

## Groups as Organisms: Psychology of the Noosphere — Part Two

**DSW:** Well, let me come in and introduce the concept of religion and spirituality, which of course brings Teilhard back in. And also people like Durkheim and so on, is that if you look at the fundamental nature of religion and spirituality is to regard something as sacred, something that you place above you and wish to become part of something larger than yourself.

And so there's a state of mind it's reinforced by all sorts of practices, ritual practices, and so on and so forth, which Durkheim wrote about so eloquently and Teilhard cultivated that sense with his language. So we could really see that from a scientific perspective more than ever before. Studying the concept of the sacred, what it means to worship. All of that as this basically state of mind in which we're really functioning as members of a group so much so that we really see ourselves as part of something larger than our ourselves.

And so that aspect that you talk about, Garry, seems to come really to the fore and leads to a euphoria. And the self doesn't go away. And it can't go away because you have to know the role that you're going to play. And so you and others within the community are all still there, but it's all organized by that sense of the sacred. And so actually, if you could respond to that, and then I want to come in again with a therapeutic piece from my article with Jim.

### 1:50

**GS:** Yeah. So let's take that example of Wegner's theory of transactive memory and mesh it with the way I think about things and what you said. So this idea of transactive memory is a powerful idea that Wegner resurrected. The idea that if I remember X, and you remember Y, and somebody else remembers Z, and if we all know where all these memories reside, we can then collaborate and have a much greater store of memory, perhaps as now represented by the Internet in some ways.

But the question is, how is it that we have access to said memories, right? How is it that we know who knows what? Because there are certain memories, even in the transactive memory system that you can not outsource, you can not subdivide. You can not subdivide, for example, the knowledge of English across agents, if English is your spoken language in the group. It's an obvious thing, right?

### 2:56

We all need to understand the meaning of the words that we use. We all need to know who's responsible for what, we all need to know what is the label of the thing that means a certain store of knowledge. We need to know what an engineer does. We need to know what a medical doctor does. That sort of knowledge of labels and locations cannot be transactional. It has to be common.

And the question is, how do we create this common store of information? Because it's critical, it's critical to the operation of the transactive system. And so the argument being that *collective* agency, having experiences, having emotions, watching behaviors from the standpoint of a we. Which is a self, by the way. It's not an individual self, but it is a collective self. And it feels just as personal, even if it in our imagination transcends the physical body. It's still a psychological construction that feels deeply personal and perspectival. It just happens to be collective.

So the argument is that that collective self, that representation of a collective self is highly potent when it's enacted in terms of the memory it forms, the emotions and so on. And I should say, because I think some people who are listening to this will think, well, this sounds very much like social identity theory.

And I would argue that unfortunately, social identity theory and social categorization, which is at the forefront of how social psychologists think of human sociality, is not quite there in a very specific and fundamental way.

#### **4:56**

Social categorization, social identity as the way it's conceived by Turner and Tajfel in the 1970s and 60s comes out of the cognitive tradition, a cognitive tradition that deals with categories, if you will, categories of perception.

And the same way we categorize stools from chairs is the same way we categorize ourselves from others, this group versus that group. What I'm saying is that that really falls short of human cognition and what it actually does. Because human cognition is not simply categorization. It's also the representation of the agent themselves in respect to the categories, in relation to the categories. And we forgot about the agent. We forgot about the importance of representing that agent.

It's being rediscovered with the renewed interest in consciousness and what does it mean to be conscious, in a roundabout way here, but we have left that alone for too long. And I don't know, maybe I think what Jim said is true, that measurement issues do plague inquiries like this. I also think we can never measure something without first elaborating and theoretically pinning it down. So it's a bit of a catch-22 of where you start.

#### **6:32**

**DSW:** Well, I think Jim I will soon pass to you, but I think that one of the things I'm getting from this conversation as I wanted to, is how much this stuff that we associate with the Internet actually goes back to the very beginning in terms of this distributed knowledge and so on and so forth. And when you talked about the store of common knowledge that's required before we can partition knowledge, we have to have a store of common knowledge. What would that be but language and the capacity for symbolic thought is exactly that combination of something which we all have in common otherwise we can't communicate. And then that allows us to specialize in division of cognitive labor and all of that.

