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Chapter

Presence and Self-Learning: An Evolutionary Hypothesis

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Abstract

This work aims to examine the idea of ‘presence’ as a form of quality of one’s being in the world by exploring some concepts that are connected to it, such as fullness, self-learning, time, well-being. We shall draw attention to certain pathways of thinking relating to how human subjects may live the experience more fully and with greater self-learning by referring to the psychoanalytical tradition, and to mindfulness and cognitive psychology, and the cognitive inputs which these disciplines supply, for instance, in studies on memory and learning. Whereas the majority of psychoanalytical tradition regards malaise (unwellness) as an anachronism, or as the hyper-presence of the past in its meeting with the present, the hypothesis of highlighting the presence to oneself as a form of opening and of fullness of the experience itself may lead to formulating theoretical bases, which we aim to discuss.

Keywords: presence, self-learning, mindfulness, psychoanalytical theory, time, fullness, well-being, happiness

1. Introduction

If we refer to the most accredited evolutionary theories on the human subject (for instance, Quaglia and Longobardi [1], but also Pelanda [2]) the idea that is developed, starting from a genetic endowment that expresses itself in an environment, through co-construction of experiences of being in the world that are sedimented in memories, seems to be shared by many.

Following Imbasciati and Cena [3] and Minolli et al. [4], one can trace the start of this process back to the intra-uterine period of the subject’s life, immediately after conception, and proceed until the subject’s death.

The evolution of the subject is a pathway that is always oriented by experience, and that is set within the genetic constraints as they are ‘realised’, in the etymological sense of ‘made real’, over time. In other words, more familiar perhaps in scientific language, we can say that the genotype is realised in the phenotype.

Experience brings together the unconscious and conscious levels of what the subject learns about his or her living, from living itself. From microbiological levels to cultural forms, everything constitutes a heritage that the individual subject makes his own and uses to orient himself, moment by moment in the progress of his life.

Therefore, when we speak of the subject we will be referring to this unitary, relational, formal configuration and place the concept of 'experience' itself on the same subjectual level.

It is well known (Bolk [5]) that the plasticity of this process is particularly high in human subjects (the so-called 'neoteny'), and this gives their relationality with the world, or more precisely their experience of it, a fundamental value, which is greater than in other species, as is commonly known.

Because of the need to articulate this flow so as to be able to study it, the academic world of psychology has divided the processes we are talking about into functions: memory, learning, thought, emotions, language, etc. It is the knowledge we have of these domains that will provide the ideas that lead to a detailed understanding of how the evolutionary process takes place. We will not go into these very complex domains, but we should acknowledge that they have provided many useful contributions, particularly in the recent decades, to our knowledge of the human subject. In particular, studies on memory and emotions (Damasio [6]) have helped us to understand what form experience takes in emotional-cognitive terms and what 'reservoirs' we use upstream to read what happens to us, including what we actively produce in the world.

Memory is so important that if we were to conduct a thought experiment simulating being in the world without memory to guide us, we would find ourselves in a state of enormous disorientation and undeniable distress, as shown by those people who, in connection with CNS diseases involving certain areas of the brain, find themselves in such a situation.

But we should also try to produce the opposite simulation, that is of someone who goes towards a new experience and completely saturates it in his or her memory.

We have probably had many possibilities of observing people approaching this condition, in an occasional or permanent manner, and we are undoubtedly familiar with it ourselves, to a greater or lesser extent.

This is a condition of non-listening and non-learning, or, to put it more exactly, of absolute prevalence of Piagetian assimilation over accommodation (Piaget [7]).

At the other extreme of this condition, we could say that there is no experience other than the inclusion of the new bit of information within an organisation that is untouched by it. +1 that does not modify what exists. A Batesonian 'zero' learning [8]—in reference to the well-known taxonomy of learning—is proposed by Gregory Bateson. Perhaps, in fact, we should add that it confirms the exactness of the perspective. And this leads us to an important aspect of our reasoning.

In fact, we know that when a child is about one and a half years old, he acquires the capacity to turn himself into the object and subject of experience, or what Minolli (*ibid.*) calls 'consciousness of consciousness'.

