

NOTES ON HEALTH AS BALANCE, HARMONY AND EQUILIBRIUM

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This paper looks at the concept of health as the interaction between the body and the mind from the perspective of the concepts of balance, harmony and equilibrium. The notion of dis-ease is a key to understanding ill-health.

A concept of health and dis-ease A. Equilibrium, harmony and balance

More often than not, whenever the concept of health is discussed, the primary focus of attention is on the body or on the mind, not so much on the interaction between the two. In this paper, I would like to explore a notion of health which looks at the interaction between the body and the mind from the perspective of balance, harmony and equilibrium. Perhaps it can initially be paraphrased as a reflection on dis-ease, an indication precisely of ill-health.

How are the notions of equilibrium, harmony and balance defined? These terms suggest that there are elements which relate with each other in a certain manner. What these elements are remain to be identified. What relationship will conform to the state of equilibrium, harmony and balance among these elements is still to be discussed.

Equilibrium, harmony and balance are criteria of evaluation and connote preferred states. They are norms to be aspired to and act as measures of achievement. The three have different foci though. 'Equilibrium' seems to include the notion of balance as well as a certain optimal state. It is not enough to have balance because one could conceivably have a balance of two disequilibria.

Harmony connotes balance and a certain peacefulness which may also be present in equilibrium, a particular way in which various factors relate with each other. Harmony seems to connote as well a depth which equilibrium may not necessarily have. Balance can mean both mental and physical balance or a certain equilibrium between elements, a certain combination of factors like aggressiveness and passivity or taking initiative and being patient, being forthright and submissive. The notion of 'balance' seems prone to more empirical correlation although exactly how one measures 'balance' apart from subjective accounts may not yet be evident at this point. Obviously, these three concepts are interrelated and one is hard put as to where the exact boundaries are among them.

It may only be really possible to clarify what 'equilibrium', 'harmony' and 'balance' are in contrast to their opposite states. It is the contrast which highlights what the important configurations are to each concept. What would it mean for someone or something to be in a state of dis-equilibrium, to be in a state of dis-harmony and imbalance? Immediately, the image is one of something or someone out of 'order', out of 'place', or awry. No matter what the elements in the relationship maybe, an undesirable state of affairs persists in the 'system'.

One discerns the possibility of demarcating the conceptual boundaries primarily through simple categories. What are the similarities among these concepts; what are the differences? What are complementary components; what may be antagonistic? What can be merged or synthesized; what have to be kept apart and maintained as distinct?

In discussing equilibrium and stability to explain 'reflective equilibrium', John Rawls would say¹

The first thing to note perhaps is that they are applied to systems of some kind. Thus, it is a system that is in equilibrium, and it is so when it has reached a state that

persists indefinitely over time so long as no external forces impinge upon it. In order to define an equilibrium state precisely, the boundaries of the system have to be carefully drawn and its determining characteristics clearly set out. Three things are essential: first, to identify the system and to distinguish between internal and external forces; second, to define the states of the system, a state being a certain configuration of its determining characteristics; and third, to specify the laws connecting the states.

Presumably, when one is in reflective equilibrium, one would have achieved a state of stability, of being grounded, of having found one's center, so to speak.

B. The individual as a system

In considering the question of health from the perspective of equilibrium, the 'system' becomes the focus of interest. Three levels of systems are considered, and to a certain extent, can be interrelated. But for purposes of conceptual clarity, it is important to consider them separately, each in their turn.

The first 'system' would be the individual, her body and mind. One might even consider each of these (body/mind) as separate "systems" in their own right. What insights might be revealed precisely when they are considered as distinct?

From the perspective of consciousness and awareness there is, at least, the stream of thought (perception and awareness both of sensations and ideations) that is accessible. From the standpoint of the 'personal' and the components that make up a sense of my personhood, there is the awareness and subjective apperception of inner states² and how these inner states might feel like.

An inner awareness means viewing the inner state of affairs, taking cognizance of relevant data. These might include, for example, the emotions involved in a particular activity or undertaking (Do I

feel sad or happy that I going on a trip? or I feel irritated having to deal with this person.). Such inner awareness no doubt presupposes the ability to recognize, name and acknowledge these inner states.

