

Evolving Future Consciousness Through the Pursuit of Virtue

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Introduction

According to many social commentators and psychologists, our modern high-tech, fast-paced world is becoming increasingly frenzied and fragmented. In a time when we possess more financial wealth, material goods, and technological conveniences than ever before, we suffer from chronic stress and anxiety, information and choice overload, a decrease in perceived happiness, feelings of loss of control, deterioration in interpersonal trust and connectivity, and an epidemic of escalating depression. Of special significance, there are various writers who believe that our conscious sense of the future is narrowing and weakening. We are becoming lost and forlorn in an overpowering present. What is going wrong, and more importantly, what can we do about it?

In this paper, we examine the chaotic and disruptive aspects of our contemporary society, identify its key features, and outline a constructive approach for addressing these problems and improving the quality of our lives and mental well being. This approach proposes that happiness, purpose, and meaning in life, as well as a strong sense of future consciousness, are created through the exercise of a core set of character virtues.

The Problem: A World of Pandemonium, Speed, Egocentricity, Consumerism, and Nihilism

There are several central themes that run through many critical commentaries on contemporary society. These main disruptive features of contemporary society work against future consciousness and purpose, meaning, and happiness in life.

Presentism

In a time when it is critical to think about the future, given the rapid changes occurring around us, we increasingly focus on the present, having lost touch with both the heritage of our past and our sense of direction into tomorrow.

- **Immediate Gratification in a “Hedonistic Society”**

One main inspiration for writing this paper is Howard Didsbury’s article “The Death of the Future in a Hedonistic Society”. Didsbury claims that human concerns and human consciousness are narrowing in focus toward the immediate gratification of needs. He believes that a “hedonism of the present” – a life of pleasure for the moment - supported and increasingly reinforced by

modern technology and its conveniences, is diminishing our sense of the future and the importance we place on it.¹

Didsbury's description of our modern life style and mindset brings to mind the classic brain self-stimulation experiments of the 1950's.² Through the use of electrodes placed in one of the "pleasure centers" of the septal-hypothalamic regions of the brain, rats could receive immediate electrical stimulation to these regions for pressing a bar in a Skinner box. In this experiment rats often repeatedly and furiously pressed the bar for thousands of times until physical exhaustion and sometimes death resulted. The rats behaved as if nothing mattered but the next jolt of electricity and pleasure to their brains. They became compulsively addicted, and paradoxically, though they ostensibly had complete control over when they would feel pleasure, they ended up losing all self-control and were totally overpowered by the technology of immediate and effortless pleasure. The analogy to our times is that we live in "pleasure boxes" stimulating our pleasure centers through the use of multifarious, efficient, and convenient technologies that give us immediate gratification. We are "pressing the bars of technology" to the point of exhaustion in total disregard of the consequences, that is, the future.

A complete hedonism of the present generates temporal chaos in our lives. We simply live for the pleasure of the moment with no sense of overall direction for there is no need to think ahead and no need to remember. There is no sense of connection among the lived moments of our lives. There is no sense of long term effort since all we have to do is press the bar, push the button, or hit the key.

Neil Postman, in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, warned that we were becoming addicted to our pleasures. He saw Huxley's vision of the future in *Brave New World* as coming true. There is no need to think about anything, including the future, if pleasure can be obtained effortlessly in a moment.³

- **The Cult of the Present**

Not only is a technology of immediate gratification reinforcing presentism, so is our ontology. The historian Robert Nisbet argues that it is the "**Cult of the Present**" – the view that the present is all we have and that the present is of central importance – that is undermining the idea of progress into the future.⁴ We focus on the here and now as opposed to where we might be going.

The argument is often presented that it is only the present that is real – that the past no longer exists and the future, by definition, is yet to be.⁵ Our lives are lived in the present, so the argument goes. So why pay any attention to what isn't real? Why should we think about past or future?

The "Cult of the Present" undermines the future in an insidious way by particularly undermining the value of the past. If we believe that mostly everything of importance has recently been created or discovered, then the past will seem unimportant and primitive. If the past is negated, then a sense of direction is also destroyed. We have no sense of how what exists has been built upon the past. Nisbet argues this point when he asserts that the modern concept

of progress involves the idea of cumulative growth into the future built upon accomplishments of the past. Progress is a trend across time, encompassing past, present, and future. If we demean the past we lose our sense of direction into the future.

- **Speed, Uncertainty, and the Narrowing of the Temporal Horizon**

Peter Russell argues that the increasing speed of change and consequent growing uncertainty of the future is pushing the human mind more toward the present. The faster things change, the more uncertain the future becomes.⁶ Uncertainty brings fear and fear engenders paralysis in the present.

Accelerative change contributes to presentism. Stephen Bertman, coining the term “**hyperculture**” to refer to the increasingly fast paced modern world, has argued that our sense of both past and future is diminishing. We have to stay so focused on what is happening right now that we don’t have the time or attention to consider either the past or the future. Consequently, an awareness and sense of connection to both the past and the future have diminished.⁷

James Gleick similarly states that our attention span is narrowing due to the speed, compression, and incessant shifting and changing of messages and information surrounding us.⁸ More is squeezed into less and less. As Gleick states, “we live in the buzz.” Our moments of attention are disconnected and jump about from one item to the next. There is no sense of sustained long term attention – we suffer from a collective attention deficit disorder.

- **Relativism, Nihilism, and the Loss of Purpose and Direction**

According to many writers, with the rise of postmodernism and philosophical relativism, which are critical of any claims to absolute truth or value, we don’t have any acceptable grand narrative we can legitimately feel certain and secure about. There is no single credible view or authority regarding the purpose and direction for all humanity. This may be seen as either good or bad, depending on one’s perspective.⁹

Critiques of the Western idea of progress have undermined our secular sense of a positive direction for human society. Similarly during the Enlightenment, earlier critiques of Western religious views of progress and the future undermined a spiritual sense of direction in the West. Science and reason, creations of the Enlightenment, undercut all mythic and religious views around the world. Yet in turn, science and reason have been challenged as definitive and singular authorities. As globalization has spread across the globe, all cultures and peoples have been exposed to numerous alternative views of reality, meaning, and purpose. Local cultures, once secure in their particular visions of life, are now invaded with multiple perspectives and philosophies that challenge their authority.

If one view is perhaps as good as the next, then there is no convincing way to go or secure choice to make. There are no apodictic or universal criteria for evaluation or decision making. We are left without a viable sense of direction

amidst a plethora of varied ideas and choices.¹⁰ Even though there are many possibilities for a new story for humanity, none of these new stories has yet captured the allegiance of the bulk of humanity. There is, in fact, incessant and ongoing conflict and disputation among the promoters of such stories and philosophies.¹¹ To quote a line from Walter Truett Anderson, if there are “Four Different Ways to be Absolutely Right”, then what in fact is right, especially if these different viewpoints are conflicting and contradictory?¹²

If the future is uncertain and we can not even agree on which path or possibilities are preferable, then adopting a philosophy of nihilism is a natural consequence. Hope becomes meaningless, for we don't know what to hope for. Why not simply focus on the present, on immediate pleasure, on “just looking out for number one”? Let us play our fiddles and stimulate our brains with our technological “joy sticks” while Rome burns.

