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THE HIGHEST STATE OF BEING AND KNOWING

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Abstract

This paper identifies what are considered the most influential individuals in human history: Socrates, Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad, and then identifies a more recent individual of similar historicity and qualities--Baha'u'llah. Each of their individual conceptions of the highest state of being and knowing is briefly presented and then commonalities of their conceptualizations discussed. Each proposes a state that might be described as selflessness and detachment from the world. The present-day conceptions of human development by Piaget, Maslow, Kohlberg and Wilber are presented and compared to the highest state of being and knowing proposed by the great individuals earlier in the paper.

THE HIGHEST STATE OF BEING AND KNOWING

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Some years ago in a graduate research course I was taking, I had an experience that had a great effect upon me. The professor emeritus teaching the course did something that both shocked and embarrassed me: he started class with a prayer. I was shocked that a professor would do such a thing and embarrassed for him because he was obviously out of touch with modern-day university life.

In 1986, while attending the American Educational Research Association (AERA) annual meeting in San Francisco, I had a similar experience. I attended a session in which the paper, *Emptiness: A Transcultural Goal of Wholistic Education* (Waks, 1986) was presented. I was surprised to hear such a paper at AERA and I was embarrassed for the presenter, as he obviously seemed out of touch with what was going on in the rest of the sessions, but like my research professor, did not seem to know it or be concerned about it.

After each of these experiences I pondered over why I felt the way I did, because I actually believed in what they were doing and saying. Each of these experiences led me to further explore myself, my convictions and my way of doing things. This paper is one of the results of that exploration.

In the paper, *Emptiness: A Transcultural Goal of Wholistic Education* (Waks, 1986) it was proposed that emptiness is a common idea to the teachings of Socrates, Christ and Buddha, and as such represented a common experience that could serve as a transcultural goal of wholistic education.

This paper identifies what are considered the most influential individuals in human history: Socrates, Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad, and then identifies a more recent individual of similar historicity and qualities--Baha'u'llah. These people are called paradigmatic individuals. Each of their individual conceptions of the highest state of being and knowing is briefly presented and then the commonalities of their conceptualizations discussed. Each proposes a state that might be described as selflessness and detachment from the world. The present-day conceptions of human development by Piaget, Maslow, Kohlberg and Wilber are presented and compared to the highest state of being and knowing proposed by the paradigmatic individuals.

Paradigmatic Individuals

In his first volume of works entitled *The Great Philosophers*, Karl Jaspers (1957/1962), "one of the most seminal minds in the philosophy of the twentieth century" (Schilpp, 1957, p xi), identifies what he feels are the most influential people in the history of the world. From all the people who have ever lived, he believes that four stand out from all of the others in the effect their lives have had on the course of human thought and history. He calls these four "paradigmatic individuals". A paradigm is a pattern or example and these four paradigmatic individuals serve as examples or paradigms to humanity. Their teachings are models that have had the

greatest influence on the history of man. They are Socrates, Buddha, Confucius and Jesus. Jaspers says this about them:

The four paradigmatic individuals have exerted a historical influence of incomparable scope and depth. Other men of great stature may have been equally important for smaller groups. But when it comes to broad, enduring influence over many hundreds of years, they are so far above all others that they must be singled out if we are to form a clear view of the world's history. (p. 13)

These men set norms by their attitudes, actions, experience of being, and their imperatives. In delving to the heart of their own problems, subsequent philosophers have looked to these thinkers. Each in his sphere, they have all exerted an enormous influence on later philosophy. (pp. 99-100)

Jaspers feels that only one other person could be compared to these four individuals based on his historical influence. That person is Muhammad. The impact and quality of Muhammad's life, evidenced by the effects he has had on present-day thought and civilization, qualifies him to be regarded as one of the greatest individuals of history. As such, he will be considered along with Jaspers' paradigmatic individuals.

Baha'u'llah, who lived during the last century, has not yet had the possibility to have the historical influence of any of the above individuals, but based upon his life and teachings, he could be considered the paradigmatic individual of current times. For this reason, he will also be considered along with the other paradigmatic individuals.

These individuals represent the greatest philosophical and religious ideologies of both the East and the West. They all suffered as a result of their ideas, and two were put to death because of their teachings. Each proposed that the highest state of being and knowing is the overcoming of self and worldly attachments and limitations. Socrates called this state ignorance, Buddha emptiness, Confucius virtue, Jesus faith, Muhammad submission and Baha'u'llah poverty.

For centuries these great individuals of both the East and West have called us to this higher reality. Below we will briefly explore each of these individual's conceptions of the highest state of being and knowing.

