something one is conscious of.

This does not always entail vivid perception. Much of our experience consists of vague and indistinct presentations and feelings, and subliminally or subconsciously presented objects. To point out what I mean: until I called it to your attention, you were probably not conscious of the chair pressing against your seat and back. You were not attending to it, but it was present in your experience nevertheless. It was not in the center of the spotlight of attention, but on the periphery, as something unclear and indefinite. But both in vivid perception and in indistinct awareness, there is always an object, always something one is conscious of.

The second thing we find is mental activity. Husserl was not the first to notice that one can pay attention to experience, but he was the first to describe in such great detail its elements and structure. He describes how we experience various things – for instance physical objects, other people, mathematical or logical objects, etc. – and how we experience them in various modalities – for instance direct perception, memory, imagination, anticipation, etc. In all of these kinds of experience there is quite a bit of mental activity. Take an act or instance of perception. When we perceive something we do not merely receive it passively. Instead, mental mechanisms constitute it. “Constitute” does not mean to create. Husserl is not saying that we create reality by perceiving it. He is saying that in the perception there is an activity of mind that puts together various elements, such as sensation of color, apprehension of shape, belief that the object has an unseen side that we could see if we walked around it, anticipation that the object will stay put (if it is not a living thing), knowledge of what we can do with it or what it is good for, retention of our prior perception of it a moment ago, etc. This putting together, or constituting, yields the object as we perceive it. Normally we pay attention only to the object, but with practice we can become directly conscious of the activities and elements that make up the object as perceived.

The object as perceived Husserl calls the “intentional object” or the *noema* (from the Greek word meaning thought). The activities and constructs of mind that constitute the object he calls the *noesis* (derived from the Greek word *nous*, meaning mind). Every experience is what Husserl calls a “noetic-noematic complex”³ containing both noeses (plural of noesis) and noemata (plural of noema), both mental activities and the object(s)-as-perceived, which we take to be ongoing and existent apart from us.

This is not a surprising concept to cognitive scientists. Studies of the brain reveal complex neural processing in even the simplest acts of perception. What is special about phenomenology is that one can, with practice, pay attention to such processing from the inside, so to speak, within one’s own experience. In the chapter titled “[The Phenomenology of the Self](#)” I report the results of my own phenomenological investigation, and the numerous works of Husserl report his. Such reports are meant to be analogous to scientific reports from the third-person point of view. It is as if each of us has a view of a landscape and we are making maps and comparing them. In the case of science, we all see the same landscape. In the case of phenomenological investigation, we each see a different landscape, but by comparison of our maps we can determine the common characteristics. Thus, phenomenology is not entirely objective, like the natural sciences, but is not merely subjective either. It occupies a position in between.

There is a great difference between seeing squiggles on an electroencephalogram representing neural processing and directly perceiving the elements and activities that constitute the intentional object of which one is conscious. There is something authoritative about direct experience. Having observed my own experience, I myself have no doubt that in my mental life nothing is devoid of emotion. Cognitive psychology gives me that information as well, but only inferentially, only as an assertion backed by authority (good authority, to be sure). The appeal of

³ Zaner, *The Way of Phenomenology*, p. 133.

phenomenology is that it gives one a solid basis for knowledge, in particular knowledge of oneself, which is the goal of these chapters.

This is not to say that phenomenology is infallible. What is present in experience is indubitably there, but what one makes of it – what inferences one makes, what concepts and categories one uses to make sense of it – is not. Husserl himself was seeking certain knowledge, but there is some controversy about whether he succeeded. But even if we grant that he did, it is not enough. Each of us has to find knowledge for him- or herself. The appeal of phenomenology is that it is a method for doing so.