And some of the most recent accounts of the evolution of language places it as a cultural evolutionary process. Not the genetic evolution of some language organ. But actually smart apes needing to communicate with each other more and inventing something like the Internet back then, without needing electronics. So I think that for me, there's amazing continuity between what we think of now as the Noosphere at some large scale all the way back to the origin of human consciousness as a kind of a micro-noosphere. So I think there's wonderful continuity there that this conversation is bringing out. Jim, take your turn.

#### **7:58**

**JC:** Well, just riffing on that a little bit, I often tell my students that we were each other's original iPhones. The reason that their iPhones seem so indispensable to them is that they have all the machinery in place required to use it. And that machinery is their phylogenetic birthright. That's the design specification of their organism, is to use iPhones, more or less.

It's just that they used to look like us, like other people. I was going to say one of the things that's interesting, there's two things that came up in some of what Garriy was talking about that I thought were really interesting. And one of the things that I'm not as sure about. One issue is where does the self go?

Where does the self go when we are part of that collective? That religious organization, for example. And if you consult old Buddhist theories, so where you have whole sects literally doing violence to each other over this question. Does our self dissolve or does our self expand and grow?

I think it does both. When we are we, part of the reason that we become ecstatic is because we realize access to the resources that are so much larger than our own body. It's existential to be part of that group. It's existential in all the ways we want it to be, my existence is more certain now.

And then there's the idea of the transactive memory knowing who knows what? I think it's easy... And Dan wrote about this a little bit. I think it's easy to overstate that. I think that we actually don't always know who knows what, but we still settle into an efficient distribution of who knows what. And this is why when we lose someone close to us, we lose part of our biography. They carried part of our biography.

There are things we will never remember about our own life again now that they are gone, because they carried part of that. Some part of it was more salient to them as we went through it together than it was for me. And so my own biography is partly at stake when you lose a relationship.

### **10:58**

But finally, I want to come around to the discussion of God and religion, because one way to think of religion is that it's something really unique that we do.

That rituals and artifacts and belief in a larger God, is something qualitatively different than just being a person in a group of people. And I think maybe that it's not. I think it's a way that we have expanded and leveraged our innate capacities in much the same way that we use iPhones. Dan Wegner just comes up again and again; genius is another thing. Another phrase that he, that he coined that I think is really important here.

He said that humans are hyperactive agency detectors. We're hyperactive agency detectors. We see agency and intent in everything. This is why we yell at our computers when the camera doesn't work, for example. This is why we cry and feel pain when we sell our beloved car. The car doesn't care about us at all, but we can't help but assume that we have a relationship with that car because that's what we do.

So we have the capacity for magic right out of the gate. It's just part of what humans are. But then we have this other situation. We are root and branch agency detectors, mind readers. We read each other's minds. We take each other's perspectives. We have that third person we, that Garry spoke so well about. When Tomasello's examples, when my bike got stolen and we're walking down the street and I'm telling you about how my bike got stolen, and then we stop and I point at a bicycle, I don't even say anything. I just point at a bicycle. And we know all there is to know about that bicycle all of a sudden, together. There is this *we*. We're constantly in this mind space where it's my mind, your mind, our mind, the group mind. And then we die.

What do we do with that? The mind hasn't gone away. We have all this machinery for understanding minds, but we don't have any machinery for understanding non-existence, non-mind. And so we have household religion, we have pictures and artifacts. This is my grandfather's old mug and therefore my grandfather is here. This is possibly another Wegnerian thing about magical transfer, my grandfather is here.

And so religion, I think, codifies all of these things that are part of our ordinary human existence. We can't not feel the presence of our dead loved one any more than we can't... I don't know, we have to imagine that, we have to feel that presence. We can't not feel that presence. It's just like we have to eat. It's how we're constructed.