Socratic Ignorance

Socrates lived twenty-four centuries ago in the Greek city of Athens. He was not a prophet, nor did he make such a claim, but he felt he had a divine mission to question unrelentingly in search for knowledge of the true and good.

In his dialogues with his fellow Athenians, Socrates forced them to re-examine knowledge that they took for granted. Socrates believed one must be aware of his own ignorance before he can learn something new. In the *Meno* (Plato, 1892), Socrates shows how insight grows from perplexity and the state of recognizing one's own ignorance, as he questions a slave on a mathematical question.

Socrates himself claimed to be ignorant. In the *Apology* (Plato, 1947), Socrates explained how he set out to find someone wiser than he, because he was perplexed by the oracle of Delphi's statement that he was the wisest person. In his dialectical encounters with the supposedly wise men of his day--the politicians, the poets and the artisans, he found them not wise at all, but blinded by their own false knowledge. Because of their pride, fear, and attachment to their own knowledge, they put barriers between themselves and truth. Because Socrates was aware of and acknowledged his ignorance, he was wiser than the others. He said:

And I am called wise, for my hearers always imagine that I myself possess the wisdom which I find wanting in others: but the truth is, O men of Athens, that God only is wise; and by his answer he intends to show that the wisdom of men is worth little or nothing; he is not speaking of Socrates, he is only using my name by way of illustration, as if he said, He, O men, is the wisest, who, like Socrates knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing. (Plato, 1947, p. 190)

In the *Republic* (Plato, 1960), Socrates expresses this same idea in the allegory of the cave. Chained so that all they could ever see was shadows of images on the cave wall, the inhabitants of the cave believed these shadows to be reality. Socrates then describes what the ascent from the cave would be like and compares that ascent with the process of moving from illusion to reality. As one ascends from the cave, he must give up his former limited knowledge for a more accurate and complete view of the world until he is brought into the full light. It is only when the inhabitants of the cave recognize their own erroneous view of reality that they can learn the fuller, more real truth.

Socrates felt that one must use more than reason in coming to knowledge. He tells of a voice that spoke to him and gave him guidance which he would obey without understanding. Throughout his life this voice had spoken to him to guide him where his reason could not. For Socrates, self-knowledge is the knowledge of God, and man can only approach the divine through leaving behind earthly passions and acknowledging his own ignorance. These themes are recounted several times in the writings of Socrates' thoughts (Guthrie, 1969).

Socrates influence has endured throughout the centuries and can be found in many of great works of the West.

Buddhist Emptiness

Gautama the Buddha, or the enlightened one, lived near the Himalayas about 500 B.C. Buddha was raised in wealth and luxury, but left this behind in his search for truth. He practiced ascetic self-denial, but later adopted the middle way between self-mortification and worldly ambition as the path of salvation. Buddhism has probably had more adherents than any other religion or philosophy in history.

Koller (1985) describes the central ideas of Buddhism this way:

The main philosophical implications of the ethical-religious teachings of Buddhism are contained in the doctrines of no-self (*anatta*) and impermanence (*anicca*). Both of these doctrines in turn are underwritten by the principle of dependent origination (*paticca samuppada*), according to which everything that exists is constantly changing and depends on everything else. The chief difference between the doctrines of *anatta* and *anicca* is that the former refers to the non-substantiality of the self, whereas the latter refers to the non-substantiality of things in the world. (p. 155)

Buddha's Four Noble Truths summarize his teachings: life involves suffering, the cause of suffering is desire, elimination of desire leads to a cessation of suffering, and the elimination of desire is the result of following the Noble Eightfold Path. This Path consists of right mode of seeing things, right thought, right speech, right action, right way of living, right effort, right mindedness and right meditation (Gard, 1961).

In other words, suffering is caused by not understanding reality and by a pre-occupation with worldly and selfish desires. If we can rise above our ignorant cravings and our selfish desires, we can find oneness, happiness and peace.

The final stage in the Noble Eightfold Path, right meditation, has been characterized as emptying oneself so that our sensual cravings and vain imaginings can be squarely faced and dealt with. Only when we have reached this state of right meditation or emptiness of self and limited worldly learnings can we achieve nirvana. Nirvana is also called *sunyata* or emptiness. This condition is far beyond the relaxation or meditative states achieved through simple physical and mental techniques. It leads to a state of awakening or enlightenment.

