

Stephen Pepper's World Hypotheses: Season 1, Episode 5

Let us begin with a brief meditation.

Reflect for a moment on the notion of **generativity**.

- Erik Erikson (1963) describes generativity as "**primarily the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation**" (p. 267).
- Of course, generative actions need not be limited to the support and guidance of one's own offspring. According to Erikson (1964), "**generativity, as the instinctual power behind various forms of selfless 'caring,' potentially extends to whatever man generates and leaves behind, creates and produces (or helps to produce)**" (p. 131).
- John Kotre (1984) considers generativity as "**a desire to invest one's substance in forms of life and work that will outlive the self**. The investments are ways of achieving material and symbolic unity with an extensive and enduring future" (p. 10; underline in original).
- Dan McAdams (1992) offers additional clarification by considering generativity as **the thematic unity of a meaningful personal narrative**:
 - "As Sartre (1964) points out, the ending of a story shapes all that comes before it...One's sense of wholeness and direction is teleologically anchored. If I am to know who I am as an adult, then I must conceptualize my life in terms of a telos--I must formulate a clear vision of what I am going to do in the future in order to bring the narrative to a good completion....Further complicating the adult's search for an appropriate ending to his or her life story is the fact that he or she generally does not want the story to end....What is needed, therefore, is a satisfying ending for a life story that implies, at the same time, that the story does not really end!" (pp. 358-359)

So considered, generativity is clearly a meaningful *psychological* concept. But I'd like us to consider – at least as a thought experiment – the possibility that generativity is not simply a personal need or value. Rather, the notion somehow taps into the very secret of the cosmos. By engaging in truly generative acts – by weaving generativity scripts into my personal narrative – I am somehow participating in the cosmic act of creation that began with the Big Bang. Insofar as I am authentically generative, I experience myself as “in tune” with nature. The psychological and the cosmological have become one.

I am not yet able to sufficiently corroborate the observations made in the previous paragraph. Again, it is just a thought experiment. But let us toy with the possibility that the notion of “generativity” brings us closer to “**the absolute**” (Pepper, 1942, p. 301) than does any alternative scheme.

This meditation confronts us with a new question: What are the conditions of possibility for a generative mode of being-in-the-world? For starters, it appears that some sort of “communion” appears to be involved. According to John Kotre (1984):

- *“**Communion** represents the participation of the individual in a mutual, interpersonal reality or in some large organism. It is represented by the precept ‘die and become’”*
- *When communion achieves fulfilment in generativity, “life-interest is transferred to the generative object. The object is loved for itself, and the worst thing imaginable is its death”*

Kotre (1984) observes that the generative project can be perverted in various ways. Of special concern to Kotre is the possibility that *agency* might emerge as the dominant theme in a personal narrative:

- *“**Agency** represents the self-asserting, self-protecting, self-expanding existence of the individual. It is represented by the precept ‘survive and kill’”*
- *When agency hijacks the generative project, “life interest is retained in me. Generative objects may be narcissistically possessed, cannibalized, or erected as monuments to the self. The worst thing imaginable is one’s own death”*

We can appreciate Kotre's point about the dangers of agency without communion. Still, we might recognize a place for *a certain sort* of agency in authentic generativity. Dan McAdams recognizes that an "inner desire" to lead a generative life ideally involves a *synthesis* of agency ("symbolic immortality") and communion ("the need to be needed"). In fact, communion without agency may be as destructive to the generative project as is agency without communion. My friend says: "It really bothers me that the world is going to hell in a handbasket, but what can I really do about it?"

Perhaps generativity is most appropriately considered as *an ideal synthesis of agency and communion*. If we follow this lead, we would be obliged to further explore the meaning of the terms "agency" and "communion" and document how various fragments of meaning achieve their fulfilment in the notion of generativity. Erik Erikson highlights a constellation of psychosocial virtues that would appear function as just such *fragments of meaning*:

- **Hope** [which I might consider as a "communion" fragment]
- **Will** [an "agency" fragment]
- **Purpose** [where the accent seems to be on "agency", but I can recognize "communion" themes here as well]
- **Competence** [pure "agency"]
- **Fidelity** to a way of life – to an "identity" ["agency" again]
- **Love** [pure "communion"]

This is no mere *collection* of virtues (like those we encounter in the positive psychology literature). Rather, each of these psychosocial virtues are *integral to the functioning whole*.

What we have here is a sketch of a very primitive form of **organicism**, a synthetic world hypothesis concerned with the dynamics of integration.