Speed and Overload

- **Living in a Buzz – on the Go - in Accelerative Change**

Since Alvin Toffler published *Future Shock*, the idea that many aspects of our world are undergoing accelerative change has become an extremely influential and accepted description of our times.¹³ Toffler spoke of the “death of permanence”, where jobs, friends, spouses, homes, belongings, and everything else that gives human life stability have become unstable, transient, disposable, and exchangeable. The exponential curve of growth and change has become the most pervasive icon of our times.

As Gleick has described in his book *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*, modern humans are obsessed with time, speed, and efficiency. We compress more information and more activities into shorter and shorter units of time. We manage and schedule time in innumerable ways, including time to relax. We measure time with increasing precision and find ways to “save” time. We squeeze more productivity into our lives. In the process of managing, coordinating, measuring, and accounting for our time, we have become enslaved to it. We are in a race with the clock and chained to it.¹⁴ We live in the “Age of Velocity” – our lives a blur on the Minkowskian tapestry of existence.

As noted earlier, various writers believe that increasing speed and rate of change narrows human consciousness to the present. It also amplifies the feelings of chaos and loss of control. We do not have time to put the pieces together and we feel swept away by the rush of life.

The philosophy of accelerative change is supported by contemporary interpretations of modern cosmology and evolution. Both Ray Kurzweil and Hans Moravec, for example, argue that the informational complexity of life and mind has been exponentially increasing throughout the history of the earth, reflecting a cosmological trend of accelerative growth of complexity throughout the universe. They foresee this trend as continuing in the future.¹⁵ Following the logic of this argument, there will come a time in the not so distant future, when the pace of

change and the growth of complexity will become so great that typical human minds will no longer be able to comprehend it. We will pass through what Vernor Vinge calls the technological “**singularity**”, where only techno-enhanced or artificial intelligence minds will be able to understand and keep up with it.¹⁶

- **Ambient Engulfment, Bombardment, and Overload in Choices and Information**

We are engulfed and inundated with information and choices. Not only is the speed of data transmission – of chunks of information – increasing but we are literally surrounded by multiple channels of input. We go into a lounge or restaurant and there are multiple TV’s showing different channels, there’s music playing, lights flashing and streaming about, and people talking on their cell phones. The grocery store is not much different. For that matter, our homes are also on information overload. The ambient stimulus array is a cacophony of different voices, images, and competing data flows.

Advertising is pervasive and insidious. Commercials must be short, dramatic, and to the point, allowing more commercials and ads to be compressed into periods of time. Further, with visual displays (TV’s, computer screens, electronic billboards) becoming more pervasive, multiple sources of information can be placed in the same perceptual space – bombarding us from every direction in our field of view.

Our lives are similar in chaotic structure. Multi-tasking has become a way of life. We make countless lists lest we forget something. Instead of focusing, we jump back and forth between multiple tasks, messages, and agendas. Our lives are filled with competing demands and unending distractions. We drive our cars, wait in lines, and go for walks with our cell phones and CD headsets, perpetually engaged and distracted by the noise in our heads.

Recently Barry Schwartz, in his book *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*, argues that we are overloaded with choices.¹⁷ Information overload is connected to choice overload. The more TV channels that are available, the more potential choices there are. The more books to read, the more choices there are. Although offering more choices presumably gives us more freedom and more pathways for self-development and self-expression, if there are too many options, everything becomes a blur which generates confusion and behavioral paralysis. Coupled with the loss of any secure and certain criteria for making choices and decisions, we simply flounder in a sea of plenty.

Too much of everything backfires. Based on George Miller’s classic psychological paper on memory and attention, it appears that humans may not be able to intelligently handle more than seven (plus or minus two) distinct items of information at the same time.¹⁸ We can not hold in our mind and intelligently think about 500 different courses we can take at college, 500 different brands of cereal to chose from, or 500 different career paths to pursue in our lives.

There are of course reactions to information and choice overload which include the simplicity movement, running back to nature, and curling up in some form of authoritarian fundamentalism. But there are problems with all these

solutions. Running back to nature seems regressive (and paradoxical since often we take our cell phones, SUV's, and laptops along with us). As Gleick points out we are overloaded with simplicity solutions. Also the simplicity movement seems yet another commodification of something that used to be free. Fundamentalism is closed-minded and dogmatic and often leads to militancy and violent conflict, which in turn brings more chaos and disruption to our lives.

Chaos

Chaos can be defined as a lack of coherence, pattern, connection, or relationship between events, entities, or items of information.

- **Disconnected, Trivialized, and Perpetually Shifting Information Flow**

Neil Postman argued twenty years ago that the disconnected and perpetually shifting information flow presented in the media, and especially on TV, is undermining sustained dialogue and extended human attention span.¹⁹ Chunks of information (commercials, advertisements, news items, emails, etc.) are coming at us without any overall pattern or direction. We hear about a bombing in the Middle East, a new brand of cereal, the baseball scores, debates on cloning and same sex marriages, entertainment specials on TV tonight, and the election of a new Pope in quick succession without any meaningful transitions. All items are given equal billing from deodorants to death. All data are equalized – reduced to bits, numbers, time slots, and short moments of notoriety and importance.

- **Mental Pandemonium and the Fragmented Self**

Not only is chaos and disconnectedness a pervasive feature in our lives and in our social reality, but our very minds and selves – our presumed psychological core – are supposedly not of one piece. Walter Anderson, among others, has argued that the theory that the human self is a singular, centralized and constant psychological reality – an idea derived from modern Western thought – is both historically dated and empirically mistaken.²⁰ The postmodern self is many voices, many roles, and many personae often shifting and transforming depending upon the circumstances. The psychologist Sherry Turkle has proposed a similar thesis regarding the nature of the self on the Internet where people can experiment with different personal identities. Who is to say which is the real self?²¹ Arguments are presented from psychology that the undercurrents of the human mind are actually a plurality of voices and selves – a “pandemonium” as Daniel Dennet describes it – and that the sense of an organized and singular self is a social and psychological construction, or fiction, that gives us an illusory sense of stability and security.²²

Our selves are becoming more multifarious as our lives and world become more complex and chaotic. Just as cultural and religious worldviews once provided a sense of order and stability for human societies, the idea of a stable

self provided order and meaning to our individual lives. Both sources of order have been challenged and undercut.

- **Out of Control, Stress, and Reveling in Chaos**

In his highly influential book *Out of Control*, Kevin Kelly argued that we must give up the Newtonian and rationalist ideal of attempting to control life. Life, the world around us, the future, and even ourselves – none of it can be controlled. There are no central command stations. There is interaction among multiplicities and resultant levels of chaos. The hierarchical model of control is passé – we live in a world of networks, distributed power, swarm or hive minds, and inherent unpredictability.²³ We should stop trying to impose order on a world that squirms and wiggles about and has many minds of its own.

As a general philosophical and cultural phenomenon, there has been an increasing emphasis on the concept of chaos and its integral and necessary importance in the workings of nature.²⁴ Supposedly, we should understand the role of chaos and live with it, and even revel in chaos. There are advocates of “creative disorder” who believe that chaos and disorder supports flexibility, freedom, creativity, and individuality.²⁵

Generally, though stress occurs when people no longer feel in control of their lives. In a chaotic world that is bombarding us with too many different things from too many different directions, coming and going too quickly, we often feel that we don’t know where we are going and that we don’t have command of the steering wheel. Stress and anxiety frequently follow.

