

# WISDOM TRADITIONS, NATURE AND INHERENT HUMAN VALUES

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*“To see the world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower,  
to hold infinity in the palm of your hand and eternity in an hour.”*  
(William Blake, Auguries of Innocence)

## บทคัดย่อ

ศาสนายุคแรกเริ่มนั้นเรียกกันว่า “ธรรมประเพณีปริชาญาณ” ซึ่งเป็นช่วงก่อนที่มนุษย์จะรู้ดีรู้ชั่ว ภาวะเบื้องต้นที่มนุษย์กลมกลืนกับธรรมชาตินี้ต้องเผชิญกับการแทรกแซงของศาสนาในยุคใหม่ อันมีผลทำให้ความสัมพันธ์ของมนุษย์และธรรมชาติเปลี่ยนไปในวิถีทางที่มนุษย์ครอบงำธรรมชาติ วิทยาศาสตร์และปรัชญาต่างก็ยึดถือแนวทางของตนในการที่จะศึกษาภววิทยาของการดำรงอยู่โดยมีศูนย์กลางอยู่ที่การรับรู้ของมนุษย์และมักจะละเลยการบูรณาการกับธรรมชาติ บทความนี้พยายามมองย้อนกลับไป “ธรรมประเพณีปริชาญาณ” เพื่อแสดงให้เห็นว่า “ธรรมประเพณีปริชาญาณ” มีส่วนทำให้มนุษย์มีบูรณาการที่ล้าลึกกับธรรมชาติได้อย่างไร ซึ่งจำเป็นต่อความเจริญงอกงามของมนุษย์ บทความนี้จะแสดงให้เห็นว่า ญาณหยั่งเห็นเหล่านี้จะสังเคราะห์กับวิทยาศาสตร์ ปรัชญาและศาสนาสมัยใหม่ได้อย่างไร

## Abstract

Early religions have often been called “wisdom traditions” and represent a stage of human existence that was prior to knowledge of good and evil. This initial harmonious state in nature was disrupted by more modern religions, resulting in a more dominating relationship with nature. Science and philosophy has further pursued their own investigations into the ontological nature of existence, centered on human perception and often ignoring our

integration with nature. This paper attempts to look back to the earlier “wisdom traditions” to show how they can contribute to a deeper integration with nature which is essential to human flourishing. It will show how these insights can be synthesized with the insights from modern science, philosophy and religion.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Western and Eastern wisdom traditions assert that humanity was ordained, by the primordial forces shaping existence, to be well-integrated within the environment. Western religious traditions describe this as a stage prior to the knowledge of good and evil, thus prior to judgments based on preconceptions (suggesting that human cognition was a factor in the initial period of existence). Science and philosophy investigated the validity of such claims by pursuing empirical (rational) evidence concerning the nature of existence and how perception influences the human understanding of the nature of existence. The resulting evidence led scholars to conclude that perception is the basis of how we experience the phenomenal world. By understanding the role of perception in shaping the human experience of the phenomenal world we gain insight into how to sustain a focus on nature’s beneficial opportunities and avoid what is harmful to human well-being. As a result of such an inquiry we can better understand how to reduce the nature-human dualistic split.

The world’s wisdom traditions assert that it is possible for humans to enjoy the feeling of being well-integrated with the environment and they prescribed how to maintain a perceptual focus on what is essential for human flourishing. Such a perspective has long been prescribed by the world’s wisdom traditions as the key to human flourishing. The world’s wisdom traditions have asserted that this is a preferable perspective from which to view and experience existence. They also state that the subsequent alteration of this preferable perspective is unfortunate and should be rectified. By synthesizing insights from ancient wisdom, modern science, philosophy and religion we gain a better understanding of how humanity could enjoy a better-integrated experience with the environment.