In the context of finding out what human nature is, one finds (or at least I have found and believe others would if they investigated as I have) that there are certain structural aspects of experience which one can plausibly say make up the self, the human being as experienced from the first-person point of view.⁴ These include the following:

- Thoughts, including conscious or semi-conscious thinking, noeses and enduring beliefs
- Feelings, including sensations, bodily feelings, emotions and moods
- Impulsions to action and the resulting actions
- One's concept of oneself (a type of thought or belief)
- One's sense of oneself (a type of feeling)
- The recognition that one is experiencing and acting

These are not most often not separate elements. Every moment of experience contains thought, feeling and impulsion to action, each to a greater or lesser degree. These low-level structures, building blocks as it were, are the mechanisms by which the self operates; but they do not in themselves determine what the self does. They enable biological functions of activity and enjoyment, but do not establish the goals of one's activity or what sorts of things one enjoys. Nor do they give us much insight into what human beings should do to function well or experience fulfillment other than be healthy enough to act in the world and perceive it accurately. If this were all there is to phenomenology we could safely ignore it in our quest to find out what constitutes a fulfilling life, But there is much more.

There are a great many other findings of phenomenology – Husserl wrote several volumes and his students and followers wrote many more – but I want to focus on just two of them. One is illustrated by the method itself: that one of the unique things about human beings is our capacity for second-order mentation, our ability to direct our attention at ourselves. The other is related to the fundamental structure of experience. Intentionality, or aboutness, means that we are always related to our world and do not exist in isolation.

Second-Order Mentation: The Human Virtue

The phenomenological method itself, not just the results, gives us an important insight into human nature, and is itself an instance of it: that we are able to turn our attention to ourselves. Even more than our vast intelligence, the capacity for self-reflection –

⁴ I describe these in some detail in the chapter titled "[The Phenomenology of the Self.](#)"

that we are able to turn our attention to our own experience, to take ourselves as an object of thought and perception – is what makes us uniquely human.

We have seen in the previous chapter that humans have far greater intelligence than other animals, that we are the species that makes plans, that imagines states of affairs not immediately present and targets our behavior to reach envisaged goals. When this intelligence is directed at affairs in the world, I call it *first-order mentation*. This can range from the very simple, such as jotting down a grocery list, to the very complex, such as planning a multi-year project encompassing thousands of interrelated tasks. Not only do we make plans, we execute them and accomplish our goals, making corrections along the way to overcome obstacles and take into account changing circumstances. When this kind of observation, planning and execution is directed at oneself, I call it *second-order mentation*. Others have called it self-knowledge or self-reflection (as one examines one's reflected image in a mirror).

By "mentation" I mean mental (private, subjective) acts of all kinds: thought, imagination, desire, aversion, volition (intending in the ordinary sense, planning and acting), direct perception and so forth. All of these activities, when directed at oneself, enable *self-transcendence*. By this I mean that in "seeing" oneself as an object, one takes a position, as it were, outside of oneself, and that enables one to alter the self that is "seen."⁵ Of course the self that is "seen" is not different from the self that "sees," in that both are the interior of the same physical body. But in another sense, the self that "sees" is different. It has a larger vantage point and is not caught up, or at least not entirely caught up, in the life of the self that is "seen." By taking a position outside oneself, one can alter oneself.

Harry Frankfurt describes this self-reflective structure of the self in his essay "Freedom of the Will."⁶ Humans, along with all other living beings, have first-order desires, desires to do or to have something. Some animals – chimps and bonobos are good examples, and possibly dolphins and whales – even appear to have the rudimentary ability to anticipate the future and make decisions based on prior thought. But only humans have "the capacity for reflective self-evaluation that is manifested in the formation of second-order desires,"⁷ desires to have certain desires. The second-order self wants the first-order self to want something, typically something different from what the first-order self actually wants. For example, suppose a person has a craving for a certain food – something sweet and sugary, say, or full of fat and salt – that tastes good but is not healthy. Realizing that, the person feels bad about the craving and *wants to want* something else to eat. That is a second-order desire.

An even stronger form is second order volition, where a person wants a certain desire to be his or her will. By *will* Frankfurt means a desire that is strong enough to move one to action.⁸ In this example, the person would not only want to want to eat something healthy and want not to want the unhealthy food, but would also want the desire to eat healthily to overrule the craving, to be the desire that actually results in

⁵ "See" and its variants are in quotes because the experience is not entirely or not merely visual. One experiences oneself in many modalities.