One could even say that one has to have the ability to 'accept' that reality and not deny that such inner phenomena exist. More than that, the significance of these responses or the fact that there are these inner states could mean something other than the inner state itself.

This could be circular because there have to be criteria for the assignation of 'significance' to identify what will be considered significant. How will these criteria for significance be arrived at? One conjecture is that criteria may be gleaned from the language one has learned and the ways of signification emphasized in the learning of that language. Categories as mental dispositions for clustering are not considered pre-linguistic but may be incorporated into the ways of speaking that a person may be exposed to. Clusters of what are significant may be indicated by patterns of discourse.

There is a need to be aware of what it means to reflect, to take stock. Reflection involves going over what has transpired, either the external event or even my internal responses to a given phenomenon. Reflection means being able to recognize and be aware of one's state of being. Taking stock also involves paying attention to what has transpired, as if to notice things as they are, because I may not always be fully aware of how things are, in contrast with how I think they are.

These inner states can also be considered as data, possible sources for insights into one's state of being. If I am irritated with this person, does that reveal something about me? That there are people who irritate me or that I am irritated by this person must mean there is something in the person that irritates me. Why am I irritated?

These reflective insights can be considered further data. I can then choose what to do with the data. Awareness in this sense and

reflection on that awareness provide the elements for further choices and perhaps, even for self-modification. But there seems to be the possibility of inner criteria and inner resolve. The root experience might be the sense of inner peace, inner order, that things (emotions/ thoughts) are in their proper order, a sense of things in place³.

At this point, it is useful to introduce the notion of potency as the power or capacity to do something, even the ability to reflect and take cognizance of the results of one's reflection. Potency means having the energy to initiate an activity or a series of events, even the awareness that one has the power to initiate a series of events through an action or series of actions.

After taking stock of a state of affairs, one can choose to intervene in that state of affairs. One intervenes, for example, by having a mental image of what an alternative state of affairs might be and then "move" towards that alternative state. Moving' here means transforming the present situation into that alternative state in the sense of change or modification.

The possibility of internal conflict or dissonance exists. One can be torn between this state of affairs (thought, feeling, disposition) and another. One response is to deny the existence of the conflict or the dissonance until one has the capacity to deal with this. Should one decide to do something about the conflict, how can it be dealt with? How would it be possible to reconcile and integrate seemingly disparate elements within one's self? Of course, what are disparate need not necessarily be conflicting, just different. But there is unease because one feels more comfortable when some "order" or a manner of relating these disparate elements to eliminate the sense of unease exist.

But can one be comfortable in the presence of dissonance? What allows for the 'integration' of the various elements would be a sense of balance and of harmony. Exactly what this means is not apparent; what is at least important to note is that the potency exists to distinguish among inner sensations and inner states, and that I can choose to

respond to them in a certain manner. What the criteria for the responses are remain to be realized.

C. Interaction between and among persons

The second 'system' is the social dimension. This would include the ties that are created and reinforced through interaction, especially those involving affective ties. Interactions play a role in instructing the individual how inner states can be perceived, how they can even be described and apprehended.

There is the hidden assumption that analogies are possible between persons (if he feels pain, I can also feel pain; or the pain he feels is a pain that I can possibly experience as well). Due to these logical analogies, I am informed through the interactions I have regarding the possible inner states of another because I consider the possibility of these inner states occurring in the other much as they might appear in me.⁴

To be sure, there is no guarantee, no proof that exactly the same experience is in the other. There would be no way of knowing in the sense of absolute certainty. But perhaps the search for certainty is misplaced. One learns from the responses of the other. In the process of acquiring a language, the infant apprehends that there are terms to refer to inner sensations so that I indeed know that I am in pain, not just think or imagine that I am in pain.⁵

As within a person, the interactions between persons themselves create a symbiosis, an ecology, in the sense of a (possible) pattern of interaction. There can be a range of possible behavior that are played out or circumscribed within a given relationship. Certain patterns of behavior are allowed, others not. Parameters are established precisely to indicate how a 'relationship' might flourish or not. An equilibrium, insofar as established patterns have been created, engenders a sense of normalcy regarding the usual sort of interaction that this relationship would then have.

