

GENERAL SYSTEMS THEORY AND SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION

Somasundaram Rajendran

8, Royal Troon Court, Pueblo, Colorado 81001, U.S.A.

ABSTRACT

General Systems Theory has become a useful model to understand human behavior and also every thing in the whole universe. It has provided a more meaningful World View as it has unified all human knowledge about all aspects of living and non living part of the universe (Bowler 1981). Prior to Renaissance in Europe the world view of people in different societies and cultures were more mythological, magical, superstitious and religious. Since Renaissance gradually the world view became more objective scientific model to explain everything in the universe including human beings. Such a scientific model has helped to advance in understanding of the material physical world and contributed to rapid development of technology and Industrial and later Information revolution. In the early part of twentieth century the limitations of such a reductionistic mechanical analytical model was recognized especially in biological science. So a new interacting Systems Theory model was introduced especially in biology (Bertalanffy1962). Later such a model was found useful in understanding of all fields of studies of living and nonliving things in the universe. As a result a new Systems World view has emerged. According to which every thing in the whole universe can be studied as organized entities or systems that has parts as sub systems interacting with each other and also the whole system interacting with other systems outside of that particular system and form more complex and higher systems. In that model every thing, including human beings are connected with each other directly or indirectly and influence each other systems at various degrees. So this model unifies everything in the universe. According to systems theory human beings are part of universe as a whole system and have sub systems of body as a biological system and mind and behavior as psychological system and by interacting with other human beings form social systems of family, community and nations. Such a model helps to understand human experience and behavior more completely. As the systems theory has developed attempts have been made to explain ultimate philosophical questions like the meaning of life, morality, suffering, death and immortality which may be important issues for many human beings. This paper proposes to include a highest level of all systems called Transcendental system that is different from religious systems that are part of social system. The controversies related to this system and arguments in favor and opposing views will be discussed. The purpose of this paper is to stimulate more discussions among the active members who are involved in developing further General Systems Theory in all directions.

Keywords: General systems theory; Spirituality; Religions

INTRODUCTION

General Systems Theory is one of the most unifying approaches to understand ourselves as human beings and the world around us. It connects us to everything in the universe in a meaningful manner. In order to understand human beings in the universe and nature we need to study human beings as a system and how we are interacting with other things in the universe. The general systems theory is still in its early stage of development and needs more modifications to unify every thing in the universe. We have to challenge, debate, and test and revise the theory to make it more correct, clear and useful. As this theory deals with every thing in the universe it is not possible for individual human being to be knowledgeable in all areas of this approach. So

General Systems Theory and Spirituality and Religion

there must be a process to simplify and summarize the main principles of the theory for average person who may not be familiar with particular field of study. This paper proposes a highest level of all systems called Transcendental Spiritual system that is different from religions, which are part of social system and discuss philosophical argument of Mortimer Adler regarding the existence of this system and the value of including that system in General Systems Theory.

PRINCIPLES OF GENERAL SYSTEM THEORY

According to General Systems Theory everything that exists in the whole universe can be viewed as entities interacting with each other and organized as units called systems. Each such system has subsystems as parts of that particular system that interact with themselves and form a higher whole system, which in turn becomes part of another whole system and so on. The systems are formed with some purpose or goal of varying specificity. The important point is that we cannot completely understand by analyzing only the parts of any system but also we have to study the whole system as the structure and function of the emerging whole system is different than the subsystems. There are boundaries with specific properties between these systems which transfer materials, energy and information and result in stability of that system. So also there is a dynamic equilibrium maintained within each system by feedbacks from other systems as there is always change in the form of growth or decay of the systems especially in the biological systems like human beings. Each system has some influence on other systems which may vary depending upon the proximity, feedback, control, constraints, resistance, dominance etc. We can view the whole cosmos as the biggest system with its own structure, laws, functions, purposes. Human beings are highly organized living systems that come to existence relatively recently and form only a small part of the whole cosmos.

Human Systems:

As human beings we are naturally more interested in understanding how we fit in this General Systems Theory. Actually this theory was developed in the field of biology and hence more applicable to human beings as biological organisms. We would like to know how human beings interact with other human beings, living organisms and non living environment. According to our current estimate human beings have evolved in course of about four billions of years from other lower forms of living organisms that originally evolved from non living molecules, even though we are not certain how and when that happened. When we look at human beings from systems theory point of view we are primarily a biological organism or system with a human body of complex organization of physical and chemical material that has many subsystems in the form of cells as the basic unit system at a lower level. Cells together are organized as tissues, organs and the whole body as a higher biological system. The human brain and the central nervous system is the highest system in the human body that controls and regulates other systems. Human body as a whole is a marvelous unique system with unimaginable abilities and potentials. We can even call it a miracle that such a system exists in this universe, even though there is a probability similar or even higher forms of living things may exist in other planets that we have no knowledge of them at this time.