This capacity, which would appear to be specifically human, is what enables the constitution of identity, that is the representation of what a subject feels/thinks he or she is, the attribution to oneself of what one experiences.

The concept of identity, as expounded in this way (Tricoli [9]), offers a significant complexification to evolutionary theory because it allows each experience to be seen in relation to the consistency/inconsistency with the identity that the subject enacts at that moment.

Identity becomes a particularly important point of reference as a summit from which to evaluate experience, and it is its rigidity or permeability that makes the difference.

It is indeed possible that an experience that introduces a significant inconsistency into the subjective system will be welcomed as an opportunity or even as a threat.

The resulting emotion will, however, be consistent with the identity meaning that the experience assumes.

From this point of view, anguish signals a meaning of danger to the given identity, which is considered somehow inemendable or to be defended rather than enriched or revised.

An example makes what has been stated more evident. Seventeen-year-old Luca has experienced certain erotic images and thoughts of a homosexual nature, which contrast with his heterosexual identity. Luca strenuously opposes the appearance in his consciousness of these experiences, which he considers unacceptable. When he happens to experience them, he goes so far as to hit himself and thrash about on the floor of his house, screaming in the hope of chasing them away. Luca is the eldest son of a large family and feels that he represents an example for his siblings as well as the first realisation of the family myth holding together the two cultures his parents have each brought. Eleonora is the same age as Luca and she feels attracted by girls and, to a lesser extent, by boys aged thirteen to fourteen; she treats these feelings and emotions with curiosity and openness. She avoids rigidly defining herself according to sexual orientation and feels she is experiencing a condition of 'open' fluidity. This condition is quite common among her companions, and even at home it is treated as an understandable phase of her adolescence.

In our culture, the most common condition of a subject is to value the consistency of his/her identity. But living brings one's consciousness into potentially continuous contact with stimuli—which we can schematically consider as pertaining to the internal world (body and consciousness) or the external world—that introduce information which can gradually confirm or disconfirm one's identity, or which can be placed within a range of experiences.

Luca was first disturbed by the homosexual images he saw on a site, but perhaps the fact he found them was not accidental. What matters here, however, is that this experience, which produced a form of proto-excitement in him, was very distant from his identity, that is from his idea of himself. When Eleonora had an experience of erotic disturbance when sleeping with one of her classmates, she felt she could embrace this experience by redefining her identity as fluid.

My thesis is that the subject is in a continuous and multiple relationship with the world and, through consciousness of consciousness, with himself, and the quality of his presence in this flux constitutes the core of well-being/malaise and, more generally, the quality of his being in the world itself.

There is, of course, no objectively optimal or healthy approach to refer to, there is one's own approach that can evolve over time in different directions, and the task of psychological scientific knowledge is to understand what relationship exists between a certain structure of subjectual functioning and the lived experience, behaviour, etc.

2. Change, evolution, presence to oneself

How does change happen? A fine book by Ford and Lerner [10] illustrates in detail the complexity that this word can contain. If we think of the subject as a system and therefore as an entity in a relationship with its environment, unitarily constituted and internally articulated, with a singular trajectory that develops over time (Minolli, *ibidem*), we can imagine that a stimulus, as we have seen, may have encountered an emotional availability and reactivity in Luca, and that change will affect what he will do with this experience. Eleonora seems to be able to accept a less rigid identity

and allows herself be crossed, fertilised, taken by the experiences she is living at this moment of her life.

These two brief human events tell us, first of all, that change occurs in relation to the self and, more precisely, to how the subject experiences his world.

But it also tells us that the road of rejection and the battle against what is experienced are destined to make us a terrain of suffering that has as its advantage the conservative maintenance of an historically given identity which is today somewhat in crisis, which we are partly tempted to integrate but fear to do so.

Both psychoanalysis, in most of its many theoretical-clinical forms, and meditation, in particular the increasingly widespread form in the Western world called Mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn [11]), as well as other theories and methods of psychotherapeutic intervention and healing practices—though not all of them—seem to me to be moving in the direction of facilitating a presence to oneself, in other words an accepting and integrative contact with what is in each person's experience¹.