Individuals do show differences though in their perception of control in their lives and the value they place on such control. There is significant individual variability in reactions to stress and uncontrollable change.²⁶ On a continuum, people may see themselves as being more in control of their lives (internal locus of control) or as people whose lives are more influenced by external factors (external locus of control). Having a sense of internal locus of control is correlated with psychological well-being.²⁷

Yet just as feelings of lack of control often generate negative psychological states of stress and anxiety, people find the experience of disorder unpleasant and depressing. According to the psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, people find work where they are engaged in purposeful tasks more satisfying than free time and aimless activities.²⁸ At the extreme end of the continuum, chaos totally unleashed in the human mind is tantamount to psychosis.

Monetization, Commodification, and Consumerism

People in modern society not only have their basic survival needs more than satisfied, but have more wealth, possessions, and purchasing power than at any previous period in history, yet they do not feel any happier and in fact exhibit more depression.²⁹ Once basic survival needs are met, money can’t buy you happiness. In fact, being excessively motivated to increase one’s material wealth

comes with a cost. What is wrong with a monetary philosophy of life – why doesn't it work?

Commodification is becoming an increasingly pervasive paradigm. Everything in life is being turned to a product with a monetary value that can be purchased for a price. Monetary worth has become the common denominator for everything of value and acquires a psychological and social power that ends up negating or minimizing the value of other things in life. To use psychological terminology, money has become a universal secondary reinforcer, associated with all possible primary reinforcers. As a universal secondary reinforcer it is always perceived as a necessary means to all ends, and in fact, often becomes the perceived end itself. We no longer pray for wisdom, friendship, or kindness; we pray to get rich. Many of us have become firmly convinced that if we had enough money we would be happy, though the evidence clearly indicates otherwise. All in all, money has become God – we worship the “golden cow”.

Secondly, because everything is reducible to a “product that can be purchased” there is no sense of effort or self-initiative directly associated with identifiable things of value. Rather, identifiable things of value are bought. If a person has enough money, presumably everything of value can be obtained. Value is not the result of a doing – it is the result of a buying. Further, because modern technologies invariably require money to purchase or use, the more we become dependent on technologies to accomplish our goals or give us pleasure in life, the more we become dependent on money.

Third, since things of value are purchased with money (as opposed to earned with effort or even bestowed on us as gifts of God), we are reduced to the role of consumers or customers, rather than creators and contributors. We become takers who are filled with needs rather than givers who have something to offer to the world.

Finally, since money is the means to all ends, and everything is a product to be purchased, future consciousness is undercut. What is of value does not require long term effort or thinking – it simply requires bucks in your pocket.

The historian Peter Watson has commented, we are all “doing too well to do good”.³⁰ Acquiring and maintaining material plentitude and financial wealth is a full time job. Our fast paced life, our stress, our individual isolation, and our focus on the demands of the present to a great degree revolve around advancing our careers and generating a good income. Our plentitude comes with a price.

Egocentricity, Individualism, and Narcissism

The psychologist Martin Seligman has argued that there has been too much emphasis on the individual – that our philosophy of life has become too self-centered.³¹ Seligman contends that one main cause of increasing depression is excessive expectations for the self. Excessive expectations produce frustration, anger, and disappointment later in life and consequently depression.

In the last few decades, our popular culture has witnessed the self-actualization, human potential, self-esteem, and human diversity movements, all

of which focus on the self and human uniqueness. We have been told that we are unique, special, and deserving of all life has to offer. We are not told that humans have numerous common biological, psychological, and social qualities, though the scientific evidence strongly supports a high degree of “human universality” and invariant “human nature”.³²

Excessive individualism produces social disconnectedness and consequent social chaos. As various writers have argued, relative to the past, there has been a loss of community and social coherence in our modern society.³³ We are all “bowling alone”.³⁴ We live in our individualized pleasure boxes. We have fortified ourselves in gated communities and SUV’s.

Walter Truett Anderson has recently argued that our strong sense of individualized and egocentric identity is our deepest social problem. We all want and cling to all kinds of identity labels. We are all taught to respect each other’s identities. There is a great deal of positive reinforcement in our society for developing one’s individual self and being egocentric. Yet there is, and in fact has been throughout history, immense and incomparable violence committed in the name of personal, cultural, national, and religious identity. For Anderson, our contemporary culture wars are actually identity wars.³⁵ Advocates of cultural pluralism and human diversity often sound egocentric and confrontational, and hence self-contradictory.

Egocentricity and extreme individualism not only generate social fragmentation through confrontation and self-centeredness, but through social apathy and perfunctory tolerance. We live in an era of Postmodernism and philosophical relativism. There are presumably no universal systems of truth and value. Truth and value have become subjective and culturally relative. Hence, in a true liberal fashion, no one presumably has the right or privileged vantage point to judge any one else. We unquestioningly accept multiple points of view and ways of life because what is subjective, individual, and unique has become our philosophical absolute. Each person and each culture simply “does their own thing”. This produces total disconnectedness.

Extreme individualism though backfires. We are all told that we are unique, and we all end up conforming to this social -psychological absolute. We are a plethora of special egos. If we are all special, no one is special. If we are all right, no one is right. Our individual selves would vanish without constructive interaction, dialogue, and mutual evaluation. We are open systems and reciprocally interdependent – we cannot stand alone. Excessive individualism is scientifically and philosophically flawed.

There is one other apparent paradox associated with our egocentric and individualist society. Although we pride ourselves on our individuality, we feel increasingly impotent to affect real change. People feel helpless in the face of the powerful corporate, cultural, and government forces that seem to determine the pattern and direction of events. There was a belief once that humans could solve the problems of the world. Now though we have become nihilistic and uncertain what the future will bring. Feeling helpless is a defining feature of depression.³⁶

If people feel that they can not affect change, they are more likely to retreat into their isolated worlds. They are also more likely to look for pleasure in

the technological conveniences and material products the society of plentitude provides for them – that is, people end up being pacified and addicted to the very forces that rob them of an authentic sense of happiness and accomplishment. No wonder we are increasingly depressed.

Summary and Conclusion

There are many interconnected reasons why people in modern society are stressed out, depressed, too present focused, and not very happy. For Didsbury, we are addicted to short term pleasures delivered through technology. According to Gleick and Bertman, we are obsessed and captured by speed. Some writers focus on excessive materialism, consumerism, and individualism as the primary causes.³⁷ Anderson highlights our ego-centered way of thinking. The Integral Culture movement, aside from identifying materialism as an important cause, emphasizes a multifaceted loss of connection in modern society among ourselves, with nature, and with the cosmos as a whole.³⁸ Neil Postman sees our society as a technological realization of *Brave New World*. Our values are increasingly defined by technology, and media – communication technology fragments our consciousness and dialogue into disconnected and trivialized bits of entertainment and information. We are “preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy.”³⁹

Nihilism is another disturbing feature of modern society. If there is no credible image for tomorrow this leads to hopelessness and a loss of optimism. Nihilism generates depression which motivates people to seek short term pleasures to counter-act the depression. Increased depression though creates a narrowing of temporal consciousness. Depression is also connected with perceived helplessness. Not only is the future dark and uncertain, but we can’t do anything about it.

If we do hear upbeat visions of the future, they often highlight the very things that seem to be making us stressed and unhappy. We are asked to adapt to and revel in chaos, in the accelerating development of technology and human life, in unpredictability, and our special little egos.

The Solution: The Pursuit of Virtue

Character Virtues and Universal Values

Our central hypothesis is that our psychological and social reality can be significantly improved through a focused exercise and development of a core set of character virtues.