More interesting feature of the human beings is the highly developed psychological or mental functions. From the systems thinking perspective we can call human mental functions and mind as the psychological system. Psychological system emerges from the brain and the nervous system and depends on it for existence but seems to function autonomously in a mysterious way. Psychological system is formed from subjective feelings, perceptions, thoughts, imaginations, dreams and has free will to choose voluntary actions. It creates an isomorphic inner model of

General Systems Theory and Spirituality and Religion

external universe including self, others and rest of the known and unknown living and non living rest of the whole universe as a representation. Its function is not only to survive and reproduce like at the biological level but also to be conscious of our self, other humans and the rest of the universe. There are many people who are more materialistic in their view of the world and not psychologically minded may deny the separate psychological system and consider the mind as epiphenomenon and the higher functions of the brain without its status as a separate system.

Whatever view you may take, when two or more human beings interact they form a different and a higher social system which is the basis of the next higher level human systems. Social system has its own structure, function, goals or purposes. Human beings have developed a very advanced and sophisticated societies and cultures which could not be achieved by individual human being. There is a shared collective consciousness and communication that is vital not only for the survival, and reproduction of human beings but also our understanding of our selves and the world around us. General systems theory could help us understand how all human beings are connected with each other and also to other living things and nonliving material world and the whole universe (Engel 1980).

Spirituality and religion:

It is likely, human beings with their highly developed intellectual functioning and imaginations wondered about the nature of human beings and pondered over ultimate questions like who really we are, why we were born, what is the purpose and meaning of this life, how we are supposed to live our lives, when we are going to die, what happens after death etc. In spite of the remarkable achievements in studying material world and living organizations by modern scientific methods and technological advances, we do not have definite answers to those ultimate questions. Depending on individual experience and personality features we have come up with two approaches to these questions.

One is based on Existential philosophy (Solomon 1981), according to which what human beings know for sure is that they are conscious of their existence and have freedom to think and choose what they want to do and become responsible for their choices. It is up to human beings to make their own meaning of their lives. There is nothing for them after death. Franz Kafka, one of the influential existential writers, declared that the meaning of life is that it ends! This is a pessimistic view of life.

Other approach is that of Spirituality and Religion. Many human beings for a long time believed in a Higher being behind our existence and that Being is all powerful, absolute, infinite, perfect, all good, truth, love, joy and reaching that Being is the ultimate purpose of human life. Human beings after they realized their finite, transient, imperfect, vulnerable existence looked for guidance and answer to these questions from that Higher Transcendental Spirit or God. So there have been heated emotional arguments and debates about faith in such a Being which is difficult for ordinary people to understand.

Every society and community has created various forms of religions with different beliefs and rituals to follow the path for salvations and good life (Durkheim 1915). Human beings have built places of worship, rules to live by and fought wars to spread their particular faith. Inhuman actions in the name of particular religions have scared many people. Attempts have been made to separate religion from governing and politics. Religious freedom to practice whatever faith one wants to follow is considered more civilized democratic form of societies. However religion continues to be a powerful issue in all human affairs including in our scientific endeavors. As