⁶ Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, pp. 11-25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

action so that he or she ends up eating the healthy food. Frankfurt regards the capacity for second-order volition to be the essential characteristic of being a person.⁹ I regard it as an aspect of the second-order mentation that is uniquely human.¹⁰ For Frankfurt, freedom of the will consists in being able to make second-order volitions effective; that is, to have the second-order volition actually govern the first order such that the preferred first-order desire is what results in action. When that happens we judge that our will is free. "It is in securing the conformity of his will to his second-order volitions ... that a person exercises freedom of the will.... The unwilling addict's will is not free."¹¹

Having a free will in this sense is an example of one's second-order mentation functioning well. Like any human activity, second-order mentation can be done poorly or skillfully. When we are unable to see the whole picture, when we have false ideas about ourselves, distorted by ignorance or painful emotion, we are doing it poorly. When we are able to observe ourselves carefully over time, identifying and removing preconceptions, we are doing it better. When we have true ideas about ourselves but are unable to act on them, we are doing it poorly. (This is Frankfurt's unfree will.) When we are able to use what we find out about ourselves to change for the better how we behave and hence what kind of person we become, we are doing it excellently.

What I am suggesting is this: *Second-order mentation is the peculiarly human virtue, what we do that other beings don't. We are all capable of it, and when we do it well we function optimally and are most fulfilled. It is what enables us to achieve the goals suggested at the end of the previous chapter: to take care of our environment, to keep our intelligence functioning well, to free ourselves of emotional distress, to nourish close relationships with others, to overcome self-deception and decide for ourselves how best to act morally and live in relation to a greater purpose. Second-order mentation gives us mastery, because it enables us to tune the instrument, so to speak, by means of which we exert first-order influence on the world.*

Second-order mentation gives us the peculiar sense of self that is expressed in the poem *Invictus*: "I am the master of my fate: / I am the captain of my soul."¹² The *I* to which the poet refers is the coherence of interiority of second-order mentation, the ongoing inner life of how it feels to be operating at that second-order level. We each (unless we are damaged) have a first-order sense of ourselves as continuous and ongoing entities, as being the same person through time, which comes from familiarity with a point of view, from being within that point of view and seeing the world from it. Within our interior landscape, so to speak, there are certain familiar features – habitual thoughts, feelings, emotions, attitudes and ways of behaving – that are present all or most of the time. These comprise a sense of how it feels to be oneself. Much of the self-sense probably comes from the experience of being in one's body, a particular body that has a particular vantage point on the world. The body changes over time, but gradually enough that one has a sense of continuity. The sense of self is the unity over

⁹ Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁰ The distinction between "human" and "person" is just terminological at this point, but if we discover that some non-humans – whales, say, or beings from another planet – have the same capacity for second-order mentation that we do, then, with Frankfurt, we should speak of persons rather than humans.

¹¹ Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, pp. 20-21.

¹² Henley, "Invictus."

time of interior background feeling tone; and the sense of self arising from second-order mentation is the same, except it seems more vivid, somehow more real or efficacious. That is because it is more efficacious: one exerts control not only over one's world but over oneself as well.

If second-order mentation is something we all have the capacity for, and if it can be done poorly or well, then it behooves us to find out how to do it well, so we can enjoy the benefits of living a fulfilling life. Excellence at second-order mentation is an iterative process:

1. Observe yourself and your life carefully and, as much as possible, without bias. Find out what works to bring you the satisfaction of functioning well. Observe the patterns, the regularities, in your life and note their effects. Find out which ones serve you and which don't.