Humanity’s understanding of the nature of existence is primarily based on perception. Humanity has held a perspective on existence where nature

and human culture exist in dichotomy. But this perspective of nature has not always been the view through which humanity perceived and experienced the environment and is not the only view through which the nature-human relationship is based. It is possible and preferable to have a perspective that allows taking advantage of nature's signaled opportunities for flourishing while diminishing what would threaten human well-being. Being able to take advantage of this improved nature-human relationship is a matter of understanding how perception shapes the human perspective on ontology, thus shaping the human experience of existence.

The first segment of this article describes why the human biological system has an inherent value preference for perceiving existence in a way that provides better nature-human compatibility. I offer a biological explanation to support the claim that humanity's natural drive to be well-integrated within the environment is characteristic of how humanity's biological nature is constituted. The second section of the article describes the possibility of enhancing the perception of the nature-human relationship. The enhanced perspective on the nature-human relationship (a perceptual focus on nature's life enhancing opportunities) would contribute to human flourishing and aids humanity in enjoying more of what we value.

The final section describes the significance that our natural value preference for cooperative interaction has for human culture, the progression of civilization and for improving the nature-culture relationship. A flourishing culture is built on increasing the range of internal and external beneficial interchanges. The world's wisdom traditions have continued to proclaim that the highest level of being can be actualized when humanity holds such a perspective on existence and when this perspective shapes the practices of individuals. Such a perspective takes us beyond a sense of dualistic contention into improved connections with the things we need to flourish. This is followed by a conclusion summarizing the arguments made in the article. The conclusion reemphasizes ontology and teleology (the natural preference for beings that are well-integrated with as many other aspects of existence as possible).

## **HUMANITY'S INHERENT VALUE PREFERENCE**

Aristotle believed that all things (especially all organic things) exist

with the ontological necessity of maintaining integrity without which they will begin to deteriorate (this includes both individuals and societies). Aristotle's naturalism prompted him to claim that knowledge is intended to increase our understanding of the teleological significance of natural processes plus to enhance our participation in natural processes.<sup>1</sup> On the basis of this claim one could argue that realizing one's full potential (*entelechy*) for happiness, flourishing and well-being is based on understanding the teleological significance of human interactions (intersubjective and with nature).

Because concern for the self is tied to a concern for having beneficial interactions with the environment—the only source of nourishment and growth—good (or that which benefits humanity) would be that which enables humanity to achieve its *telos*. Bad (or that which harms) are those things which interfere with humans achieving *telos* or that which diminishes the quality of those things on which the human biological organism is dependent for existence. In other words intentionality is evident as a feature of nature's *telos*. However, the value nature's *telos* has for enriching human existence is dependent on humanity learning to shape encounters into beneficial and life enhancing outcomes.

Thus experiencing eudaimonia requires developing a character trait that as human beings (given the human biological and neurobiological nature) is needed to flourish—to do and fare well in this world in which we inevitably find ourselves—not just in the particular culture or society we happen to find ourselves in.<sup>2</sup> In this respect the understanding of ethics needs to be expanded to include a particular new trait that would specify the importance interactions have to achieving human *telos*. Humanity's *telos* is preordained by the primordial biological forces that shaped patterns of natural interchange into complex structures of beneficial exchange (the very basis of life for the human organism and for human society is the ability to form structures of cooperative interchange). The fact that human behavior is directed at (or is about) veridical interaction with the natural order means that the ontological reason for human interactions is the natural human predisposition for seeking appropriate reintegration with the natural order. The elements of humanity's biological nature demand nature-human reciprocal integration.

The world's earliest wisdom traditions all spoke about humanity's initial, naturally ordained inclination for being well-integrated within the environment. The belief was that humanity's initial immersion in nature was character-

istic of the way humanity's biological nature is constituted. Thus, the earliest conceptualization of the nature-human experience reflected a prescription for experiencing *at-one-ment* with the natural order. We are demanded by the urges of human nature to interact with the environment. The necessity of human interaction affirms that the nature of the human experience is enhanced when properly integrated with other elements in existence.<sup>3</sup> In support of this claim the world wisdom traditions (Eastern and Western) have asserted that it is possible to have a well-integrated connection with nature (that is not only a source of nourishment and growth but also the basis of a heightened sense of well-being and harmony).