The idea that the “good life” can be achieved through the internalization of character virtues goes back at least as far as Aristotle. For Aristotle, a life of virtue not only creates happiness in the individual but equally contributes to the well being of the community.⁴⁰ Virtues are not simply self-centered or self-serving. Further, for Aristotle happiness is not the same as pleasure. Pleasure is

a good feeling; happiness is an accomplishment, a form of excellence, and a way of life. Happiness is not achieved through practicing a “hedonism of the present”.

Virtues are connected with values, in that a virtue is a value lived and internalized into the character of a person. If truth is a value, honesty and forthrightness are the corresponding virtues.

As noted earlier, our contemporary world has been strongly influenced by Postmodernism and cultural relativism. The argument has been repeatedly made that values are relative and different across cultures. In spite of its popular appeal, this argument is probably wrong. Based on a lifelong survey of different cultures, the futurist Wendell Bell contends that all human societies share the common values of human life and health, knowledge, truth and evaluation itself. (All cultures believe in the value of values.) Further, there are many other almost universal values, including justice, peace, loyalty, courage, friendliness, trust, self-realization and autonomy.⁴¹ Rushworth Kidder also argues that there is a high degree of global consensus on human values. He interviewed a set of culturally diverse people, each respected by their peers for their ethical thinking and behavior. The following eight common values emerged from the interviews: Love, truthfulness, fairness, freedom, unity, tolerance, responsibility, and respect for life.⁴² Note that there is significant overlap between the two lists.

In a more general vein, the anthropologist Donald Brown has compiled a vast list, numbering into the hundreds, of “human universals” across all cultures. This list includes social conventions, modes of behavior, conceptual distinctions, and values.⁴³ The Postmodernist emphasis on relativism and subjectivism appears clearly contradicted by Brown’s research. We seem to have been misled by the propaganda of extreme individualism. As a species, we think and behave in very similar ways, and part of this commonality is in our values.

One of the most interesting surveys of common human values has been conducted by Martin Seligman and his associates.⁴⁴ What is particularly important about his research is that it surveyed key values not just across cultures but across human history. A large selection of influential writings from different cultures and different historical periods was identified and presented to a group of investigators for review. According to Seligman, six fundamental virtues across all cultures and historical time periods emerged from this review. The six virtues and subcategories are:

- **Wisdom** (Curiosity, love of learning, judgment, ingenuity, social intelligence, and perspective)
- **Courage** (Valor, perseverance, and integrity)
- **Love and Humanity** (Kindness, generosity, nurturance, and the capacity to love and be loved)
- **Temperance** (Modesty, humility, self-control, prudence, and caution)
- **Justice** (Good citizenship, fairness, loyalty, teamwork, and humane leadership)
- **Transcendence** (Appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, spirituality, forgiveness, humor, and zest)

Seligman's argument is that **authentic happiness** is built upon the exercise and development of these character virtues. Sounding very Aristotelian, Seligman believes that authentic happiness is a relatively enduring quality and is not necessarily associated with short term pleasure at all. Momentary pleasures tend to diminish quickly for people adapt to the frequent experience of a repeatable pleasure. Character virtues on the other hand require effort and challenges. Hence, authentic happiness is something that must be worked at and the pathway involves an ethical growth in the individual.

For Seligman, meaning and purpose in life involve both the development of character virtues and the identification with some reality or goal "beyond oneself". The virtues serve a "transcendent reality" rather than just being self-serving. Consequently, extreme individualism works against finding meaning and purpose. Interestingly, "transcendence" is one of the primary character virtues listed. In many ways, transcendence is anathema to our modern emphasis on the ego, self-gratification, and subjectivism – there is something beyond our private realities that needs to become our center of gravity and our standard of truth and value. It should also be noted that since purpose in life requires transcendence, a future oriented mindset involves practicing the virtue of transcendence. Extreme individualism and egocentricity work against future consciousness.

We are going to take Seligman's theory of authentic happiness as one major starting point for our approach to modern life. Virtue leads to happiness and purpose. We also contend that there is a set of relatively universal human virtues that provide some common criteria for leading the good life.

Articulating a Life Narrative based on Character Virtues

Our second main proposal consists of two connected parts. First, we should conceptualize our existence and our temporal consciousness in terms of the narrative or the story. Second, we should use character virtues as the central theme or motif in our life narrative.

People cognitively represent their personal identities as "narratives" or "stories". To use an expression of Antonio Damasio, we understand and describe ourselves in terms of an "autobiographical self". The object of self-consciousness is not a static thing but an unfolding story.⁴⁵ Our self-narratives change over time depending on new experiences and new interpretations. Also people often have multiple stories they tell themselves about themselves – even contradictory ones. Self-narratives can be a mixed bag of positive or negative, tragic, comical, or self-elevating elements. Human societies or cultures also conceptualize identity in terms of stories or narratives with a distinctive heritage, collective myths, dramas, heroes and villains, and usually visions for the future.

The narrative is the most appropriate and valuable way to conceptualize the future. A narrative for the future does not just identify a goal or vision, which is a frozen "idea" in time. A narrative is a story that extends in time – it is a process rather than a state. A life narrative usually entails the identification of challenges and problems to address. Narratives have drama and are filled with emotional color. Narratives also usually involve multiple characters, both

supportive and adversarial, who will have an effect upon our lives. Our future will not unfold in a social vacuum. These various aspects of a narrative make it a realistic way to conceptualize the future.

Using the narrative as a mental framework for self-description, we need to rediscover our heritage and past, if we have forgotten or forsaken it. In order to expand our temporal consciousness, we need to reintegrate our past into our sense of identity. We need to emphasize accomplishments and important events that are connected with the development of virtues.

Just as our past needs to be framed in terms of the achievement and expression of virtues, our future narrative should also center on character virtues. How does one live a life dedicated to the development of wisdom, temperance, or transcendence? We should be motivated toward realizing such virtues.

One important benefit in centering on character virtues in the articulation of a life narrative is that it takes the focus off of the self. Life becomes the realization of virtues, rather than an expression of self-aggrandizement. Depressed and anxious people are more self-absorbed than happy people, and given the excessive self-centeredness of our times, it is important to find a way to conceptualize our lives that is not so egocentric.

The Six Key Virtues for the Future

Now we wish to propose and describe six key virtues for the future. This list derives from the lists created by Bell, Kidder, Brown, and Seligman, as well as other sources. Special consideration is given to what seem to be our most glaring contemporary problems and what virtues we especially need for the future. The six proposed virtues are:

- **Self-Efficacy and Self-Responsibility**
- **Order, Integration, and Direction**
- **Courage, Faith, and Freedom**
- **Wisdom and the Love of Thinking**
- **Reciprocity and Balance**
- **Evolution and Transcendence**

Self-Efficacy and Self-Responsibility

Achieving authentic happiness is first and foremost an accomplishment. It requires effort, rather than being something that can be purchased, or something that can be produced through momentary pleasures. Developing character virtues requires self-effort and produces a sense of accomplishment. Hence, a prime virtue that is required for the exercise and development of all other virtues is self-responsibility. What is good in life is achieved rather than bestowed upon us.

Through the accomplishment of goals, one strengthens one's sense of self-efficacy. Without self-accomplishment there is no sense of self-efficacy. Perceived self-efficacy is the degree to which one sees oneself as capable of

accomplishing goals.⁴⁶ People show different degrees of “self-efficacy”. A person with low self-efficacy believes he is relatively powerless with respect to the future, whereas a person with high self-efficacy believes he has a high level of control or influence on the future. High self-efficacy is the opposite of perceived helplessness and counter-acts the experience of depression.