In fact, it is very different to think of a normality or ideality of self which we can follow or try to follow, rather than follow what is already there, that infinite well of experience which evolves in ourselves-in-relation and which we can only try to listen to and connect with.

In our perspective, the subject is not oriented by consistency but by consistency and inconsistency. Not only by order but by order/disorder (Morin [12], Manghi [13]), his identity, his idea of self, may be more or less anchored, attentive, to a consistency, perhaps to an order sometimes considered socially presentable.

A well-known experiment that of the 'ghost hand'² makes us realise how attached we are to the memory of the cognitive-affective representation we have of ourselves in spite of an experience that would urge us to accommodate this image.

But also, more commonly, the discrepancy between the perception of our image or the sound of our recorded voice can elicit surprise or even disappointment.

However, this should not induce us to think that the subject, and therefore not only his or her identity, is anchored to self-consistency. Quite the contrary. Just as so many irrational or apparently incomprehensible choices, or more commonly symptoms, show us, the subject continually produces discontinuous forms which may remain outside consciousness for long—think of many forms of illness³—and then emerge symptomatically or through egodistonic forms of experience such as symptoms or dreams or acts whose meaning we do not understand, at least not at first glance.

This way of functioning of the human subject, constantly producing forms, usually subliminally, inconsistent with identity, appears to be very functional in introducing complexity, and thus change, into the subjectual system, in other words producing stimuli which the subject is urged to deal with by virtue of the experiences of pain and/or discomfort or outright malaise, or more simply curiosity and

¹ In Buddhist Vipassana meditation, for example, the concept of Sati is considered the first of the seven factors of enlightenment.

² In short, this research focuses on people who have lost the use of a hand as a result of a trauma and continue to experience having that limb long after its amputation.

³ I am using the word disease here in a specifically biomedical sense, believing it inappropriate to use it in relation to the subject. The subject does not fall ill, he experiences forms of discomfort and malaise or fulfilment and joy or whatever, but the language to be used to describe these states is on a different level than the biological one, which is inevitably partial.

attraction—as Eleonora has shown us—that he or she experiences in relation to some of the outcomes of the discontinuities that emerge in consciousness-of-consciousness.

The theoretical representation that we are proposing, which develops the thinking of some of the authors cited through a partially new thesis, is consistent with the development that research and theory on dissociative experiences have produced in the recent years (e.g. Bromberg [14]), basically showing that the internal articulation of the subject may constitute a way of being that is not necessarily dysfunctional.

We would like to postulate the thesis that all forms of development of human subjects, both those that we experience more commonly and fluidly, and those that generate more discomfort or even malaise or the so-called psychotic forms, might follow this dynamic in which the subject's relationship with the world and with his or her self-consciousness produces partly discontinuous or inconsistent experiences that require an identity check with multiple outcomes.

In this approach, the concept of self-presence, which occupies a central place in much of Eastern thinking, as well as in the work of authors such as De Martino [15] or Minolli (*ibid.*) or Jervis [16], appears to be a key concept in order to understand even experiences such as those of happiness and well-being.

3. Happiness, fulfilment, presence

Happiness appears to us as a 'punctiform' experience, as a short-lived state of mind which I think should be distinguished from serenity or, in a different way, from satisfaction or pleasure, which often also forms part of it.

In relation to the perspective we have briefly outlined above, happiness seems to be connected with the experience of identity confirmation that we perceive. Confirmation which can concern any kind of event and whose intensity will be precisely connected, we believe, with the identity relevance of what we experience.

I observe that a whole world emphasises the relevance and value of happiness, partly for economic purposes by showing forms and products that would be useful in achieving it (the list of examples would be practically endless), totally aligned with the idea of finding—outside oneself—the objects that would provide happiness itself. Such a perspective is linked to the support and enhancement of the ideal of self, which, in our thesis, gains meaning if we connect it to the confirmation of our interpretative power of ourselves in the world. We certainly do not wish to view this perspective in a devaluing way but only to place it in a subjective meaning consistent with the proposed theoretical perspective. This is also 'that which is present' in our experience and we are fully aware of it. We might add that the experience of happiness certainly supports 'that' direction of one's living and as such appears to be invigorating and nourishing, useful to avoid living in a state of perpetual psychic labour. The concept of happiness thus appears to us to be interpretable as confirming and sustaining the identity with which the subject is aligned in the given moment of his existence, thereby constituting a support for it.