Recent research in cognitive science sheds light on the connection between humanity's inherent biological impulses and perception thus on the significance of perception in the human experience of nature. Studies in perceptual psychology and neurobiology reveal that the human inherent perceptual preference for viewing and experiencing nature-human interactions is complementarity.<sup>4</sup> The theory of complementarity is rooted in Gestalt theories of perception and was originally used to explain the *figure-background* dynamics involved in human perception.

That is to say, in accordance with Vygotsky's social formation of the mind, that cognition serves the attempt to shape internal and external stimulus into complementarity".<sup>5</sup> Cognition prefers to achieve a complementary interaction between the perceiver and the perceived. Modern research in complementarity, conducted by physicists, biologists, psychologists and sociologists agree that it explains the link between the biological aspects of human behavior, how individuals self-organize, the structuring of culture and the human relationship to the environment.<sup>6</sup> In other words "The whole body (including the human cognitive abilities) is a biological self-organizing system that interacts with the environment in a way that shapes out of environmental possibilities a unique eco-niche that best complements its organism.

Nobel Prize-winning neuroscientist Gerald Edelman implies that complementarity explains the fundamental connection between nature's biological principles and the value preferences naturally triggered as human cognitive skills developed. The human neurological system (an extension of the human biological system) prompts a neurological value preference that reinforces behavior that promises an undisturbed enjoyment of nature's beneficial opportunities.<sup>7</sup> The struggle for survival in an unpredictable environment pre-

disposes neural value preference. The preference is in favor of values, proven by natural selection, that contribute to shaping fortuitous encounters into an experience of life sustaining outcomes. He claims that humans are “hard wired”, with a neurobiological, value predisposition that developed with the intent to “reinvent” internal-external ecological equilibrium.

Many of the world’s wisdom traditions have always asserted that achieving the natural value preference for life-enhancing interactions with nature sparks regeneration, benefits health, increases human vitality and heightens mental abilities. Eastern and Western science would add that the complexity of the human organism is a composite of natural elements in cooperative interchange. These natural elements-reorganized into the form of a complex structure-still require reintegration with the environment (sparked by the biological nature of the organism) in the form of beneficial interchange with the environment. “This is because our complex structures are generated by conjunctive unions which depends on effectively integrating with others”.<sup>8</sup> Both myth and science agree that the human inherent value preference has been shaped into conceptions of what will satisfy natural biological drives. What has been ordained by existence was shaped into the earliest and most cherished cultural concepts of humanity.

## **ENHANCING THE PERCEPTION OF THE NATURE-HUMAN RELATIONSHIP**

The drive for complementarity or for continuous reintegration-evident in the biological make-up of both nature and humans-can be thought of as *the tie that binds* all of existence into integral relatedness. Science, philosophy and religion all agree that the integrity of complex organisms is enhanced by fulfilling the inherent urge for better nature-human compatibility and in the human situation helps the individual to experience a fuller sense of self. Cooperative interchange can be thought of as a natural biological value preference that establishes the inclination for social cooperation and culture. This natural value preference has been expressed by the world’s wisdom traditions as the conviction that harmonious interaction is consistent with what was ontologically ordained to be best for human well-being and for the human experience in nature.

Eastern and Western perennial philosophy claim that viewing and experiencing existence from the perspective of humanity's inherent value preference is personally beneficial, mentally beneficial (heightens cognitive abilities), and is socially beneficial. Such a realization is more likely to result in the experience of elevated being. Perennial philosophy has claimed that the fundamental biological principles of creation have encoded the organic elements of nature with intention that can be decoded by humans into an understanding of the teleological significance of existence. From the perspective of the most respected wisdom traditions of both the East and the West the teleological significance of existence is realizing how to enjoy the sense of *elevated being*.