A critical belief connected with the idea of self-efficacy is that you can transform your life for the better. Behind this belief are a set of key assumptions. You are assuming that the future is not determined by uncontrollable forces. You are also assuming that you are not trapped by the past. Additionally, you are assuming that you have the power through self-initiative and the exercise of various capacities to significantly influence the future. Also this belief is framed as a “possibility” rather than a certainty. Framing it as a possibility engenders effort – if it were framed as a certainty there would be no reason or need to think you had to make an effort. Further, it is framed as an ideal. The future is not seen as a result of causes but of choices and effort to realize ideals. The future is described as prescriptive and idealistic, rather than deterministic. What is it that we hope to achieve? What can we achieve? Values rather than causes determine the future.

Framing the future in this manner also supports the need for courage in the face of the future, another one of the character virtues to be described below. One does not need courage if the future is secure, certain, dependent on others, or determined by external factors.

Order, Integration, and Direction

If one of our key social and psychological problems is chaos and disconnectedness, then it stands to reason that what we need is more order and integration in both our lives and our minds. Although chaos and disorder have been connected in popular contemporary philosophy with freedom and creativity, the exact opposite is frequently the case. Chaos tends to produce feelings of lack of control, helplessness, confusion, and stagnation. It is our argument that mental discipline is a central character virtue that is critically important for the future and that it facilitates creativity and the evolution of order.

Csikszentmihalyi, who has studied the psychology of creativity extensively, believes that we need more order in our minds.⁴⁷ He argues that there is a strong dimension of chaos in the typical human mind. In spite of what people may believe, we do not control what we think about very well. Typically our thoughts and feelings jump around as if they had a will of their own. If given free time, humans tend to become unhappy, disordered, and unproductive. Surprisingly, people tend to find work more satisfying than free time. When we focus our minds we feel better. Csikszentmihalyi thinks that we need to consciously structure our minds more, a task he believes is definitely within our power. If we do not attempt to bring order to our minds, we degenerate into mental entropy and chaos, which is depressing and psychologically unpleasant. Mental order leads to increased happiness and productivity.

If Csikszentmihalyi addresses the need for increased mental order, the **Integral Culture** movement (which includes writers such as Barbara Marx

Hubbard, Riane Eisler, and Hazel Henderson) highlights the need for increased social, ecological, and cosmic order and integration. In opposition to the dualist and individualist philosophies of traditional Western thinking, which separated everything, advocates of the Integral Culture movement assert that we need to reconnect with each other, reconnect the sexes, reconnect with nature and our “Mother Earth”, and reconnect with the cosmos. A philosophy of love is central to their message, and love entails a coming together of the many pieces of our highly fragmented human reality.⁴⁸

Another key feature to psychological order is meaning and purpose in life. Meaning and purpose entail some sense of direction and some core set of values and themes that define the sense and significance of one’s life. Meaning and purpose integrate – that is, bring order – to life. The pieces are fitted together and a direction is defined. Meaning and purpose in particular enhance future consciousness. We see and articulate a direction to our lives.

We propose that it is the exercise of a set of virtues that gives meaning and purpose to life. Virtues give meaning – what is the significance of doing something – and virtues give direction – life is the development of these virtues. Anchoring one’s life to virtues provides order amidst the chaos and flux. Living a life dedicated to virtue is a way to practice and realize the specific virtue of mental order and discipline.

Virtues are a particularly good way to conceptualize meaning and purpose. Virtues provide for an idealistic or preferable order and direction; they put the individual in the driver’s seat regarding the value of his or her life; and they contribute both to the well being of the individual and society as a whole. Finally, following Aristotle and Seligman, ordering one’s life around virtues brings happiness. Centering one’s meaning and purpose around the acquisition of wealth, power, fame, or momentary pleasures does not seem to bring happiness.

In the pursuit of increasing mental order we also need to resurrect the value of linear thinking. Linear thinking has been excessively criticized over the last few decades, being associated with rationalist and closed-minded thinking, but to go to the opposite extreme of horizontal or free-associative thinking leads to a psychotic and disorganized state of mind. Without linear thinking we would not be able to create any focused or directional line of behavior. Sequential and goal directed behavior, planning, history and narrative, causal thinking, and logical thought all require linear thinking. Purpose and direction by definition imply linearity. Linearity creates continuity in our lives. If we are to re-create some viable notion of progress we need to articulate some sense of positive linear direction extending out of the past into the future. Without a belief in progress, we will remain stuck in feelings of hopelessness and depression. A belief in progressive linearity is critical to happiness.

One final theme relevant the development of order is the reconnecting of the past, present, and future. We need to integrate our sense of the overall temporal structure of reality. Our contemporary temporal consciousness, being focused on the present, is fragmented. To move out of the chaos of the here-and-now it is critical to integrate past, present, and future. We have already noted, following Nisbet and his study of progress, that broadening our sense of

history is actually supportive of future consciousness, and gives us a sense of linearity and development. As Leonard Shlain argues, “To understand and change the present condition of our species, we must gain insight into the past. If we do not, we cannot exert a lasting influence on the future.”⁴⁹

Courage, Faith, and Freedom

Courage and freedom appear as core virtues and values in the lists of Seligman and Kidder. We suggest that these two ideals are psychologically connected, and further, that faith is related to both factors, thus forming a triad or character cluster.

Courage, faith, and freedom are connected with the theme of the future as possibilities. As argued earlier, it is important to view the future as possibilities. Seeing the future as deterministic or teleological certainties disempowers us. Unless the future is possibilities there is no real freedom of choice and no real self-determination. Believing in a pre-destined or deterministic future may give us a sense of security, but we must transcend this need if we are to live the future as possibilities. Hence, living in a future of possibilities where there is real freedom of choice requires courage. There would be no need for courage if one felt secure and safe. Similarly, faith is required in a world of uncertainty. Although people often state that they have faith and are certain or convinced of whatever beliefs they profess to have faith in, true faith only exists if one isn't certain. Faith is believing when you aren't certain – faith, in fact, requires courage.

Faith is often opposed to reason, as if to live a life of faith meant to forsake reason (and also empirical evidence). In fact, faith can be seen as believing in spite of what reason and evidence may indicate, yet this concept of faith turns it into a state of being closed-minded, unrealistic, and even mad. What we mean by faith though is simply believing in something even though one realizes one isn't certain. Faith is not arrogant but humble. Neither reason nor empirical evidence can provide absolute certainty and proof for our beliefs. It is unreasonable to expect certainty. Almost all our beliefs about the world, including our scientific ones, are contingent. Having faith is realizing and living with this uncertainty. Faith requires courage and not being overpowered by our fears.

Although freedom is often listed as a central ideal that most people around the world profess to highly value, freedom is, in fact, a frightening thing to many of us. As Eric Fromm argued years ago, people find many ways to “escape from freedom”.⁵⁰ Freedom entails choice and self-responsibility. Expressing our freedom of choice and self-determination involves moving beyond the securities of authority, conformity, and dependency on others.