This may well entail learning how to learn, learning how to observe accurately. It is a bit like the phenomenological *epoché*, except one attempts to observe without bias one's life and one's interactions with the world and others rather than the minutiae of one's experience. One steps back and observes oneself – both in the present moment and in recollection, both individually and in dialogue with others – without getting caught up in the story. For most of us it will probably take some repeated practice and discipline, because we have blind spots that prevent us from “seeing” ourselves accurately. Emotional discharge to remove painful rigidities of thought, feeling and behavior will help.

2. Act on what you find out.
 - a. Plan to do something differently. Think of some way to improve the situation.
 - b. Do it. Try it out.

If we don't take action, nothing will change. If we do take action, we may find that our actions work, and we may find that they don't. In this respect we need to become skillful riders of the elephant, to use the metaphor from the previous chapter, the elephant being the mass of instinct, habit and emotional reaction that lives in first-order mentation. Sometimes it doesn't work to confront the elephant directly and try to overcome its inertia by sheer force of will. In the example above, if sheer willpower can't prevent you from indulging harmful cravings, you can try to outwit them instead. Don't put yourself into situations where the craving arises; instead get busy with something else. Get more exercise. Remove the addictive food from your house. Enlist the help of friends. Substitute something healthier when you get hungry. Clear up the emotional issues that underlie the craving. Form a habit of eating healthy food, keep it up, and notice how much better you feel. There are many possibilities, all of which tend to strengthen the rider – the part of us that exercises second-order mentation – and tame the elephant.

3. Do this cycle repeatedly.

Once you have started an improvement plan, observe carefully to see whether and in what way it is working or not. Then change the plan if needed, and take additional action. If it is working, keep doing it; if not, try something else.

In addition, see what else in your life is working and what isn't and take action to improve the areas that aren't.

This three-step process bears a great deal of resemblance to process and quality improvement in industrial and engineering settings, in particular the Deming Cycle of Plan-Do-Check-Act.¹³ In industry and engineering one applies an iterative process much like this to manufacturing, product development and the like in order to improve the processes and their output. It is all first-order mentation, looking at aspects of the public world and changing them. Using second-order mentation, one can direct this process at oneself.

Sometimes we take this capacity for granted, but it is really quite extraordinary. We can change who we are. We can activate latent capacities, overcome bad habits, cultivate virtues of character. Within limits we can reinvent ourselves, become who new persons. This is the germ of truth in the existentialist claim that existence precedes essence, that human beings have no fixed nature but instead create themselves through their choices and actions.¹⁴ In fact, as we have seen in this and the previous chapter, there is quite a lot that is fixed about human nature, but within that fixity we have the freedom to reinvent ourselves; by virtue of second-order mentation, we are not fully constrained by the past.¹⁵

(Do not mistake this for the New Age 101 doctrine that we create our reality. It may well be that our past actions have determined not only where we find ourselves today but also what kind of person we are and how the world appears to us. But it is not necessarily the case that we deliberately chose those actions. Maybe we did and maybe we didn't. The point is not to feel ashamed of the circumstances we find ourselves in because we allegedly created them [assuming there is something about them that we or others disapprove of], but to realize that we have the capacity now to do something different.)

The existentialists warn us about inauthenticity, which is knowing one has the capacity for second-order mentation and pretending to oneself that one doesn't. By contrast, an authentic stance toward life is to know that one has the capacity for second-order mentation and to cultivate that capacity and use it effectively. To do that is to achieve excellence at being human.

¹³ Wikipedia, "PDCA."

¹⁴ Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism." See also Wikipedia, "Existence precedes essence."

¹⁵ Please see the chapter titled "[Do Humans Have Free Will](#)" for additional discussion of this point.

Being-In-The-World

Phenomenology reveals that we never have experience without it being experience of something, we are never conscious without being conscious of some object or set of objects. In any moment of experience one finds both noeses – mental acts and structures – and noemata – objects as experienced. If one takes a phenomenological stance toward a different level of one's experience, toward one's life as lived rather than specific acts or instances of being conscious, then one finds oneself always in the world, always engaged with the world. Martin Heidegger, Husserl's student, calls this state of affairs *Being-in-the-world* (in German, *In-der-Welt-sein*), hyphenated into one word to indicate that categorical distinctions such as subject and object, consciousness and world, are interpretations that are in some sense secondary, not foundational. The original experience, which we can understand only by stepping back from it in a sort of *epoché*, is a unitary phenomenon.¹⁶

That we are always in the world is not a surprising, new discovery. What is important is the attitude that one can take toward it, an attitude of examining one's subjective experience of it with detachment akin to phenomenological disengagement. In doing so, one can evaluate it.