As human cognitive skills developed reliable knowledge was shaped by the human neural network *firing* in patterns aligned with the neural value preference. The value preference favored relating to things in nature in ways that shape environmental interactions into outcomes that are beneficial for individuals and cultures. Such knowledge was key to human survival and the effort to organize flourishing cultures. In other words the thriving of humanity and culture was dependent on realizing that in spite of nature's threats culture could produce accumulated knowledge of how to recognize nature's signaled opportunities for growth and how to effectively manage the disturbances that would threaten the flourishing of the culture. Many of the world's wisdom traditions have asserted that achieving the natural value preference for life-enhancing interactions with nature sparks regeneration, benefits health, increases human vitality and increases the feeling of Holistic well-being.

Knowledge is considered reliable if it helps the individual to maintain organic integrity while interacting successfully with other aspects of the environment that are needed for flourishing. As a result of such cooperative interaction the fullest sense of self is actualized. It is such knowledge that is a preferable basis for the cultural belief systems regulating human interactions. The emergence of culture is indeed based on the recognition that structures of cooperative interactions work best for helping humanity face environmental challenges. Charles Sanders Peirce asserted that knowledge of what extends units of cooperative interactions thus increasing life enhancement is discerned by accurately appraising the true nature of environmental signs.

Peirce claimed that patterns of natural interchange are evidence of biological elements intentionally participating in efforts to cooperatively form structures of beneficial exchange (the very basis of life for the human organism

and for human society is the ability to form structures of cooperative interchange). Flourishing depends on being able to recognize and participate in these opportunities for cooperative interchange. Peirce would add that the recognition of ambiguity in nature is not due to environmental conditions alone as perception is contingent on the perspective of the experiencer. Peirce argues that reliable knowledge reduces the disturbance of nature's ambiguity by increasing the probability of anticipation becoming experience.

Peirce claimed that nature primarily acts on the basis of repeated patterns. These repeated patterns (that we call the laws of nature) he referred to as *The Principle of Agape*. Peirce goes on to explain that there are always some spontaneous, unexpected disruptions that are characteristic of this dynamic creative force.<sup>9</sup> Because of such possible disruptions humans sensed that the opportunities in the environment were surrounded by possible interferences to the effort to gain satisfaction. This resulted in humans developing acute sensitivity to the ambiguity in the nature-human relationship.

Peirce realized that nature is filled with opportunities for nourishment, growth and regeneration. Nature is also abundant with encounters best avoided. This can result in the impression that the dreadful aspects of the environment are juxtaposed to the individual, intentionality and culture. Peirce however thought that attempts to avoid the distressing disturbances in nature are more successful as a result of accurately appraising nature's signals, by acting on the basis of accurate knowledge and by extending the range of cooperative interchange.

Peirce believed that individuals act on the basis of knowledge that is believed to be reliable for effectively managing encounters with the environment. Knowledge proven effective for managing these encounters is considered to be epistemologically reliable knowledge. Peirce considered knowledge as reliable when it accurately describes how to enjoy nature's life enhancing possibilities. According to Peirce nature is abundant with signs that can be interpreted to understand how to enrich the human experience. Thus he held that reliable knowledge guides the individual to perceive possibilities that nature provides for being internally and externally well-integrated.

## THE HUMAN INHERENT VALUE PREFERENCE FOR INTEGRAL BEING

The world's wisdom traditions claim that the fundamental biological principles of creation have encoded within each and every human cell an intention that can be decoded by humans as an inherent value preference for extending the range of beneficial interchanges and interactions. From the perspective of the world's wisdom traditions nature has ontologically structured the human organism so that it has a natural value preference for experiencing more beneficial interactions (intersubjectively, socially, and with the environment). I argue that all complex organisms sense this encoded ontological intention as a natural urge to be even better integrated and to experience enhanced cooperative interactions. In this respect prudence demands considering that the world's wisdom traditions are right to admonish reconciling this breach between humans and nature in order to enjoy a more elevated human experience.