There are many ways in which we can be constrained by reality, but these constraints actually provide for security and safety. Our culture, our religious beliefs, and even our self-defined sense of who we are, are all factors that give us identity, but constrain us to a particular way of being, thinking, and living.⁵¹ As Anderson argues, the Western theory of a unique, single, and constant ego may in fact be a self-imposed limitation on our nature – in a world of excessive individualism we may not really be that free.⁵²

True freedom means that any of these constraints can be altered or abandoned through choice and action. If we are free then we embody possibilities. As with courage and faith, freedom entails overcoming our fears and our very human need for security.

Approaching the future with faith, courage, and freedom means that we don't simply adapt to, conform to, or accept the prophecies and predictions we hear about the future. There are different ways the future could unfold and these different possibilities provide the arena of choice for us. We need to become open and realize that through self-initiative we can guide which future is realized.

Wisdom and the Love of Thinking

The love and practice of good thinking is a virtue. Good thinking is a proactive mental activity – it is something accomplished, as with all the other virtues. It requires self-initiation, effort, and practice. It also brings self-control and self-discipline to the mind; hence it serves the virtue of mental order. It contributes to the overall excellence of life and counter-acts some of the most basic problems of our contemporary world.

Good thinking, as with other virtues, is a skill that can be enhanced, and as with any skill, it involves standards, ideals, and values. The qualities of good thinking have been extensively addressed within the **Critical Thinking** movement. As its advocates have argued, there are “universal standards” for good thinking.⁵³ Although there are significant individual differences in how people think, good thinking, like human values in general, is not as subjective and variable as contemporary relativistic philosophy would have us believe. As Jacob Needleman stated, “It is good to be open-minded but not so open that your brains fall out.”

Critical thinking has been defined as the opposite of egocentric thinking. Critical thinking involves the capacity to entertain and evaluate, according to rational standards, alternative points of view. Egocentric thinking is seeing things from only one point of view.⁵⁴ Egocentricity involves being exclusively concerned with satisfying one's own personal desires and goals and protecting and justifying one's own beliefs. Egocentric thinking is biased and prejudicial. Since one of the central mental qualities associated with the chaos and disconnectedness of our times is egocentrism, we should adopt a form of thinking that explicitly challenges this mode of viewing reality. Critical thinking is the antidote to egocentricity.

Critical thinking also serves human freedom for it brings flexibility and openness to the human mind. Being trapped in an egocentric mode of thinking constrains the individual to one point of view. It is interesting then that a virtue that brings self-control and order also brings freedom.

Given the vast array of different voices, philosophies, and cultures a globalizing society brings to the individual, it is essential that people develop the capacity to sort through and evaluate all these different points of view. How do we bring order to the chaos? How do we decide which ideas are worthwhile and which ideas are not? Advocates of critical thinking suggest that the standards they have outlined provide a way to evaluate and decide amidst the noise.

Lest the critical thinking perspective be accused of adopting a form of dogmatism in advocating for certain standards of thought and cognition over others, it should be mentioned that one common description of critical thinking is simply “thinking about thinking”. Dogmatism has the feature of leaving various assumptions unquestioned – it is not self-reflective. Good critical thinkers evaluate their own mode and standards of thinking – they are explicitly non-dogmatic. Hence, critical thinking raises self-consciousness, which is another way it benefits freedom. The critical thinker is more aware and less trapped by his or her own ego and assumptions.

Closely connected with the idea of critical thinking is the theory of **reflective thinking**. Reflective thinking is moving beyond absolutism and relativism. King and Kitchener describe three developmental stages of thinking and judgment making. Stage one is absolutist thinking: It is true and right because some identified authority says so. Absolutist thinking is highly egocentric and dogmatic. This mode of thought is the mind of a child. Stage two is relativist thinking: All ideas are equal because there are many different possible points of view on a topic. This mode of thought produces thoughtless tolerance, disconnectedness, and indecisiveness. Stage three is reflective thinking which is identifying the most convincing position among many alternatives based on evidence and reasoning without the need to be absolutely certain.⁵⁵ Reflective thinking achieves a balance between, or perhaps more accurately, a transcendence of closed-minded absolutism and non-committal relativism.

Utilizing critical and reflective thinking involves assessing alternatives and making thoughtful commitments, decisions, and choices without the security of definitive answers. It means acknowledging and living with uncertainty. It also means not being paralyzed by fear. It is courageous thinking. It is the ideal mode of thinking for the future in that it thrives in a world of mystery and possibilities rather than certainties.

A devotion to critical thinking facilitates the growth of wisdom, one of the six key virtues in Seligman’s list. Seligman includes “curiosity, love of learning, judgment, and perspective” as subcategories of this virtue and all of these character qualities are distinctive traits of the ideal critical thinker.⁵⁶ Wisdom is a quality that transcends mere information or knowledge. Wisdom implies a deep understanding of reality and the application of that understanding to life. One could even say that wisdom is a process and a capacity as much as a body of content. Wisdom is also connected with a love of thinking. There is an affective and passionate dimension to critical thinkers. As a virtue, wisdom is not simply a skill but a passion.

Sadly in our society today, we are drowning in information and devoid of wisdom. The ongoing corruption of education is a case in point. Knowledge is broken down into modules and sold for a price. Further, in spite of various and continued efforts to transform education, it is still primarily concerned with learning facts and specialized skills. Integrative and inter-disciplinary programs, which would facilitate the development of wisdom, flounder, whereas programs, which promise job advancement and focus on isolated areas of expertise, flourish. Neither students nor schools profess any interest in the development of

wisdom. Given the presumed accelerative growth of information and knowledge, it would benefit us to strongly support educational programs that promise to pull the pieces together and apply this integrative knowledge to the problems and challenges of the world as well as our own personal lives. Wisdom is power and ordered knowledge. Data glut is chaos and generates impotence.

A New Conceptual Framework of Thinking – Evolution and Reciprocity

A common argument among many futurists and visionaries is that we need a new way of thinking to live and thrive in the future. Many of these arguments focus on critiques of Newtonian, Industrial Age, and Western Enlightenment thinking and propose some type of evolutionary, ecological, and pluralistic mindset to take its place.⁵⁷ The old way of thinking is seen as too linear, analytic, static, rationalistic, and hierarchical. The proposed new way of thinking is more horizontal, holistic, dynamic, intuitive, and network-like. Interestingly this new way of thinking is similar to “feminine” and “non-Western” thinking whereas the old way of thinking is associated with Western males.⁵⁸

The problem with such critiques is that they tend to throw the baby out with the bath water and consequently all of the stereotypical Western male cognitive and psychological traits have been unfairly and one-sidedly undermined. As noted earlier, we would be lost without linear thinking, and to pick another example, without analytic thought, logic and science would go out the window and life would be reduced to a chaotic blur.

So what type of conceptual scheme best captures the full breadth of human experience and thinking, and provides a constructive and viable mindset for the future? Based on a review of many contemporary proposals we suggest that two key ideas emerge which are evolution and reciprocity. These two ideas form the core of the last two character virtues we describe.

Reciprocity and Balance

- **Reciprocity**

We use the term “**reciprocity**” to mean distinct but interdependent. The dictionary definition of reciprocity highlights the idea of mutual exchange. An open systems view describes nature as reciprocal systems. The whole idea of ecology is built on the notion of reciprocity – of mutual dependency of life forms forming an integrated whole.⁵⁹ A philosophy of reciprocity views reality in terms of complementarities and balance. The Chinese Yin-Yang exemplifies perspective. Many concepts of justice and fairness derive from the idea of reciprocity. The expressions “An eye for an eye...do unto others... and you scratch my back...” all describe reciprocities. Reciprocity is a key principle underlying the idea of partnerships.⁶⁰ One could argue that all evolution, natural and man-made, involves the creation of new reciprocities. All evolution is reciprocal evolution, or as Harold Morowitz states, “All evolution is co-evolution.”⁶¹

At the most basic level, integrating the idea of reciprocity into one's philosophy and behavior means acknowledging one's interdependency with the rest of humanity, with nature, with the cosmos, and even with technology. It means giving up the mistaken notion of extreme individualism – that each of us is a separate self-contained entity.