### **15:01**

**DSW:** Often the way I put it is that what's universal is a meaning system all humans, all normal humans, must have a meaning system or cultural meaning system. There's great diversity in how those meaning systems are constructed. All of them are essential for organizing our experience, ultimately leading to action. Not all of them have to honor our ancestors and so on.

It's possible that uncle Fred dies and I just forget about him, but something else is taking place in my meaning system, which is keeping things going and is by being transgenerational by definition has to be

something which is beyond the individual because the individuals come and go. And so that's the essence of what it means for us to be a symbolic species and for there to be this symbolic stream of inheritance that is alongside the genetic stream of inheritance, that's what's universal.

And then sometimes it takes the form of gods and so on. Sometimes it's purely atheistic. It's such a diversity of them. It's like convergent cultural evolution. It's hard to know what they share in common other than the functional requisites of being a meaning system.

### **16:23**

But I want to end up on a practical note and also more on this issue of scale, because one of the things that's I think highlighted by this conversation is that when we talk about the Noosphere it's not just expanding something to the global scale.

It's something that needs to operate and to be maintained at all scales from the micro-scale of the small groups that we live in or should be living in. And now often those are sadly lacking, or lack the right kind of organization, to the meso-scale of all of our social identities, our ethnicities, our nationalities, and so on and so forth.

And then finally up to the global scale, which obviously it needs to be brought into existence more than it currently is. This concept of the Noosphere needs to exist, basically, it needs to be multilevel. And this is where multilevel selection comes in. And at the smallest scale, it leads to new ideas about therapy and training.

### **17:38**

And I just wanted to introduce to our audience what we do at Prosocial World when we work with groups and we implement what we call the core design principles.

And I won't go into it too much, but you'll see the connections right away, as the first thing we try to establish for the group, which is trying to do something together is establish a strong sense of identity and purpose, in a very practical way. What are our values what are we trying to do? Why is it valuable? What does that mean? So on and so forth. I think that you can see that this is enhancing that group part of what we're thinking about. And of course, we also exist as individuals within the group. And on the topic of where the individual goes. It's the nature of human society, that it is forever vulnerable to exploitation from within.

And so individuals always have to be vigilant about being pushed around and the group has to be organized so that doesn't happen. And that's one reason why the self remains a strong identity while also being a collective identity.

### **18:54**

And the very last conversation I had in this series was with an Australian aborigine named Tyson Yunkaporta, who's written a book called "Sand Talk, How Indigenous Wisdom can Save the World".

And in that book, he recounts various aboriginal folk tales and folk ways. And one of the things he said is what you hear every day in aborigine society is in the first place, nobody's the boss of me. So there's your assertion of individuality. And at the same time, it's always done in the greatest respect and deference to the cultural traditions, to the elders, to the rituals and so on. So there's a very strong individual element. Nobody's the boss of me, and there's a very strong communal element.

They go together and must, if you were to remove that individual element, that's the way up to totalitarianism and various excesses, the kinds of superorganisms that we don't want. So, there's all of that.

So I think what I would ask and as our final round is to ask you to comment on the largest scale, how do we expand the Noosphere to the global scale and the multilevel part, the need to do at all scales? Anything that you have to say about that would be really super helpful. Garriy, why don't you go first and then Jim?

#### **20:34**

**GS:** Yeah, I've only given limited thought to this kind of question. So I might fumble in my response. But first I would like to say that when the mind represents perspective, not only the object of its perception, but also its own perspective in relation to that perspective, there is something very mystical about that. And I think part of what's so mystical for me about that is that it realizes its individuality, and at the same time wants to connect. It wants to expunge it.

The next thing you want to do, if you see something is say, "Do you see it as well, right?" You want to get to a place where we see it. So there's some connection there between realization of personal perspective and the desire to then create a collective perspective on that very thing.

But people are uncomfortable once they realize that perspective maintaining its individuality and they want to expand it, they want to share it with their friends. They want to create larger groups and I don't know where the stopping point is. Maybe there is no stopping point, what could be part of this *we*, how broad can it go? And what is stopping it from expanding?