The world's traditional belief systems lay the foundation for the experience of integrity by promoting being in harmony with the primordial forces of existence as the means of being in harmony with the self. They prescribe integrity as a means of aligning human values and human actions with what has been intended by the natural forces of existence. The elements of one's own physical make-up demand interaction with other elements in existence. We are aware that doing this successfully brings benefit. Wisdom traditions advocate acts of integrity in order to promote the beneficial reintegration of elements necessary for growth and regeneration. This is the key to the experience of health and wholeness. We know that ineffectiveness in this regard can bring threat or harm. The threat is maximized to the extent that humanity fails in an attempt to be properly integrated with the other elements in the environment.

The nature of phenomenal existence—a composite of the elements of nature constantly in interchange in the effort to experience reintegration—makes evident the fact that the world is not made up of atomistic entities juxtaposed to each other. In other words, in accordance with Aristotelian teleology, as biological organisms human survival, growth, nourishment and well-being are dependent on shaping necessary interactions into harmonious interchange. Because of the fact of interdependence the purpose, goal or function of hu-

man activity is enhancing interactions. Thus, to improve the quality of human existence we must learn to view the parts in such a way that we perceive them as *Holistically* integrated, thus the particular quality of the total increases in life-enhancing value.<sup>10</sup> Such a perspective on the nature of existence takes us beyond a sense of dualistic contention into improved relationships. It takes us beyond a subject-object split into cooperative union.

Humanity's value preference accounts for what John Searle (philosopher of mind) calls the cooperative and coordinated character of collective intentionality. Searle adds that this value preference is rooted in the biological structure of the human organism thus stems from the ontological nature of "how the world in fact is". In other words collective intentionality and cooperative behavior are displays of natural functions. "For the individual there is a value in survival and reproduction, and for a culture there is a value in continuity. But natural function takes place only within a set of prior assignments of value (including purposes, teleology, and other functions)".<sup>11</sup>

It is in this respect that neuropsychologists assert that there is an inherent drive for growth and increased complexity imprinted into organic organisms by nature's underlying biological principles. One way to appreciate what this entails is to survey a few representative types of organism-environment couplings, starting with single-cell organisms and moving up by degrees to more complex animals. "In every case we can observe the same adaptive process of interactive coordination between a specific organism and recurring characteristics of its environment".<sup>12</sup> Thus it can be argued that it is an inherent human neurological (cognitive) urge that prompted shaping human cooperative interactions into culture.

Humanity has learned that culture, as an extended network of complex cooperative structures, supports thriving in spite of the challenges the culture is confronted with. Humanity's fundamental cognitive experience began with a learned response to environmental stimulus. These cognitive abilities have been a special capacity that has played an important role in formulating our response to the challenge of unpredictable encounters. This ability, if not a special gift of nature, certainly was developed to help us have a better experience with nature as well as with each other.

John Dewey believed that a cultural worldview represents an accumulation of knowledge of how to manage interactions in ways that promote the flourishing of the culture. Human culture was spurred on by the realization

that beneficial interaction is not only basic to maintaining individual integrity it is essential for the integrity of all structured units. This means that the worldview of a flourishing culture must be based on expanding its scope of internal and external cooperative interactions. In other words, to promote a thriving culture neural value preferences must be shaped into conceptual understandings of how to extend the range of cooperative interactions.

Dewey understood that there is a certain contingency that human culture faces in relationship to nature that creates precarious nature-culture interactions. Dewey claimed that the ability to survive in the natural system depends upon an ability to foresee possible dangerous consequences. The ability to enjoy that system depends upon the perceptual ability to foresee nature's opportunities for satisfaction and fulfillment.<sup>13</sup> Dewey recognized that because humans, like all animals, adapt to the environment in ways that effect the environment; "Any disequilibrium of an organism in its environment, encompasses both organism and environment".<sup>14</sup>

## CONCLUSION

One of the old maxims that motivated much of our behavior toward nature (and other aspects in existence) was "only the strong survive!" The strong would flourish and the weak would diminish. This led many people to presume that the weak would be dominated by the strong. I believe that we are now beginning to conceive of the possibility of acting on the basis of a new maxim: Existence prefers those who create the least disturbance to other elements in existence as possible. Existence prefers those who are well-integrated with as many other aspects of the environment as possible. The preference of the forces of existence is to restrict or eliminate beings based on the extent to which they damage other aspects of existence. We are all aware of the fact that existence can and certainly has at times eliminated those beings not appropriately integrated with the environment.