- **Reciprocity and Creating Resonant Environments**

The person and the environment form a reciprocity.⁶² The person and the environment mutually affect and determine each other. To use an expression coined by the psychologist Albert Bandura, there is “**reciprocal determinism**” between the person and the environment.⁶³ We are neither passive victims nor totally in control. What happens in our lives is an interaction effect.

Given this fundamental reciprocity, the level of future consciousness a person is able to develop and maintain is integrally connected with the environment. People at times can maintain a strong future orientation in spite of an impoverished present-centered environment, but generally speaking, environmental conditions and opportunities strongly impact a person's state of mind.

Based on the notion of reciprocal determinism, people can influence and in fact change their environment. Consequently, it is important to identify, seek out, nurture, and create **resonant environments** that support future consciousness. Many of the critiques of our contemporary lifestyle cited above put the blame on environmental factors that deteriorate extended consciousness, purpose, and mental order. Hence, it is critical to realize that evolving meaning, purpose, and future consciousness can not take place in a vacuum – it is not something done alone. One must find reciprocal exchanges and mutual support with others. One must integrate the inner self with community and others. One must go beyond the self-defined ego and find a context in which to thrive.

Expanding future consciousness is not something that is instantaneously achieved; it is a growing and open-ended process. Similarly, resonant environments need to be cultivated and developed, as does one's mode of interaction with these environments. Future consciousness and resonant environments reciprocally evolve.

Engaging a resonant environment should produce challenges and surprises. A resonant environment is not something one completely controls. There is a degree of uncertainty in that the environment contributes to the unfolding of events. A resonant environment that facilitates the development of future consciousness stretches the mindset and capacities of an individual. An environment that simply responds to the wishes and actions of an individual without challenge or effort (our rats in Skinner boxes) does not enhance future consciousness. Hence, resonant environments that support the development of any of the virtues we have described must create a challenge for the individual.

- **Finding the Tao – Finding Balance**

Reciprocity also means seeking and creating balance in life. We should become attuned to the Tao – the balancing of Yin and Yang. This is the practice of temperance, another of Seligman’s key virtues. Balance allows one to maintain self-control and order. One can become a slave to any value or goal if it is carried to an extreme. It is important to balance logic with intuition, reason with emotion, and the quest for certainty with faith. It is important to balance work and focused activities with play and rest.

One important example of balance is that we should acknowledge that there are two reciprocal forms of thinking, both of which have value and validity. These two forms of thinking, circular and linear, holistic and analytical, capture the variability that is seen between female and male thinking, Western and non-Western thinking, and left versus right cerebral functioning.⁶⁴ In a true global society in the future, East and West, women and men, artist and scientist, all need to be seen as having an essential and valuable place and contribution.

Balance and interdependency are tied together in the idea of reciprocity, as they are connected in the Taoist Yin-yang. Each polarity requires the other for its full realization – one cannot suppress half of the human equation in pursuit of some extremist dream.

In our fast paced, frantic world, it is also important that there is disengagement, acceptance, and stillness in life. One needs to stop and assess reality. One needs time to reflect and to feel oneself. One needs to be alone. One needs to accept and stop pushing all the time. Burn-out, exhaustion, excessive stress, and general psychological mania, all result from too much focused doing and not enough disengagement, inner peace, and tranquility.

One of the most important themes in contemporary science is the interdependency of order and chaos.⁶⁵ The psychologist Maureen O’Hara has developed a theory of human personality that addresses the issue of finding a balance of order and chaos in our lives.⁶⁶ According to O’Hara, there are three fundamental ways of dealing with change – defensive, psychotic, and growth responsive. The defensive response is “anxiety repressed”; the psychotic response is “anxiety unleashed”; and the growth response is “anxiety contained and transformed”. She refers to the growth oriented self as a **“transformative self”**.

According to O’Hara, the defensive reaction emphasizes the need for excessive order and involves efforts to simplify reality. It produces rigidity, conformity, addiction, dependency on authority, lack of creativity, and feelings of apathy and depression. It is the psychological source of absolutism, fundamentalism, the retreat into the security and stability of the past, and the desire for excessive control.

The psychotic reaction produces excessive psychological chaos. It involves withdrawal and a retreat into fantasy, a lack of psychological coherence, mania, psychic pain, and a collapse of any boundaries between the self and others. It is the source of extreme subjectivism, fragmentation, and deterioration in any standards.

For O’Hara, the transformative reaction involves flexibility, creativity, integration, balance, openness, interconnectedness, expansive consciousness, a

synthesis of the rational and intuitive, a tolerance for ambiguity, a balance of cooperation and competition, empathy, and joy. The transformative reaction generates psychological and social evolution, and involves a synthesis and balance of chaos and order.

Notice that many of these psychological features correspond to the type of character we have described in our outline of fundamental virtues for the future and that many of the features of the defensive and psychotic personality types correspond to negative aspects of contemporary society as we have described it. Neither the defensive nor the psychotic reaction generates psychological growth.

O'Hara believes that the most adaptive and functional self for a society that is both pluralistic and changing is the transformative self. She contends that appropriate social systems and cultures are needed to support a transformative self. In our terminology, the evolution of future consciousness requires resonant environments. According to O'Hara, neither contemporary Western nor Eastern culture provides such social support for a transformative self. In support of her claim, we would point out that social and psychological research indicates that Eastern cultures are holistic, conformist, and "right brain", whereas Western cultures are analytic, individualistic and "left brain".⁶⁷ We need a culture that is more balanced and brings together in mutual support the strengths of the West and the East.

Evolution and Transcendence

The last key character virtue that Seligman identifies is transcendence – the capacity to go beyond the individual self and find meaning and purpose in something greater than oneself. We propose that this virtue be coupled with the idea of evolution. Evolution also entails a sense of beyondness, particularly regarding time and the present. From an evolutionary perspective, we have a sense that we are moving toward something in the future that transcends the present. It may seem strange that we are bringing together these two ideas, since transcendence has a strong spiritual connotation, whereas evolution is a scientific and naturalistic idea. The idea of evolution though was greatly inspired by earlier Western religious views that saw time as linear and progressive.⁶⁸

As noted, evolution is a pivotal idea in proposals for a new way of thinking about reality. Our past intellectual heritage, in both the East and the West, has identified the most elevated aspects of reality as eternal, unchanging, and permanent. God was changeless and the scientific laws of nature were presumably constant and fixed. Yet, as the last few centuries have demonstrated at many levels and from many perspectives, it is entirely unrealistic to view reality as static, permanent, and secure. Life is fluid, transforming, and to a degree uncertain. Evolution provides a scientifically grounded theoretical framework for understanding the history and dynamics of all of nature, including humanity and the cosmos.⁶⁹ The history of evolution also clearly shows that the growth of complexity, though involving an irreducible dimension of creativity and novelty, is built upon the past, rather than being a rejection or jettison of the past.⁷⁰

It is our contention that our fast paced contemporary society exhibits a lot of change and very little significant evolution. There is a great deal of chaos and many defensive counter-reactions that are either regressive or static. As a remedy, we advocate for a philosophy and ethics of evolution and growth. Practicing the virtue of evolution and transcendence involves the pursuit of progressive development through the exercise of all the important virtues. Following O'Hara, and a philosophy of reciprocity, evolution requires balance and synthesis and not the mad pursuit of extremes and domination over nature and others. Evolution involves the creation of new order that incorporates the best of the past but also transcends the past.