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The pattern can also indicate how the relationship might “progress” or flourish. To be sure, it is possible to have an equilibrium between two psychotics or even a “normalcy” between a battered-wife and her abuser. But is this an equilibrium in the sense of being a stable relationship?

Unless and until the social relationship is found harmonious with a sense of inner balance and inner order, what will always be sought is a sense of deeper “fulfillment” or “satisfaction”. Perhaps it is the deep notion of having an inner harmony that can as well be the instigator of moves towards making the relationship qualitatively better, to move towards that sense of deep inner satisfaction.

Interestingly enough, it is against a background of peacefulness, a state of an absence of conflict or a state of quietude, that the process of integration and resolution among conflict-states between persons, and even within a person, can occur. The seemingly conflict elements are realized for what they are, as elements in conflict, given the silence that a peaceful background can provide.

The peaceful background is precisely the backdrop so that those in the foreground, the conflicting elements (for example, my desire to be honest and truthful and my need to gain some advantage in this relationship), may be highlighted the way they ought to be so that they are seen and recognized. Peacefulness is needed because the elements in the conflict may not be seen for what they truly are unless there is no ‘static’, so to speak.

And yet, one could ask, how can there be peacefulness if there is conflict? There must be an act of will, including the potency or power, to transcend the disturbance to see what may lie beyond the disturbance or conflict.

Two kinds of potencies are alluded to here: first, the potency to realize the elements of that conflict (be they emotions and bodily

sensations, or among emotions and among bodily sensation, etc.) and second, the ability to put these conflicting elements aside.

The potency or power to act is in one's mind, in one's resolve to do something. Putting the conflicting elements aside is an act of the mind as well; I 'move' with my mental images, I picture in my mind what it means to put the disturbances aside. Putting the conflicting elements aside means being not to be disturbed or perturbed by them as a discipline of the mind and instead, to be able to see through the conflict, to imagine what is beyond the conflict. This process indicates the possibility of two levels of perception in the mind⁶ and even two of ways of 'seeing'.

D. The individual, the social and the biosphere

The third system would be the physical universe which makes possible both individual and social life. The laws of nature are such that natural phenomena will occur the way they do independent of the wishes of persons and societies. We are affected and sustained by the physical universe and some form of conviviality will have to be established with nature so that life as we know it can continue, if not flourish.

In the largest sense possible, the biosphere, with all the dead and living creatures in it, forms one system which itself has tensions and upheavals but maintains an equilibrium as well. This equilibrium is not always harmonious, nor always stable and balanced, but the equilibrium is maintained. Nonetheless, there is nothing 'outside' the system so it remains within itself the complete system that it is.

Among and within these three levels of systems, there can be the operation of an integrating principle. Initially, on the level of being to 'locate' the elements and to see these elements within a certain frame of field of (mental) vision, there can already exist the integrative disposition. This is part of a passive process of integration. One merely identifies and takes note of the components. But having taken note, or

having to recognize their presence or existence, I have located the elements within a field of vision; in that sense, they have been “captured” by a picture, and linked up, perhaps even co-ordinated, placed within an ordinal scheme.

The more active integration means the involvement of mental acts: discriminating among the various elements, being able to distinguish the levels of significance these elements may have, comparing and contrasting, grouping together what are similar and what are dissimilar, and then assigning relative value to each cluster.

Higher integration presupposes the ability to make sense of myriad details, creating a discourse or explanation which can weave together the various elements into a meaningful whole. In this sense, integration means synthesis, constructing a whole from significant parts. Providing explanations or creating a discourse to take the significant details into account is one manner of integrating these elements. Having criteria for differentiation and synthesis presupposes discrimination among elements and then being able to group them according to their characteristics. Making sense of the whole is the product of a series of mental acts.

Focus on the body and mind
A. A cognitive map of the mind

Human beings function according to categories aroused in our minds by experience. There is no up or down, left or right, in nature; we impose these directions onto the world. Individuals have a fixed position and everything else in the universe acquires a location from that vantage point. A cognitive map or a mental framework is an ordering our minds impose on thoughts and feelings, perceptions and recollections.

One’s sense of inner space is also organized by a cognitive map. An inner space exists, which is not so much an ordering of elements, but a ‘location’ within which certain inner activities are made possible, including mental acts.

