

#### **Birth and Zoological Structure of the Noosphere: Segment 4**

**David Sloan Wilson:** 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.

**Garry Shteynberg:** 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?

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.

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.

**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.

**Jim Coan:** 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.