- **Developing Optimism and Combating Pessimism**

According to Seligman, one of the key subcategories of transcendence is hope and optimism. Seligman, who has studied the attitudes of optimism and pessimism extensively, argues that the belief that one can positively affect the future is critical to optimistic thinking. Optimism involves a strong sense of self-efficacy. He defines optimism as a way of thinking involving the beliefs that misfortunes are relatively short-lived, limited in their effect, and due to external circumstances. Pessimists, on the other hand, not only have negative images about the future, they believe that they cannot positively affect any change in what is to come. They believe that they are doomed to failure. They feel hopeless and helpless. Seligman defines pessimism as involving the beliefs that misfortunes have long-term and pervasive effects and are the fault of the individual. Following a cognitive theory of motivation and emotion, Seligman contends that depression is primarily due to pessimistic thinking.

Both optimism and pessimism are self-fulfilling prophecies. Consequently, each mode of thinking gets reinforced since it tends to lead to the very results it anticipates. Seligman sees optimism and pessimism as “habits of thought”, which obey the laws of reinforcement. Based upon a great deal of accumulated experimental evidence, he believes these habits of thought can be changed through re-learning, education, and training.⁷¹

Optimism though can be either realistic or unrealistic. According to Noelle Nelson, another researcher, fear of the future leads to inaction and negative emotional states. But to uncritically think the future will be wonderful is unrealistic and will invariably lead to frustration and disappointment. Nelson, instead, argues that a “Winner” belief about the future involves acknowledging both the negative and positive possibilities of tomorrow, and believing that we have some power and choice in determining which possibilities are realized. Hence, perceiving the risks, but also seeing that one has some control over what will come to pass, generates good mental health. Conversely Nelson argues that believing that external forces beyond our control determine the future, or that the future is set, generates apathy and other negative emotional states.⁷²

From Nelson's analysis, and Seligman would concur on many of these points, realistic optimism involves critical and reflective thinking about the future, seeing the future as possibilities and taking responsibility for which possibilities

are realized. It requires courage and faith in the face of acknowledged risk, and in general, produces more happiness than misery and depression. Further, we would add, and Seligman would concur again, that realistic optimism expands future consciousness whereas pessimism and depression close down the human mind to the future. Why think where there is no hope? Believing in the possibility and value of evolution gives us hope.

- **Flow and Cultivating an “Evolving Self”**

Csikszentmihalyi presents a theory of mental health that specifically highlights the concepts of evolution and transcendence. His theory of the “**evolving self**” emphasizes the need to transcend the egocentric constraints within us.⁷³ He believes we have the inherent capacity to see beyond the limits of our present condition and transcend them. Csikszentmihalyi argues for a new type of self in the future - one that does not identify with or accept the selfish needs of genes (the body), culture, or the ego. He believes that the ego was created when humans first distinguished their minds as something distinct and separate from the body. The future self - an evolving self - should identify with something beyond itself. He thinks that achieving this transcendent state requires a strong element of mental control. We need to learn to believe in freedom and self-determination.

According to Csikszentmihalyi, the key to an evolving self is the experience of flow. Flow is a state of consciousness to be cultivated within life. He describes the flow experience as involving both clear goals and feedback - an open system of interaction between the self and the environment. Within flow experiences, the skills match the challenge; a balance is achieved between the person’s abilities and the difficulty of the task with just enough tension. There is a “one-pointedness” of mind and a merging of thought and action. There is a sense of potential control, not complete control though or else the activity becomes boring. Further, there is a loss of self-consciousness and a feeling of self-transcendence. There is an altered sense of time and a feeling that the activity is worth doing for its own sake.

The experience of flow in life continues if we keep finding new challenges. Flow requires novelty. According to Csikszentmihalyi, it is the engine of evolution. When flow is absent, people turn to self-destructive and other negative actions.

Csikszentmihalyi presents a theory of **transcenders**, of people who pursue the experience of flow. They search for increasing complexity in their own consciousness. They enjoy a life of developing skills, meeting challenges, being part of the evolutionary process, and moving to higher levels of harmonious complexity. Transcenders are evolving selves.

He describes the ideal self of the future as recapitulating the ideals of the past, and as encompassing a balance and synthesis of the opposite traits within us. He sees this ideal evolving self as a cosmic self that identifies and integrates with all humanity, nature, and the universe. He describes the growth of this new type of self as dialectical, between differentiation and integration, and inner and outer concerns. The evolving self grows through increasing uniqueness and

through increasing integration and transcendence. The evolving self is original yet systematic, independent yet responsible, intuitive yet rational. It possesses pride yet it is concerned with others. It is a self that “flows” and “transcends” its own boundaries. It is an evolving narrative that is moving with a sense of adventure and purpose. It is open to the world and to its own inner workings.

- **Cosmic Evolution, Enlightenment, God, and Mystery**

It is important to develop a global and cosmic view of the future and integrate one’s life narrative into it. We need openness to something higher, something beyond the self. One must let go of the inner defined self and of past habits and ways of thinking. We need to move beyond a self-centered point of view. Placing one’s life narrative in transcendent context gives one’s life purpose and meaning.⁷⁴ The state of enlightenment, whether spiritual or secular, according to Walter Anderson, involves connecting with the Oneness of it all.⁷⁵ For the biologist, John Stewart, identifying with cosmic evolution is the highest form of adaptation. We see ourselves as participatory in the grand cosmic process of evolution and are centrally motivated to contribute to this process.⁷⁶

Whether one believes in natural cosmic evolution or God, or some synthesis of the two ideas, it is critical for our growth to acknowledge the mystery of existence. If we believe we have all the answers, we can not experience transcendence and we cannot grow. We are closed within a self-defined egocentric universe. God must be an open definition – a real transcendence. Transcendence is not a form of security. Transcendence, whether secular or spiritual, requires faith and courage.

Conclusion

We conclude this paper with a quotation from Spinoza. He is one of those giants of the past on whose shoulders we should stand. Spinoza argued that we should view ourselves through the “eyes of eternity” – that is humans should see themselves in a cosmic context. He also believed that the key to happiness was through ethics and virtue, a philosophy and psychology we clearly also endorse. Spinoza was also a paragon of reason, yet equally a person of courage, passion, and humility.⁷⁷ Though he lived long before the emergence of the modern theory of evolution, he was indeed an evolving self. He is the pristine synthesis, in thought and action, of the ideals of the Western Enlightenment. And finally, he was a truly independent soul, a person of self-determination. And thus, on this theme, we end with his closing words to *The Ethics*, “If the way which I have pointed out ...seems exceedingly hard, it may nevertheless be discovered...How would it be possible, if salvation were ready to our hand, and could without great labor be found, that it should be by almost all men neglected? But all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.”⁷⁸ Let us hope that perhaps we can evolve to the point where our modern salvation, though undoubtedly difficult and challenging, will not be a rare and infrequent achievement among us.

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