D. T. Suzuki, recognized as the foremost interpreter of Zen Buddhism in the West, states:

According to Buddhist scholars, this phenomenal world is an "aggregate" existence made up of conditions, and not a self-existing reality (Atman). When the mind is said to have attained "dissolution", it means that the mind has entered into a state of "absolute emptiness" (*sunyata*), that it is completely free from all conditionalities, that is "Transcendence". In other words, the mind gains its ultimate reality, being now above birth and death, self and not-self, good and evil. (1972, p. 42)

Scott (1890), in comparing Buddhism to Christianity, says:

In both religions, taken at their highest, the goal of aspiration was not extinction of sorrow, but extinction of self-love: in Buddhism the quenching of *trishna*, or *upadana*, "thirst", in Christianity the quenching of *ἐπιθυμία*, "lust", "inordinate desire." In both religions the goal meant a finality, a state in which there was an end of death; and in both, moreover, it meant a change which no language could define, and to which no standard could apply. (p. 215)

Not only did Buddha teach these concepts, but his life was a realization of them. His system of knowledge did not rely on sense perception, logical operations or empirical proofs, but on the transformations of consciousness and the stages of meditation. It requires a new way of thinking for the modern western mind. Buddha's concepts of emptiness--freedom from self and the world--results in a tolerance for others that allows the veils of ignorance and illusion to be removed.

Confucian Virtue

Confucius lived about 2500 years ago in China. He believed that righteousness, propriety and filial piety were fundamental virtues of humanity. Confucius did not consider himself a prophet, a religious leader, or even a sage, the highest of the four types of men in his philosophy. He is considered by many to be the first person to devote his life to teaching. He was interested in improving the human condition in this world and formulated many principles upon which science is based. His statement "when you do not know a thing, to allow that you do not know it. This is knowledge." (Confucius, 1963, p. 43), might be considered one of the first formulations of scientific thinking.

For Confucius, the most perfect man or the superior man (*chun-tzu*) was the man of *jen*. *Jen* makes human beings uniquely human and is the ultimate principle of human action. The Confucian Way (*Tao*) is essentially the way of *jen*. *Jen* has been translated many ways, i.e. virtue, humanity, benevolence, love, human-goodness and human-kindness. *Jen* can be expressed in terms of conscientiousness (*chung*) and altruism (*shu*), as in Confucius' statement "Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you" (Koller, 1985, p. 266). This is the "one thread" (*i-kuan*), the golden rule or golden mean of Confucian teachings (Chan, 1963).

Confucius taught that we should be aware of our own limits. From *The Analects*, the most reliable source of Confucius' teachings, the point that Confucius "had no arbitrariness of opinion, no dogmatism, no obstinacy, and no egotism" is brought out (Chan, 1963, p. 35). He did not think he had complete knowledge, nor did he think that such knowledge was possible. He felt one of the errors of men was their failure to see their own faults and ignorance. On questions about metaphysics, Confucius was unwilling to give answers that limited ultimate reality. He thought it was impossible to speak objectively about things that were not objects (Jaspers, 1962).

Confucianism has been a dominant force in China for over two thousand years and can be said to have truly molded Chinese civilization and philosophy (Chan, 1963).

Christian Faith

Jesus, the Christ, lived two thousand years ago in the middle east. Christianity was born from his life and teachings and has played a major role in the development of modern civilization.

Christ taught that this physical world is nothing when compared to the spiritual world. Jesus exemplified his teachings by sacrificing worldly desires for his spiritual

mission. The path to salvation involved resisting the temptations of this limited world and advancing toward the kingdom of heaven. He spoke much of love. Love free of self and the world is the ultimate condition.

Jesus stressed belief and faith over reason and tradition. One's abilities are only limited by one's belief and faith. This faith leads to heaven and a freeing of worldly cares. It implies a trust and contentment with the will of God. Jaspers says this about Christian faith:

The end of the message is: Believe in the good tidings. Have faith (*pistis*). Faith is indispensable for admission to the kingdom of heaven. It is the prerequisite of salvation and is itself salvation... Faith is a word for the Biblical relation to God. It means absolute trust in the will of God. "Thy will be done" is an expression of this trust. Faith is certainty, concerning God, concerning man's bond to Him, concerning God's love which is the foundation of prayer. Faith is the salt that seasons man's whole being. But it cannot be taken for granted, induced by design. It does not understand itself. (1957/1962a, pp. 69, 70-71)

Christ taught that knowledge was achieved through faith and that this faith could not be completely understood. He spoke of people hearing and seeing, yet not understanding. He praised the poor and lowly because they were receptive to the truth. The learned and wealthy rejected his teachings because they were blinded by their own knowledge and attachments.