Remembering occurs in the mind, in time or through time, but no two memories about the same event occur at the same junction; they remain distinct. For as long as I can have a true recollection of the event, I might make a distinction between what happened and how I felt about what happened. Events in one's life, much like these recollections, are also "placed" within a certain order. There are relationships among memories, ties between thoughts, bonds among feelings. How these are arranged might be individual, what system works for one person might not do the job for another.

Elements present within inner space may also be integrated or may remain distinct or disparate. I do not want to link my occasional fibbing with the need to be truthful all the time because I may find it hard to justify to myself why I do the things that I do. And there can be a desperate need to be coherent and consistent while recognizing that it is bothersome to be so. I would rather not confront the question. The inner space is the locus for these mental activities. Personal space can also be where the 'demons' lie: thoughts I may be afraid to entertain, images or memories I may want to suppress, forget or deny..

This inner space may be where one repairs to, during moments of reflectiveness, when one takes stock, goes over what has transpired, to find one's bearings, given the myriad events that occur in one's life, and in that sense, recover one's center. And when the center of gravity has been found, this is where I am, this is where I am most at home and settled, this is also where I am most solid and at peace. The center of gravity is my deepest awareness of my self, what is my deepest core. Beyond the particular thoughts, feelings and sensations, what is beneath all these, out of which the awareness of these thoughts, feelings and sensations is made possible? What is the deepest sense of quietude and peace?

Due to a deep sense of the 'backdrop', the quietude and the peace, the thoughts, feelings, ideas and sensations one has may be coordinated, related, organized, linked and given meaningful and significant form.

B. A paradigm for the body

We also have a cognitive map of our bodies or bodily sensations, something that is taught to children. It takes intelligence to determine how all these body parts are to be coordinated. While the coordination need not always be conscious, we realize that for certain physical activity to be possible (dancing, for example) a sequence of actions or an 'order' of behavior is required. Parts of our body can be made to move in a certain sequence. Instruction of the body through drills and training becomes instruction of the mind, insofar as sequence and coordination of body movements is concerned. After a while, one is no longer mindful of the particular sequence (like counting the steps in dancing); one begins to get a 'sense of the whole' and so moves according to that sense, according to that mental picture, even with a given attitude or posture.

What is the dominant paradigm with which to view the body? How one looks at one's body has an impact on that body. This is not say that one's picture of one's body necessarily has to be the case, that if I look at my body as gorgeous, that it will be so. How one feels about one's body manifests in how one moves about. One needs to have a mental construct to move one's body in such a way that what I want achieved will be done. To be able to move about as one would like, this 'body picture' is the instrument for coordinating one's movements.

One's cognitive map about bodily sensations locates pains in a geographical grid, left of this, above that, inside this. There is almost an unconscious identification of bodily sensations when attention is given them or when attention is called because of extreme sensations. How may all these bodily sensations be synthesized? I focus not so much on a particular sensation but on the over-all state of the body. Or on the over-all sensation of my body in a certain location, in this room or aboard a ship. Or how do I feel being with this person? What do my bodily sensations inform me about how I am reacting to this individual?

I would think that these are important data sometimes. And I can consider the data for what they are. What I will decide to do about them is a different matter, subject to deliberation and decision-making.

During moments of reflectiveness too, I can be aware of how I am responding to certain situations. It is possible for me to have a total sense of my self. Given a dominant paradigm for viewing the body, would there be a relationship between such a paradigm and mental 'order', such that there is an attitude that can arise in me that form my sense of my physical self as to how to view this sense of self..?

The primary point here is that oftentimes, one's sense of self arises from an awareness of one's body and one's attitude towards it, much as one's sense of inner self can also manifest in how one's body behaves and carries itself. ("My body feels heavy, I do not feel too good about myself." Or "I am hefty [have a hefty body], [therefore] I am a substantial person.")

The dominant paradigm one has of one's body can also indicate whether one is comfortable with or "at home" in one's body. Do I feel that I "own" my body and that I am settled in it? Obviously, since this is the only body that one can have, one does not really have much choice, one cannot exchange it for another's.