Being-in-the-world is a structural characteristic of human beings. We cannot fail to be in the world. But we can do so well or badly, in the sense of doing it in a way that fulfills us or not. We are now in a position, based on what we have learned about human nature so far, to consider strategies for being in the world successfully, in a fulfilling way. There are numerous useful and not-so-useful strategies for particular situations – whether to be circumspect or forceful with a given person, for instance, or whether to take the main highway or side roads to get where one is going, depending on the traffic and time of day – but those are not of universal interest. What I am looking for is overarching strategies, strategies that will work in any situation and that will fruitfully guide the adoption of particular strategies for particular situations.

The first is to improve one's capacity for second-order mentation as outlined above. By achieving excellence at that virtue, the uniquely human virtue, one attains mastery, the ability to achieve any goals one sets for oneself. And we set such goals – at the end of the previous chapter I suggested several – in service of what is good for us, what keeps us functioning well.

That we are not separate from our world gives us a clue to a second over-arching strategy, useful in all situations: to do what is good for our world as well, because it is what nurtures us.

Phenomenologically, each of us is a locus of consciousness and activity at which energy from the world is incorporated into experience, transformed, and then emitted to affect one's surroundings. We are each a crucible of transformation, taking in energy, transforming it, and emitting it; and we have a choice, at every moment, of whether to affect our surroundings in a way that enhances health and vitality for all concerned or not. We can think of the self as a dynamic pattern of relationships with others, with the non-human world and with oneself. One way of describing

¹⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 78. See also Wikipedia, "Heideggerian terminology."

eudaimonia, wellness of soul, is as a harmony of those relationships as experienced, as a beautiful coherence of interiority. In order to create such beauty, one must create beauty in the world, because the world is the content of one's experience. The focus on creating benefit both for oneself and for one's world I call the Goodness Ethic.

The Goodness Ethic

The Goodness Ethic is based on the recognition that we are inextricably connected with each other and with the entire universe. From a third-person, objective point of view we can see this in that we are part of nature, the universe. Biologically we are embedded in the natural world and could not live or function without it. And we are social animals, descended from a long line of highly social ancestors, and have always been interdependent and bonded. From the first-person, phenomenological point of view, the fundamental structure of human existence is Being-in-the-world. The structures of human experience – thought, feeling, emotion, impulses to action – are all intentional, aimed at something other than themselves considered purely as noises. Metaphysically we are justified in asserting that everything has an influence, no matter how tiny, on everything else. If there were something that had no effect, then for all practical purposes it would not exist; and since it would have no causal effect on us, we could safely ignore it. From all points of view, then, there is no question that we are deeply interconnected with our world. Hence, it makes sense, in order to nurture ourselves, to nurture that world. That is what the Goodness Ethic is about.¹⁷

The Goodness Ethic may be stated in a number of ways. The simplest is this:

- *Work for the good in all things.*

Other ways of saying this are these:

- Live with an intention to maximize what is good for all concerned.
- Align yourself with what is good all around, for everyone.
- Act for the benefit of yourself and your environment.
- Do the best you can to maximize goodness for all.
- Act for the benefit of the whole.
- We are all in it together, so let's make it good for everybody.