And I'd imagine it's our institutions, it's our technology. Although our technology in the last 50 years, and I should say for good or ill has expanded the frequency and the breadth of when we say something like, we see something, it encompasses maybe millions or billions now than before and more frequently. So yeah, I'm of two minds on it. My one thought is that it's of course a good if it can be done peacefully.

#### **22:52**

But there's also a dark side to the expansion of a collective perspective as it's represented by the individual and the dark side is doing so forcibly. And the way you do it forcibly is not so much convince people of viewing the world the way you do. But rather by not thinking of them as people, with perspective.

Disagreeing perspectives may not be perspectives at all. So it goes. So, there are definitely bad ways of creating greater, broader experiences of collective agency. As far as the good ways, it is sad to say, but social media and modern technology have been, from what I can tell, the biggest sea change in our lives in terms of this. And it's been used mostly for purposes that do not elevate, let's say, human engagement. And of course, it's because it's motivated by making money.

#### **24:14**

But I think there's potential in these kinds of technologies, if used for good to connect people across the globe in productive ways. Part of social media that's so pernicious is that it engages all our basic sociality—collective agency, perspective taking and so on—but it doesn't take it to its natural intended purpose, which is co-action and collaboration.

It stops before it starts, it stops the conversation. Because Facebook doesn't need us to produce things. It just needs our attention. It just needs us to be on there. But yeah, I'm sorry. I haven't given any clear answers about how I would do it.

**DSW:** I think that's a very eloquent and well-stated, so there was very important stuff that you said there. Jim.

### **25:17**

**JC:** Here we are in the modern culture of surveillance capitalism, where we are all marching in lockstep because the agent that is drawing our attention is collective outrage and provocation. That's one way to do it. That's not the way I would recommend necessarily. I mean, it's interesting I am thinking about something that David and I wrote about recently, which is this example of these Gulf Oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico, Gulf Oil, the company.

And how they wound up dealing with their very high accident and mortality rates on these rigs. The thing was initially what you had was an analysis of why guys were getting hurt so much and dying so much. And one of the things that was realized is that, well, because these rigs are so dangerous, they're hiring tough guys, tough guys who can handle it. Who can go out there and be tough.

Well, being tough is a way to be in the world and it's a way to be in a group. These are a group of men who identify as being super tough and super strong and super resilient. But how do you maintain that group identity? In part, by never showing weakness. When you show weakness, you threaten the group. So what was happening is that people weren't telling each other when they were messing up and their mistakes were snowballing and getting people killed.

### **27:20**

So how does this get changed? Well, one thing you could do is try to select other people. Maybe you could do that. Can you change the way that the group functions? It turns out that you can, partly by reinforcing. This gets back to how I think Skinner was right on the money in a lot of ways, reinforcing a different culture.

Okay. So what you do is you, and this is what was done. They started reinforcing vulnerability. In other words, the guys who reported mistakes would be rewarded in some way. They would start in some sense, making group cohesion contingent upon being strong enough, tough enough to let everybody know when you messed up.

And started to change what the reinforcing structure was for belonging to the group. Belonging to the group required now a different set of actions and behaviors and attitudes. And the guys took care of the changes by themselves because of the social contingencies in play. I'm being a little abstract here. There are many details to this study.

It's a classic and it's in our paper, but bottom line is that it reduced fatalities by a huge number, a number not seen in these kinds of interventions. And I think it was because the intervention was at the group level. It was not at the individual level. It wouldn't make sense. It wouldn't make sense to intervene at the individual level. Individuals weren't the problem, the group was the problem.

**DSW:** Yeah, that is a great example. Go ahead Garry.

### **29:38**

**GS:** One thing that this reminds me of is the difficulty of this kind of work because as we all know, the individual mind is a great pattern recognizing machine. So when it looks at groups, it looks for patterns of behavior. It looks for differences. And where can it find those differences? It can find it among the individuals within the group. Only when we zoom out and really look at the context, look at a variety of groups, a of variety of ways of doing things. A variety of nations, a variety of cultures can then you now see patterns among those things. But that requires a real zoom out and a holding of information that with a different scale to see those kinds of patterns.