The **root metaphor** of organicism is, of course, **the organism** – though we might substitute the term **integration**. Pepper observes, however, that “as with contextualism...no ordinary common-sense term offers a safe reference to the root metaphor of the theory”:

- “The common term ‘organism’ is too much loaded with biological connotations, too static and cellular, and ‘integration’ is only a little better. Yet, there are no preferable terms. With a warning, we shall accordingly adopt these” (p. 280).

A side note: We might wonder about the value of root metaphor theory if Pepper simply *gives up* on the root metaphor at the start (or declares it *barely adequate*). I think the issue here is that the basic metaphors that guide thinking find themselves evolving much as rough danda are transformed into refined danda. For example, in mechanism, the root metaphor is the “machine”. But, a wristwatch that works well as an image for *discrete* mechanism is less adequate for a more refined *consolidated* mechanism (where Pepper suggests the image of a “dynamo”).

It should be clear that if we employ the term “organism” as a root metaphor, we are not using this image to generate specific theories. [As noted in previous episodes, a root metaphor is not a parochial metaphor]. Rather, the metaphor inspires a style of thinking that eventually achieves such a degree of refinement that the connection between the original metaphor and the world theory is quite obscure (at least from the vantage point of “common sense”).

Categories of Organicism:

- **1) Fragments:** “whatever is not integrated” (p. 290)
 - “An isolated datum is a fragment. It becomes precise and significant only when it is brought into a coherent system and connected with other data” (p. 290).

- **2) Nexuses:** The *internal drive* of fragments “toward the integrations which complete them” (p. 291).
 - Agency does not want to remain mere agency! It seeks its fulfillment in a generative mode of being-in-the-world.
- **3) Contradictions:** “The nexus of a fragment leads it inevitably into conflict and contradiction with other fragments” (p. 292).
 - The nexus of agency is in tension with the nexus of communion.
 - More concretely: Suppose I have achieved a stable identity – “fidelity” to a certain manner of being. Is there a danger that this hard-won sense of self will be threatened by the authentic experience of intimacy?
- **4) Organic Whole:** The “intergration of conflicting fragments” (p. 298)
 - **The principle of organicity** – Two formulations:
 - A) “An organic whole is such a system that every element within it implies every other”
 - B) “It is such a system that an alteration or removal of any element would alter every other element or even destroy the whole system” (p. 300).
 - E.g., An authentic sense of identity, far from being threatened by genuine communion, actually makes such communion possible:
 - Erikson: “It is only after a reasonable sense of identity has been established that real intimacy with others can be possible. The youth who is not sure of his or her identity shies away from interpersonal intimacy, and can become, as an adult, isolated or lacking in spontaneity, warmth or the real exchange of fellowship in relationship to others; but the surer the person becomes of their self, the more intimacy is sought in the form of friendship, leadership, love and inspiration.”

- **5) Implicitness:** “Fragments are implicit in the whole in which they are integrated” (p. 304).
 - “Fragments were details in this whole all the time and...their apparent fragmentariness was an error and illusion” (p. 304).
- **6) Transcendence:** Contradictions “are transcended in the integrated whole” (p. 305).
 - The tension between agency and communion is transcended in the organic whole dubbed generativity.

My generativity scenario is misleading in the following respect: I *began* with “the absolute” and worked backwards. There is certainly something to be said for this procedure. Lawrence Kohlberg (who clearly has organismic proclivities) once described his theory as “the rational reconstruction of the ontogenesis of justice reasoning”.

Still, we may never be so fortunate as to have such easy access to the absolute. Science typically proceeds from the bottom up:

- Pepper (speaking as an organicist): “What are the facts of astronomy? Why, precisely the system of Einstein or Newton. There are, no doubt, errors in Einstein’s system, as there were in Newton’s. How will they be discovered and corrected? Just as physicists and astronomers corrected Newton’s system: by finding new data, tracing out the contradictions among data, finding the integrations of data which resolve these contradictions” (p. 301).
- “As we increase, perfect, and organize these data we get closer to the facts of the case. What, then, may we presume the facts of the case actually to be?” (p. 301)
- “It is the **all-inclusive, completely determinate system of mutually implicative or causally interdependent data**. At the limit, implication and causality would coalesce, for logical necessity would become identified with ultimate fact. This limit of cognition which is absolute fact is often called...**the absolute**” (p. 301).