Jesus taught the importance of poverty. This poverty included material poverty, but was concerned more with a spiritual reality. He spoke of how hard it was for a wealthy person to enter heaven and extolled the station of the poor and meek. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:3, 5). The poor and meek have nothing and therefore can be filled with the new truth and reality as expressed by Paul in II Corinthians 6:10: "As poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things." In the same sense, Jesus said "Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:4).

Christ was himself an example of all he taught. Even though he lived in the world, he was detached and above the world. Ego and worldly desires were eliminated from his heart and mind and the limited knowledge and the conditions of his environment could not restrict him. He was the essence of faith and poverty.

Islamic Submission

Muhammad was born about 570 A.D. in Arabia and is the founder of Islam. Islam means submission to the will of God and this is the central tenet of Muhammad's teachings. Submission to the will of God requires detachment from our own will and limited knowledge. God transcends all things, and only by submitting our knowledge and will to His can we discover truth and freedom. Muslims, ones who submit, are to

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be God-centered and to believe everything comes from God and returns to God (Brandon, 1970).

The most well-known of the Muslim mystics are the Sufis. Farid Ud-Din Attar, one of the greatest of the Sufi poets, wrote about the stages of the journey of the soul in the *Mantiqu'l-Tayr* or *The Conference of the Birds* (1971). These stages are spoken of as valleys that the birds must traverse in the quest of their king. The first is the valley of search or quest, where tests are encountered and desires renounced. The valley of love follows in which the seeker is consumed by his longing for the beloved. In the valley of knowledge one receives direct intuitive truth and in the valley of detachment the traveller is freed from passions and dependence. The fifth valley, called the valley of unification, is characterized by seeing things that seemed different as one. In the valley of bewilderment or astonishment, one sees knowledge in the new light of love. The final valley is called annihilation or death and represents the highest state of understanding, truth, and reality and the highest level of Islamic submission to the will of God.

Muhammad revolutionized life in Arabia and the East and has had tremendous influence on western thought and civilization. He brought new ways of thinking and behaving and was instrumental in eliminating many of the harmful ideas and practices current during that time.

Baha'i Poverty

Baha'u'llah lived during the nineteenth century in Persia. The central idea of his teachings is unity. This includes unity of God, religion and humankind.

In the *Seven Valleys* Baha'u'llah's describes the highest state of being and knowing.

This station is the dying from self and the living in God, the being poor in self and rich in the Desired One. Poverty as here referred to signifieth being poor in the things of the created world, rich in the things of God's world. (p. 36)

Elsewhere, Baha'u'llah gives both the ultimate purpose of humanity and the necessary attitude for achieving that purpose.

I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee. I testify, at this moment, to my powerlessness and to Thy might, to my poverty and to Thy wealth. (Baha'u'llah, Bab, & Abdu'l-Baha, 1978, p.117)

The essence of understanding is to testify to one's poverty, and submit to the will of the Lord, the Sovereign, the Gracious, the All-Powerful.... The essence of all that We have revealed for thee is Justice, is for man to free himself from idle fancies and imitation, discern with the eye of oneness His glorious handiwork, and look into all things with a searching eye. (Baha'u'llah & Abdu'l-Baha, 1971, pp. 141, 142)

Abdu'l-Baha, in presenting the Baha'i view of the two natures in man, describes the condition of being a saint

Saints are men who have freed themselves from the world of matter and who have overcome sin. They live in the world but are not of it, their thoughts being continually in the world of the spirit. (Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha, 1970, p. 264)

The Baha'i view of the highest state of being and knowing could be describe as the being poor or rid of egotism and worldly attachments.

Baha'u'llah has not yet had the historical influence of any of the other individuals considered thus far, but the quality of his life and teachings make him a likely candidate for being considered the paradigmatic individual of our time.

Paradigmatic Conceptualizations

Each of the paradigmatic individual's conceptualization of the highest state of being and knowing refers to a condition of being free of self and worldly attachments. The greatest philosophical and religious leaders of all time, Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus and Muhammad, have one and all taught that the state of selflessness and detachment is the highest level of knowledge and reality. Baha'u'llah also taught this same truth.

Even though each expressed the ultimate state of learning and development differently, the theme was the same. We must rid ourselves of self and worldly attachments, this must be regarded as the goal of a complete education. Socratic ignorance, Buddhist right meditation and emptiness, Confucian virtue and awareness of limits, Christian faith and poverty, Islamic submission and annihilation and Baha'i poverty and nothingness are all expressions of the same truth. This truth has been echoed in different forms by the many scholars and philosophers who have illumined our thoughts throughout history.