General Systems Theory and Spirituality and Religion

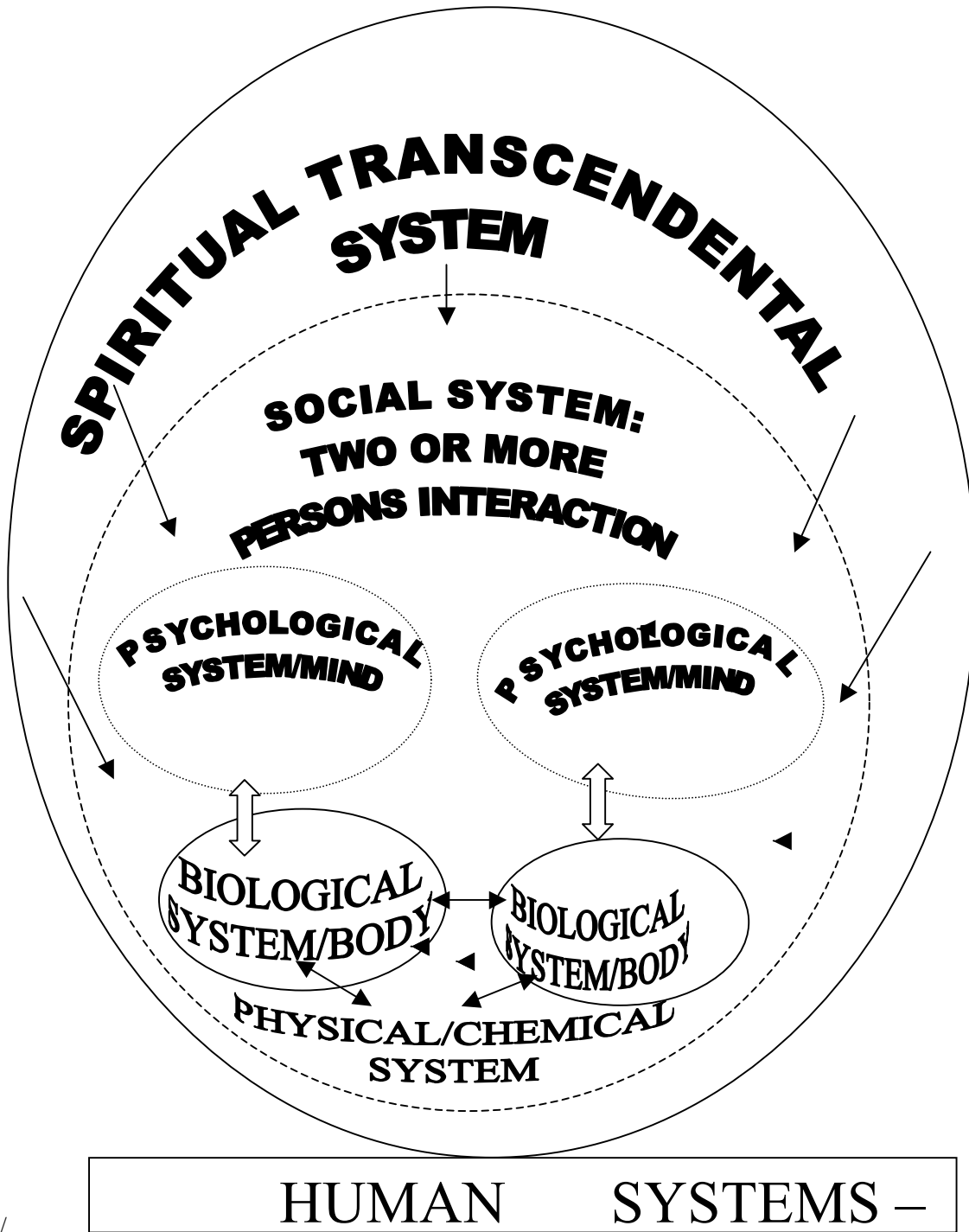
General Systems Theory is the most systematic study of all subjects we have to consider whether that theory can help us understand spiritual and religious issues more clearly.

Transcendental system:

Kenneth Boulding, one of the early pioneers of General systems theory suggested that in the hierarchies of the human systems there need to be an absolute highest level of systems that will transcend all other systems to answer ultimate questions about human beings and the universe that we are not able to answer (Boulding 1956). Many other influential systems theorists have included spirituality and religions together under human social system, psychological system, in the brain centers or even physical material world at the quantum physics level. However in this paper I would propose to reevaluate this system and argue for different approach. For people who are existential in their approach to life there is no need for such a highest level of transcendental system. They are satisfied with their agnosticism or atheism. But for people who believe in a Higher being, spirituality and religion further clarification of this system may be useful.

First let us differentiate spirituality from religion. Spirituality is the faith and belief in a Higher Being by individual human being. Whereas religion is that faith shared by group of people in the form of social institutions. So it will be included in the social system of human beings and studied under sociology. Spirituality has to be separated from that and will be considered as a separate highest level of human and also all other systems.

//



There have been debates between theologians, philosophers and scientists for a long time whether such a Higher Being called God by different names exists or not (Smart1969). Theologians start their arguments with the premise of existence of God and used ontological, cosmological and teleological arguments to prove the existence of God. During twentieth century one of the most outspoken philosophers who defended the existence of Transcendent God was Mortimer J. Adler. In his book *How To Think About God* (Adler1980) reviews all the previous

General Systems Theory and Spirituality and Religion

arguments of Saint Anselm in eleventh century and St. Thomas Aquinas in thirteenth century and Immanuel Kant in eighteenth century and including twentieth century scientific knowledge of physics and astronomy and proposes a true cosmological argument to prove existence of God who is a Supreme, supernatural and transcendental, beyond reasonable doubt. His four propositions as premises for arguments are as follows:

1. The existence of an effect requiring the concurrent existence and action of an efficient cause implies the existence and action of that cause
2. The cosmos as a whole exists
3. The existence of the cosmos as a whole is radically contingent (meaning that it needs an efficient cause of its continuing existence to preserve it in being, and prevent it from being annihilated, or reduced to nothing)
4. If the cosmos needs an efficient cause of its continuing existence, then that cause must be supernatural in its action, and one the existence of which is uncaused, in other words, the Supreme Being God.
- 5.