Otherwise, you're just on the ground looking at different individuals and explaining things only through those individual differences, which are no doubt real and important, but it's really...understanding group dynamics requires understanding many groups to make sense of things.

### **30:45**

**JC:** Well, I would say in the context that those groups inhabit. I'm so excited to just tell David this because I haven't told him yet, but part of my new role at UVA is to try to change the culture of teaching and pedagogy here by creating a new curriculum and changing how we evaluate students. In some ways that some faculty regard is pretty radical. So I've been talking about this stuff for a long time, but I take David as a real inspiration.

David's been going, "Well, I can talk about this stuff all day long, but I want to try and do something about it." So he created Prosocial World and other kinds of interventions around the areas where he lives. Binghamton?

And I want to see if I can make some group level changes in an organization, feels particularly fun to choose UVA because it's so tradition heavy. It seems like there's a lot of inertia there, but I want to try and put my money where my mouth is and try to make some changes. And as a result of that, I've been looking into when has America, for example, when have Americans suddenly changed at the group level? And probably the canonical example that everybody would turn to is World War II. We suddenly have this common enemy or this common threat.

And we ask Americans the same Americans culturally, more or less who are refusing to vaccinate and who think that Trump won the last election. Asking Americans to turn out their lights at eight o'clock all over the country. Asking Americans to grow victory gardens and do all of these things, eat less meat, heavens how could that happen? And they did in huge numbers all over the country, people all different backgrounds, engaging in this collective behavior.

What I know is that the kind of scaling that you're talking about David is possible. I know you know this too, we all know this. That it's really going to require a careful analysis of how that scaling happens if we're going to make it happen in a way that isn't just surveillance capitalism via Facebook, because we know that that can work. That's all Skinner too.

### **33:43**

**GS:** I'd like to suggest something. I think we have an institution like that, that we are engaged in. I think science is that sort of institution where there's a pluralism, there's an openness, there's a collective narrative and collective attention. It requires quite a bit of education to engage in this kind of noosphere.

**JC:** Agreed upon symbolism.

**GS:** Yeah. But in a way we have it, it just hasn't been expanded. And I also think that some of our problems of today that I feel so sometimes despondent about when the half of the population rejects a lifesaving medicine, for example. Or this self fulfilling prophecy of democratic institutions failing, conspiracy theories. What it shows is that lots of the population has not been integrated into that collective narrative and they feel perhaps resentful of not being included, of being marginalized. So yeah, I don't know, that's my concrete proposition make a scientist out of everyone.

### **35:14**

**DSW:** Science indeed, that's a great way to end science does come as close to international cooperation as we'll get. Science and some aspects of technology such as the International Space Station and what you were describing earlier Garriy was really nothing more than a process of cultural evolution. You said, we have to survey variation on a large scale. We have to see what works and doesn't work. We have to select it. And in cultural evolutionary terms, this means basically a managed process of cultural evolution at the larger scale, larger scales than ever before.

But also at all scales. So I think what we have in the updated version of Teilhard that we were talking about, and that this series is addressing in many different forms, through these amazing conversations, is a narrative and meaning system, you might say. A science-based meaning system. That really once you step into that, when that becomes your world, then you see yourself as first and foremost human beings and citizens of the world.

The welfare of the earth becomes your primary social identity, your god. And then everything underneath that remains important, but needs to be coordinated in order for the global common good. And I think that more people actually step into that worldview and have that reinforced, then so much that's currently going wrong for the reasons that we have listed and easy enough to understand can go right.

So, I have tremendous optimism at the end of the day. First, a paradigm shift in our meaning system, and then what follows from it in a science-based experimental way. And so I think that's the optimistic prognosis for the Noosphere. So gentlemen, what a wonderful conversation, so happy to have preserved it for all time. And thank you very much.

**JC:** Thank you.

**GS:** It's been a pleasure. Thank you, David and Jim.