Each of these individuals required and caused a transformation in the awareness of mankind. Socrates called for a transformation in thinking; Buddha for meditative living, Confucius for education beyond mere learning, Jesus for devotion to God that rules out worldly attachments, Muhammad for submission to God's will and Baha'u'llah for complete selflessness. They all went beyond mere knowledge to transform the souls of man. All acknowledged their own limitations and lived a life that exemplified their teachings. They serve as lights to guide us. Each of them taught with great humility, and, as a result, their teachings had a great effect.

The knowledge of each of these great men was discounted by the learned of their times. Those in authority and the supposed leaders of thought preferred to cling to their own erroneous ideas, and were thus cut off from the higher knowledge offered by these great men. Through a blind acceptance of the knowledge of their day and the traditions of the past, the people were held back from the truth. This unthinking belief caused the people to reject the truth brought by Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, Muhammad and Baha'u'llah and to rise up against them.

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Their conceptions go beyond our limited conceptions of education to include the ultimate purpose and reality of man. Most education of today can be characterized as material education--that which relates primarily to the self and the world. The education spoken of by Baha'u'llah and the prophets and philosophers of old, transcends this narrow view of man and requires an awareness of the limitations of our worldly knowledge.

Present-day Conceptions

How does the conception of the highest state of being and knowing by these great individuals compare to present-day conceptions? We can begin to answer this question by looking at the leading theories of human development. We can then compare their conceptualizations of human development to each other and to the state of selflessness and detachment called for by the paradigmatic individuals above. There are several development models of human existence. Among the most influential are those of Piaget, Kohlberg and Maslow. A recent model that goes beyond these theorists' conceptualizations has been proposed by Wilber (1983). Figure 1 compares these models to each other.

Wilber	Maslow	Kohlberg	Piaget
Causal			
Subtle	Self-transcendence		
Psychic	Self-actualization	Universal ethical	
Rational	Self-esteem	Social contract	Formal operational
Mythic	Belongingness	Conventional	Concrete operational
Magical	Safety needs	Instrumental	Pre-operational
Archaic	Physiological	Punishment	Sensori-motor

Figure 1 Comparison of present-day development models.

Note. Adapted from CURRICULUM: Perspectives and Practices (p. 130) by John P. Miller and Wayne Seller. Copyright c 1985 by Longman Inc.

These models give the hierarchical stages of human development according to their own orientations. Only Maslow and Wilber include stages that could be considered analogous to the state of selflessness and detachment talked about by the paradigmatic individuals.

The lowest level of each of these conceptualizations of human development focuses on the physical needs and reality of humankind. At the next level, the individual begins to think instead of just reacting to physical needs. At the third level persons can think concretely and are oriented toward conformity. The fourth level is characterized by formal, rational thinking and is the highest stage in Piaget's cognitive model.

The psychic level involves higher order synthesizing ability and is representative of Kohlberg's highest state of moral development.

The subtle or self-transcendence level approaches the type of thinking that characterized the paradigmatic individuals: that of intuition and spiritual insight. Maslow describe this stage in his hierarchy of needs as:

the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than as means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species to nature and to the cosmos. (1971, p. 279)

The highest level of development within these four models is conceptualized by Wilber (1983) as transcending personal identity and becoming one with all. He makes a distinction between the subtle saints and the causal sages.

The Mosaic revelation on Mt. Sinai has all the standard features of a subtle level apprehension: a numinous Other that is Light, Fire, Insight, and Sound (shabd). Nowhere, however, does Moses claim to be one with or identical with that Being... Christ, on the other hand, does claim that "I and the Father are one," a perfect Atmic or causal level apprehension. (pp. 31-32)

It can be seen that these conceptualization of human development are comparable to the conceptualization of the paradigmatic individuals, and actually provide the hierarchical stages to the highest state of being and knowing.

Conclusion

The concept of detachment from self and the world as the ultimate human state has been proposed by the paradigmatic individuals and is supported some of present-day conceptualizations of human development. As such, it is a unifying concept for the peoples of the world and a unifying goal for education. Selflessness and detachment are the ultimate goals for education: the highest states of being and knowing

The form of education should match the level of the learner's development. As a consequence, there is not much use for models of education at the level of the highest

state of being and knowing, as formal education at this level is not practical. It is obvious that a child at the lowest level of development would have difficulty benefitting from an educational program designed for the higher levels. Just as what is right morally differs from stage to stage, so is what is right educationally.

These conceptualizations of reality put forth by the paradigmatic individuals and the spiritual and intellectual leaders in both the East and West are the guiding lights of wholistic education.

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