But there are continuous attempts to modify and improve one's appearances apart from wanting to look neat and presentable; enhancing one's looks for example because one does not like the color of one's skin, or the shape of one's nose, or even that one's hair color makes one look "old". These might suggest that one is not totally satisfied or altogether happy with one's appearance. Of course, one's desire to improve or enhance is not necessarily a rejection of what one has. But these efforts can also arise from a desire to alter the physical configuration. Does this necessarily mean a rejection of one's attributes?

What would it mean to be at home in one's body or to be comfortable with it? A possible answer is to be quiet, peaceful with one's body. Just as there are individuals who are "noisy" even when they are not speaking (it is as if their thought-processes can be "heard"), there are also physical movements which are "rough", not "smooth." Are these indicative of inner states? When the body is quiet and peaceful, what kinds of actions are done, how are they done? And if one has been able to quieten the body, has one become at home in it?

Losing balance and recovering one's balance

There are instances when one loses balance and quite literally falls. One loses the sense of where things are or what has happened; one does not know what is going on; one cannot explain to oneself the events that are occurring and in that sense, one loses a sense of control. Because one has lost this sense of knowing what is going on, of having a sense of control, the 'system' can go awry. One gets sick.

Equilibrium is lost due to a variety of factors. One scenario can be simply that the person cannot make sense of what is going on. A person can be befuddled by the enormity of goings-on, even in one's life; hence there is stress. The need to deal with all the pressures, demands, contingencies and stimuli results in illness. One may not be able to handle the situation well enough so that even the body and the mind give up. The person's "system" cannot deal with the situation, it chooses to close the system down, so to speak.

Homeostasis, or the ability of the system to restore itself into a functioning organism, or the process by which mind and body seek to restore balance and achieve a modicum of equilibrium, could very well be the internal instigator, almost an intuitive response of the limbic system. Homeostasis is the body's (and nature's) way of protecting (and saving) the individual or even the physical universe's manner of making some considerations for the protection of the species. Homeostasis is the process of recovering equilibrium, of seeing to it that a system continues to function; otherwise it collapses, ceases to function and dies.

Apart from the involuntary processes, the individual can also recover his balance or do certain things to restore balance.

Supposing that one has a sense of what it was like before the person "lost" his balance, it will require an initiative of the person, a certain desire to act and intervene, to bring back that previous state of affairs or to move towards an alternative state of affairs where this phenomenon of losing one's balance does not or cannot occur. The potency to will that alternative state of affairs is needed. One can recover one's balance after the inner resolve is made to regain one's balance and equilibrium. Of course, the effect of the potency and the will will be seen in the result, when or whether the person regains his footing. This process can also be considered as healing one's self.

How else does one regain one's balance? In part because one cannot make sense of what is going on, loses one's sense of control, and therefore loses one's balance, what may help the individual regain balance is to understand what is going on. Explanation is needed to make sense of what is or has happened, of relating this event to other events, or explaining this phenomenon in relation to other phenomena so that there is a sense of how things are related and where things are. The feeling of being lost, of not knowing what it is all about, is sometimes due to not making sense of it, not understanding why this is the case.

So that I can make sense of what is going on, I may have to re-arrange my ideas and my understanding of things so that I can accommodate this new fact or event, so I can make sense of reality. If I cannot accept the new fact or cannot deal with "reality", I may also lose my balance. Homeostasis may prove an unwilling ally here. If I find the truth so difficult to accept, I may choose to remain in my own built-up reality just so I will deal with this "new" reality; I am more comfortable enconced in the reality I have created. But I can be helped to make sense of the present, with the new facts and realities, by weaving or constructing a meaningful discourse so that I can accommodate these new facts and events.

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Balance or harmony may also be lost in a relationship between and among persons. What was previously a working relationship may change such that affective ties may be cut off and even lost. When before there seemed to be a functioning symbiosis, the bond is severed or loses its former quality and deteriorates. When one of the parties changes, in whatever manner and form, the other party will have to adjust, either to regain the former pattern of interaction or to maintain the fellow-feeling that existed. When the relationship cannot regain the affective ties or even the viable working pattern, then the relationship will cease. One feels bad when the relationship which may have achieved a certain level of trust and understanding has been lost. "I feel bad" is not just a report of an emotional state but could also be a physical state which is the prelude to illness. When the relationship has been lost or severed, one seeks to find new equilibrium; otherwise, one will feel the loss for quite some time and be debilitated by it.