Adler explains that premises one and four appear to be true with certitude and the second is true beyond reasonable doubt as our own personal existence. Then he proceeds to prove the third premise beyond reasonable doubt by pointing out that the present universe is only one of infinite possible universes and not a necessary one. A merely possible universe can not be an uncaused universe. His concept of radical contingency of cosmos means it was created out of nothing and if it ends it will become nothing. So it requires super natural Supreme Being to exist. Whereas parts of the universe like us human beings and other objects originates from some other part like our parents and when end it is not to nothing but transform into some thing else like we become non living chemical substances. It is interesting Adler uses some of the same concepts of General Systems theory that cosmos as a whole is different than the sum of its parts. He also compares the concept of whole cosmos is similar to concepts like subatomic parts in physics and black holes in astronomy. Those are theoretical concepts to explain observable phenomena but they themselves are not observable. However when it comes to what standard of proofs we can provide, he explains that we cannot use mathematical quantitative proof in accepting existence of God but proofs used in judicial systems and historical investigations of truth about the existence of our ancestors in the past remote generations. We can only say whether we can prove beyond reasonable doubt or by preponderance of evidence.

Adler mentions the great French mathematician and scientist Blaise Pascal classified people into three groups depending on their belief about God.

1. Those who found God and love Him. (Believers)
2. Those who do not found God but wants to find out God. (Agnostics)
3. Those who do not know God and do not want to find out. (Atheists)

Groups one and three do not need any proof of existence of God and only the second group that Adler calls twentieth century pagans, open minded non believers, who need a reasonable proof to believe in God.

Even those people may not be convinced with the proof Adler provides. So he again goes back to Pascal who argued to wager in favor of existence of God because if you believe in God and in reality if God does not exist you loose nothing and if God really exists you gain everything. Adler also quotes Pascal "The heart has reasons that reason does not know." Finally only by love and not by reason that you can have hope and faith in God.

General Systems Theory and Spirituality and Religion

IMPLICATIONS FOR GENERAL SYSTEMS THEORY:

If we include transcendental system as the highest level of system it provides a more complete picture of a Systems world view. Then General Systems Theory unifies everything in cosmos and beyond. It gives a more realistic perspective of human beings in this world. We become more humble in evaluating our relationship to other human beings, other living things and non living physical universe. We will be more careful how we treat others, our environment and rest of the universe. As we separate organized religion from Single Supreme Being we can also separate religion from politics and support individual right to believe in personal God without persecution. Further discussion about Spirituality and Religion among Systems scientists and research may contribute to understand better human health and behavior as individual and also in the societies.

CONCLUSION

General Systems theory is the most comprehensive approach to study and understand everything, living and non living things in this universe. It views the world as interacting organized entities with parts and the whole at different higherarchical levels of complexity and evolution. Human beings are physical, biological, psychological and social beings interacting with each level as the most complex system. They are searching for answers to ultimate questions like meaning of life, how to make choices based on their free will for right conduct of life, to deal with moral issues, suffering, death, immortality etc. Adding transcendental system as the ultimate, absolute, highest system will help at least some people to find answers to those questions.

REFERENCES

- Adler, M; (1980) *How to think about God*, Macmillan Publishing company, New York.
- Bertalanaffy, L; (1962), General Systems Theory- A Critical Review, *General Systems*; VII: 1-20.
- Boulding, K; (1956), *Management Sciences*; 2, (3): 197-208.
- Bowler, D; (1981) *General Systems Thinking*, Elsevier North Holland, New York.
- Durkheim, E; (1915) *The elementary forms of the religious life: A study in Religious Sociology*.
Translated from French by Joseph Ward Swain, G.Allen & Unwin, Macmillan, London,
New York.
- Engel, G; (1980) The Clinical Application of the Biopsychosocial Model, *The American Journal of Psychiatry*; 137(5): 535-544.
- Smart,N; (1969) *Philosophers and Religious Truth*, The Macmillan Company, New York.
- Solomon, R; (1981) *Introducing Philosophy: Problems and Perspectives*, Harcourt Brace Javonawich, Inc, New York.