We are now in a position to consider the final category of organicism:

- **7) Economy: “Nothing is lost in the absolute”**
 - What?!? How about all those lame ideas in the history of science (e.g., the theory that the world is supported by a giant turtle). Must these absurd fragments *also* be integrated into our all-inclusive, completely determinate system?
 - Pepper says (in effect): Yes, we need to integrate even the lame ideas. And if we haven’t been able to do this, we haven’t yet arrived at the absolute.
 - Let’s consider Newton’s system. It appears that he left out many observations made by other important thinkers; e.g.,
 - “Anaximenes’ leaves and disks and mountains”
 - “Aristotle’s crystalline material”
 - “Ptolemy’s epicycles and eccentrics” (p. 306)
 - The above observations contradict Newton’s system. How might an organismic thinker deal with this?
 - The observations above “were not actually implied by the astronomical data. They are what we familiarly call ‘psychological interpretations’”
 - “A psychological interpretation is, of course, also a fact. **But the proper place for a psychological interpretation is not in an astronomical system**”
 - “In a **psychological system**, however, it is very relevant. That is where most facts belong which were dropped out in the progress of astronomy.”
 - **“Psychology also has its history of successive integrations pointing, just as astronomy does, to the ultimate integration of the absolute” (p. 306).**
 - Eventually, the psychological system will be **integrated** with the physico-astronomical system.
 - “Just how, we cannot say at the present stage of integration of psychological data” (p. 307).

A Coherence Theory of Truth

- Truth is a function of the extent to which an observation or judgment *coheres* with the absolute.
 - “Each level of integration resolves the contradictions of the levels below and so removes the errors that were most serious there” (p. 310)
 - “Each level brings about an improvement of judgment” (p. 310).
 - “Each level exhibits more truth through the higher integration of the facts” (p. 310).
- Pepper takes care to distinguish organismic *coherence* from mere *consistency*. There are many internally consistent “systems.” However, “it is not formal consistency but material coherence that the organicist sets up as truth” (p. 310).
 - If this seems odd, it is probably because we haven’t yet grasped the absolute. Agency and communion are never “consistent” in any meaningful sense. But, in mature generativity, they can be said to “cohere”.

Postrational Eclecticism

Thus ends our brief tour of Stephen Pepper’s *World Hypotheses*.

Pepper observes that “the history of cognition, or, more narrowly, the history of philosophy, presents to us hundreds of world hypotheses” (p. 326). However, we can simplify matters if we organize these hypotheses into “families” (my term), each with its own theory of truth:

- Mysticism: Immediate certainty
- Animism: Infallible authority
- Formism: Correspondence theory
- Mechanism: Nominalism or causal-adjustment theory
- Contextualism: Pragmatism (e.g. verified hypothesis theory)
- Organicism: Coherence

How deep is the tension among these world hypotheses? While Pepper does not see grounds for a rational synthesis at present, he does offer the following hopeful observation:

- “We know a good deal about the world. We have four rather highly adequate theories about it [formism, mechanism, contextualism, and organicism]. But we have no single judgment to give as yet. Nevertheless, **as we trace the history of cognition over the last twenty-five hundred years we get a definite sense that from different angles our theories are closing in upon the world**” (p. 331).
- “The division of the four relatively adequate theories into analytic and synthetic, and each of these division into dispersive and integrative, would be puzzling in its symmetry if it did not suggest the same conclusion” (pp. 331-332)
- “Moreover, multiplicative corroboration is pressing up from below as these four modes of structural corroboration are pressing in from the sides. These various modes of corroboration are, from a certain distance, seen all to be cooperating in a single enterprise” (p. 332).
- **“Paradoxically, our very insistence on the autonomy of these modes of corroboration renders their mutual cooperation clearer and more effective than it would otherwise be, for thus they cease to neutralize each other or to get in each other’s way”** (p. 332).
 - *Let contextualists be contextualists. Formists, go home!*

So what are we to do? Pepper suggests: **“rational clarity in theory and reasonably eclecticism in practice”** (p. 330).

- “If a world theory partly developed in one set of categories is broken in upon by a foreign set of categories, the structure of corroboration is broken up and we cannot clearly see how the evidence lies. For intellectual clarity, therefore, we want our world theories pure and not eclectic” (p. 330)
- “But for practical application we must be mindful of the judgments of all such rationally justifiable theories. Here each of the four highly adequate theories stands on a par” (p. 330).
- “Our **postrational eclecticism** consists simply in holding these four theories in suspended judgment as constituting the sum of our knowledge on the subject” (p. 342).

NARRATOR: “We have no theory of truth to supersede or legislate over the four most adequate ones” (Pepper, 1942, p. 347). **Or do we?**