Presence to self also appears as a premise of fullness of the experience, and thus a form of being in the world that allows one to live in a more open, receptive, learning manner, not necessarily in relation to experiences confirming one's identity configuration but rather in relation to experiences that can be integrated, in a logic that is assimilative-accommodative, however, and not merely moved to the front of the line.

The discordant experience with one's own identity configuration, which the subject can nevertheless integrate, position, think about, digest, constitutes an

experience which might present anxiety or even discomfort, but leads to an extension of the presence of self and of the fullness with which we live our existence. Fullness involves living the moment, the time of existence in a way that is oriented towards the present self, as we shall see more clearly below.

In the reality of our lives, the ideal of self-presence is naturally more or less distant from our individual experience where, on the other hand, defensive forms of one's identity configuration are always concretely present. The experience of openness to what is in each person's individual experience is in fact potentially destabilising and not at all easy to pursue permanently, especially in our society. After all, Tibetan monks or anyone who devotes their existence to the contact with one's self, do so in contexts where the surrounding reality is much less pressing, much more rarefied, allowing more space for the fullness of the experience of self and the world in which the subject finds himself.

It could also be argued, not entirely wrongly in the writer's opinion, that individuals who have greater self-presence are less easily oriented as citizens, more capable of in-depth perspective and equilibrium, and this is not necessarily a condition everyone wishes to achieve.

4. Self-learning

Within the subject areas we mentioned earlier, learning constitutes one of the most relevant chapters. It is usually understood, however, as learning something that we did not previously know. At school and in the sphere of training, learning actually overlaps with the acquisition of contents, skills and competences.

On the other hand, it seems to me that the perspective we are examining leads us to think that it is our being in contact with experience that directs us to self-learning opportunities, or to a range of possibilities that go from the aforementioned assimilation of experience, where what we experience fits perfectly within the categories we possess and, if anything, constitutes yet another confirmation of their validity, and as such the value of ourselves as interpreters of the world, to encompass experiences that require greater or lesser adjustments of these categories, as well as an adjustment of ourselves since we are constituted by them, in order to hold in greater account ourselves and our world.

In order to do this, however, to develop a learning form of being in the world requires a willingness to focus on and relativise the categories we use to interpret our experience of it. What is needed is a centring, a contact with the self, that is not eliminative but questioning, enlarging, integrative, like a horizon towards which to strive.

Self-learning therefore does not, strictly speaking, need external objects and can instead gain nourishment from internal objects, from the experience of self as subject and object.

It should be pointed out that self-learning is a concept that can also be used in the relationship with external objects if one focuses on the internal variations of the subject in relation to the (external) object, also creating a dual learning: of oneself and of the object itself.

5. Being and time

The reference to Heidegger [17] is remote, nevertheless I believe it is necessary to spend a few words on the subject of time in the perspective we are examining here.

The saturation of experience that we have just outlined as one of the two extremes of the subject-world relationship appears, in fact, quite clearly to be a reading of the present as an actualization of the past, and thus as a non-full presence of self in the present time. In a certain sense, we might claim that the purpose of the anachronism described is precisely the attempt to avoid being touched by the experience of the present, and thus the tendency to live a sort of life in the trenches, in defence of what has been learnt as identity and made absolute. A seemingly titanic effort in a world of relationships, however, can have an obvious function of orientation in a world so devoid of absolute references and therefore requiring one to face experience 'bare-handed', on one's own.

I believe that psychological treatment when working with self-secluded boys or with anorexic girls can help us to understand how this position is anything but unreal for them as well as for a number of subjects today.

While the reasons for such a psychological position are therefore well understood, what we believe gives quality to existence consists instead of maintaining or even pursuing a contact with oneself as an experiential subject by holding a centre of gravity that enhances, allowing one to feel the present almost moment by moment.