By "good" I mean "helpful," "nourishing," "beneficial" or "effective." What is good for something is what enables it to function well. I advocate guiding one's conduct by reference to what is good rather than to what one takes to be right.¹⁸

The Goodness Ethic is not altruism, if by that term we mean acting for the benefit of others without regard to one's own benefit. Nor is it selfishness, acting for one's own good alone. It is a false dichotomy to think of self-interest being opposed to the interest of a larger whole. For example, one is happy when one's spouse is happy. It is a win-win situation. The motivation is both for one's own happiness and one's spouse's happiness. Another example: one profits when one's company benefits all the

¹⁷ Please see the chapter titled "[The Goodness Ethic](#)," from which the following paragraphs are taken, for a fuller discussion.

¹⁸ See the chapter titled "[The Good and the Right](#)."

stakeholders, customers, owners and neighbors. Again, a win-win. The motivation is both for one's own profit and for the other stakeholders' benefits.

The goal is for *both* oneself and one's environment to survive and thrive. If you focus on your own benefit alone (selfishness), you will not thrive as much as you would focusing on both because you will likely neglect to feed things that give you nourishment. If you focus on your environment alone (altruism), you will not thrive as much because you will likely become stressed and exhausted. One term for such a focus on both self and environment is enlightened self-interest.

If you adopt these principles then things work out well. You find yourself in an environment benefits all elements, including yourself. (Obviously, if it works well for the benefit of all elements of the environment, and you are one of those elements, then it works out well for you. There is a whole discipline of sustainable systems design called Permaculture that is founded on this rule.¹⁹) And you get to be thankful to have had a good effect.

How to accomplish this is much like how to achieve excellence at second-order mentation:

1. Pay attention.
2. Intend to benefit.
3. Think about it. Figure out how to benefit what is around you and yourself, as best you can determine at the time.
4. Act. Do what you think will benefit you and your surroundings.
5. Do this cycle repeatedly.

The Goodness Ethic is not utilitarianism. It does not oblige us to compute all the benefits and choose the alternative with the most utility. It just suggests that we do the best we can given the information and the time frame for decision that we have. In fact it is not obligatory at all. It is, rather, a high-level strategy for being in the world such that those who adopt it survive, thrive and live a fulfilling life.

There are a number of corollaries to the Goodness Ethic. Take these as advice, rules of thumb to use in deciding how to be of benefit in any given situation. Perhaps you can think of others that make sense for you.

- Create beauty. Beauty is beneficial to us in general, and the more beautiful an alternative, the more elegant a solution, the more likely it is to be workable and beneficial in the long run.
- Cultivate love, harmony and compassion, as these speak to our deep need for intimate connection with others.
- Learn practical techniques of good communication. Cultivate interpersonal virtues of respectful listening and clear statements of your own wants and needs.

¹⁹ Michael, "What is Permaculture?"

- Make benevolence the default strategy for dealing with someone you meet for the first time. If they respond in kind, then you have a win-win situation. If not, then at least you have some knowledge of what doesn't work. If you lead with harshness or selfish competition, then it is much harder to achieve a cooperative relationship.
- Cultivate biophilia, love of life. Learn to spot patterns in the natural world and live and act in harmony with those patterns. Be sensitive to the ebb and flow of the rhythms of what is happening around you rather than arrogantly imposing narrowly egotistical concepts. By doing so you can merge into greater and greater patterns of harmony with the whole.
- Be grateful for the ongoing gift of nourishment you continually receive from the world that surrounds and sustains you.

Summary

Viewing human nature from the first-person point of view leads to recognition that the essentially human characteristic is the capacity for second-order mentation, the ability to direct the highly-developed human aptitude for rational observation, planning and execution at oneself. Doing so well enables one to become more proficient at achieving all the other goals conducive to functioning well that arise from an analysis of human nature from an objective, third-person point of view, as detailed in the previous chapter.

I have discussed two strategies for being in the world in a fulfilling way: to cultivate excellence in second-order mentation and to work for the good in all things. Both require one to observe oneself and one's environment carefully and as much as possible without bias, taking a detached point of view akin to the phenomenological *epoché*. Understanding the existing state of affairs is the first step toward any effort at improvement, first-order or second-order. In doing so we exercise and achieve excellence at being human.

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Revision History

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