Support from others when an individual has lost balance is important for one to regain balance or to keep to a certain track. No doubt, the emotional sustenance that one gets from the positive self-image that may be induced by a caring relationship helps a lot in maintaining one's own sense of viability. This is also why conflicts with others can be very momentous events because they challenge one's equilibrium. Will I be able to maintain my balance in this situation of adversity when I cannot rely on the other for support to maintain my own sense of balance? Where will I get the strength to withstand the adversity and the challenge? One will have to be firmly anchored, so to speak, in one's own center of gravity.

Persons look for meaning in what is going on and meaning is discovered or created when the seemingly disparate elements or factors are woven together or are related in such a manner as to make a certain 'sense of it all' emerge. We make meaning and hanker for meaning. When we do not understand and cannot make sense of

something, we cannot accommodate the newly-arrived or newly-confronted; hence, we are at a loss and cannot function and move on.

Meaning is provided when we can somehow also say to ourselves that that makes sense. And it makes sense because we can understand what makes this relationship worthwhile; we can relate what we are doing now with everything else we believe in or accept, or given a new situation, at least know where to place this new realization or new fact. We can place it in our cognitive map; it can be given a place in our inner awareness of where things are and where they are supposed to be. Loss of meaning can be a difficult issue for many and can lead to a loss of potency and eventually to dis-equilibrium.

But even when I cannot make sense of it, when the meaning escapes me, there is still an attitude of the recognition of limits—that I can only understand so far, that there are things that will remain inexplicable; or that while I cannot make sense of what is going on, I can be comfortable with it. I can accept the possibilities and the possibilities are not always what I would desire, nor the ones that I can accept and understand, but I can be comfortable with the mystery and with the inexplicability. I can accept the various possibilities and can be comfortable with my realizations and the limitations of my realizations.

In this sense, I can be peaceful with the present state of affairs. I have done what can be done, my potencies have not been misplaced and there is a certain point when things can find their harmony and balance. Even without a full knowledge of the meaning of it all, I can be content. Then I am at ease.

Endnotes

¹ A Theory of Justice. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1971. 456-457.

² One considers the cognitive map of one's inner awareness as awareness of interiority (for example, consider the Filipino concept of 'loob'). Interiority will have its own architectonics or internal structure, subject perhaps to the organization and 'ordering' that is possible, or even the perspective that one takes. One can become very involved with one's self, or one can be somewhat detached and look at the self as if from afar. Furthermore, depending on one's perspicuity, one will have been able to place ideas, thoughts, and feelings in a neat manner, or they may be helter-skelter. One's manner of thinking may be an indication of inner order.

³ This is not to claim that for a person to have mental health, this is the only thing that is necessary or even important. The mind also needs to engage in other activities and achieve certain fulfillments. No doubt there are pleasures and satisfactions that we seek, both involving the body and without. A relatively rich imagination also enables the person the capacity for transcendence or even the possibility of extending present experiences into other realms. But we also need a certain robustness to deal with conflict and adversity, and there are mental habits or dispositions which enable one to handle conflicts and adversity better.

⁴ Through the process of language-acquisition, I learn how to distinguish one inner state from another. Whenever an infant feels wet, there are verbal utterances or responses from the mother correlated with this internal phenomenon. Hence, one apprehends that it is possible to relate an internal phenomenon with a verbal utterance. One learns to differentiate among inner phenomena because of the variety of verbal utterances that are given as responses to a variety of external manifestations of inner phenomena. It is possible that the infant then begins to discern that, first, there are significant differences among inner phenomena and that these significant differences are marked verbally by different utterances. From the variety of verbal and possibly emotional responses from the mother, the infant may thus learn to relate an inner phenomenon with a verbal report.

⁵ This is the assertion of Ludwig Wittgenstein in paragraph 202 of the *Philosophical Investigations*.

⁶Visual perception, in terms of what eyes can see, and the mind being aware of what eyes see; and mental perception, what the mind itself can perceive, either based on what the eyes have provided or what the mind can concatenate on its own, what the mind's eye can choose to put together.