Here, too, the experience of meditation helps us through the concept of the 'Beginner's Mind', the position of a subject who treats the new experience as not already saturated by the past, and therefore powerful and fruitful.

Consequently, it seems to me that the time that is given to us is lived more fully, allowing us to incorporate new things into our own history and experience, moment by moment, without the past saturating what is there.

After all, this perspective is the one that allows us not to get completely caught up in a future life viewed as a destiny already sealed off; it allows us to introduce qualitative variations by making full use of the time we have and the relationships we are in.

6. Well-being

The most common interpretation of well-being makes it a concept that ranges from the economic aspects to health-related ones, without, in my opinion, actually hitting the target that is contained in the lemma. It is in fact 'being' that is the key word and can guide us to understand what its 'well-' is (Irtelli [18]).

If the being is the human subject, I believe that its wellness can be a matter that ultimately concerns each one of us and should now be integrated within the considerations that have so far been made.

If we had asked ourselves this question a century or two ago, the well-ness of being would have been closely linked to its social function. In the Western world—and not only—adult men and women had specific functions that gave meaning to their existence, while a child or an elderly person had other functions that were equally clearly defined. For none of these people would the internal world, feelings, affections, perceived self-realisation have been as important as they are today. At best, they would have found themselves in conflict with their social function: as husband/father, as woman/mother, etc., within a social order seen as more rigidly given than it appears today.

Luca's and Eleonora's experiences would have been downgraded to transient intimate details, which would then have found their place in a precise social order a few years later, risking a traumatic exit from it, marginalisation or madness.

Instead, the value of the subject and his internal worlds is now highlighted, even exhibited as unique and relevant, at times even as an absolute ethical criterion indicating that anything is possible.

This is probably one of the reasons for the increased demand for psychic care that we have witnessed over time in the West. A demand for care is a demand to focus on one's own subjectual world, but also a request for help in handling it, and this is anything but obvious, as we have tried to illustrate.

For many reasons that I have discussed elsewhere (see Vanni, [19]), the subject has become highly relevant, even central to people, while the social order has evolved strongly and is less shared within the same culture; on the other hand, the culture of the inhabitants of a place has become less separated from the other cultures of the planet (the so-called 'globalisation'). The need that arises today is to orient oneself in order to identify new paths, not given, that concern the different spheres of life—from the local level to the planetary one, and perhaps beyond, in perspective—and I believe that the dimension of the subject and his well-being should necessarily be placed within this panorama.

In fact, if for Freud, over a century ago, the capacity to love and to work were the criteria of mental health, nowadays one would very much doubt not only the exhaustiveness, but also the relevance of these two aspects that do not appear to capture the qualitative, self-referential aspect of one's being in the world.

It is difficult today to identify as the ideal of the human being a sexual/operational productivism which we find in a modernist culture from which people have long and increasingly distanced themselves, also in view of the collapse of the ideals proposed by that culture, which today appears to present ecological risks, colonialist absolutism, etc.

I believe that we can no longer think of that well-being as the goal of people, and of psychic care for them, but I also believe that it is a matter of finding not an idea of absolutized and de-historicised well-being but rather a well-being in the contemporaneity of our time and place, globally understood, where we are now.

I think we can be helped here by the thinking of complexity (e.g. Ceruti [20] Morin, *ibidem*), which identifies a key aspect in keeping differences together in a non-reductionist manner.

Perhaps, then, well-being is given by the capacity to keep together this internal complexity, this continuous order-disorder, to use a terminology closer to the thinking of complexity, which we have tried to present, with an external complexity which is equally relevant; I hypothesise that contact with the self, with one's own finiteness given by a lifetime of uncertain but not infinite duration; hence, the desacralising relativisation of one's own humanity, with that concretely present configuration, with its characteristics—physical, character, social—may constitute an opportunity for quality of existence and thus a 'well'—being in the sense of what is desirable and possible.

Not therefore an absolute being but a relative, contingent, singular being.

It is certainly not the only perspective from which we can observe ourselves, and the contemplative dimension may well give way to far more operational dimensions; nevertheless, it might be worthwhile to be able to go back to it in order to place our feet on the ground in this part of the world and at this time in history.

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