Recent research in neurobiology affirms that humanity has been *hard wired* by a natural biological principle urging harmonious, cooperative interactions as a selective value preference. We have come to value the nature of harmonious interchange because our sense of self, as we prefer to be, is dependent on increased cooperative interactions. As admonished by the world's

wisdom traditions by adhering to the human value preference we can achieve a desired state. The advantages of achieving this desired state prompts religion, philosophy and science to promote cooperative interactions. In other words, there is a human value preference “For achieving unity as a self, to have a unique center and to find common ground and relation or unity with others. In other words, human beings strive for unique individuality or fulfillment of capacities with a unique angle of vision and, at the same time, to improve the quality of their associations and to establish new common ground in friendship and communication”.<sup>15</sup>

Writers in such diverse fields as social psychology, neurobiology, philosophy and religion have all found that the endeavor to enhance the human experience is contingent on addressing the existential and ontological conditions of humanity. In other words, scholars concerned about the social psychological condition of humanity also demonstrate a concern about the ontological nature of *Being*. This has prompted many scholars – in their effort to help humanity experience greater well-being – to address human nature and the value preferences that motivate human behavior. Results from the body of research on the underlying motivation behind human behavior has led social scientists to claim that humanity has basic needs for relatedness and also has the need to feel well-integrated within particular social and environmental contexts. Society, according to this social psychological view, has the responsibility of structuring itself to satisfy the human need for experiencing well-being in terms of being well-integrated.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Falcon, Andrea. (2005) *Aristotle and the Science of Nature: Unity Without Uniformity*. Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 16.

<sup>2</sup>Hursthouse, Rosalind. (2002) *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory: Essays in Honour of Philippa Foot*. (Hursthouse, Rosalind. Lawrence, Gavin. & Quinn, Warren. Edts). Oxford, Oxford University Press, 68.

<sup>3</sup>Dewey, John. (1922) *Nature and Conduct*. New York, Henry Hold and Company, 10.

<sup>4</sup>Gibson, James J. (1986) *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 127.

<sup>5</sup>Portugali, Juval. (1996) *The construction of Cognitive Maps*. Netherlands, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 39-40.

<sup>6</sup>Berntson, Gary. & Cacioppo, John. (2008) A Contemporary Perspective on Multilevel Analyses and Social Neuroscience. *Interdisciplinary Research*, 36-37.

<sup>7</sup>Edelman, Gerald. (1992) *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire: On the Matter of the Mind*. N.Y.: Basic Books, 102.

<sup>8</sup>Dewey, John. (1929) *Experience and Nature*. London, George Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 15.

<sup>9</sup>Peirce, Charles S. (1893) Evolutionary Love. *The Monist*, vol. 3, 6:303.

<sup>10</sup>Peirce, Charles, S. (1974) Ethical and Esthetical Goodness. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (edited by Hartshorne and Weiss). Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 84.

<sup>11</sup>Searle, John. (1995) *The Construction of Social Reality*. New York, The Free Press, 6 & 15.

<sup>12</sup>Johnson, Mark. & Rohrer, Tim. (2007) We are Live Creatures: Embodiment, American Pragmatism, and the Cognitive Organism. *Body, Language and Mind*, Volume 1: *Embodiment*. (Ziemke, Tom. Zlatev, Jordan. & Frank, Roslyn. Eds.). New York, Mouton de Gruyter Publishers, 24.

<sup>13</sup>Scheckler, Rebecca Klein. (2000) *Weaving Feminism, Pragmatism, and Distance Education*. Doctoral Dissertation in Philosophy. Published by the Education Dept. of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 35.

<sup>14</sup>Dewey, John. (1929) *Experience and Nature*. London, George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 253.

<sup>15</sup>Ziniewicz, Gordon, L. (2006) *Essays on the Philosophy of John Dewey. Adventures in Philosophy*, 4.

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