Looking for New Ways of Making Sense of the Universe and the Place of Humans in It: Foundational and Non-Foundational Thought

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❖ Introduction

o A new model of looking at the human mind and how it engages the world…

o Model draws from brain science, philosophy, and elements of cultural anthropology…

o Model may serve as a basis for new hypotheses for talking about cognitive process and human cultures…

❖ **"Foundational" versus "Non-Foundational": A New Model**

o   The terms: "foundational" versus "non-foundational"

o   In a wide variety of human cultures and traditions, there is a deep and important distinction*: the world that people perceive and live in*, and *some other more fixed or eternal or transcendent "reality."*

o   The distinction is a basic one in Western culture — but such a **dual** perspective actually is *not* a universal characteristic of human thought.

o   There exist as well **monist** cultures and traditions — ones in which there is no transcendent "reality" distinct from the one that humans experience around themselves all of the time.

❖ "Foundational" versus "Non-Foundational": In Brief

"Foundational" Model
There is a transcendent realm beyond the visible world, the realm of the "Forms", of time, of God… This realm holds all the referents we need: Truth, Beauty, Justice, etc.

"Non-Foundational" Model
There is no transcendent realm beyond the visible world. All things are self-referential, in-and-of-themselves. There are no absolutes of Truth, Beauty, Justice, etc.; everything is defined in relational terms.

❖ Significance

o "Foundational" thinking is behind much of modern science:

> the postulation of some kind of substrate (such as "quantum foam") beyond apparent physical phenomena — this stems from historical "foundational" roots dating back to Plato.

o Future studies may suggest that the origins are to be found in architectural features of the human brain:

> this may contribute to new perspectives on everything from the history of human cultures to mental health treatment.

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❖ Early Foundational Cultures

o In the West: Plato's "Allegory of the Cave": a dualist or foundational perspective — what we perceive are the flickering and distorted shadows of "Forms" that are external, fixed, and perfect.

o In the East: Hindu belief systems also emphasize the *subsidiary character of our perceptions and perceived reality* — the physical world is an "emanation from Brahman", the "first cause" of the universe… and the "sole reality"

o Distinction between the world as it seems and a more perfect world is seen as *a stimulus for personal growth and change*.

o Western religions: Man is imperfect but can become more so by making effective contact with eternal truth — St. Thomas Aquinas felt that the "supreme goal of human striving" was an "intuitive" knowledge of God.

❖ Early Non-Foundational Cultures: in Buddhism

o In his book *Zen Mind, Beginner's* Mind, The famous Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki wrote:

   > We should find perfect existence through imperfect existence. The eternal exists because of non-eternal existence. In Buddhism it is a heretical view to expect something outside this world.

o Here we see non-foundational monism within Buddhism.

o It is not only that one ought not to expect "something outside this world" but further, as Suzuki also writes, that it is "a mistake to create some lofty or deep idea and then try to attain it … Our understanding is the same as its own expression, is the practice itself."

❖ Early Non-Foundational Cultures: in Daoism (1)

○ A similar concept is found in Daoism: The very concept of *dao* (道) is sometimes regarded as a kind of "foundational" substrate or transcendent Platonic form in its own right…

○ But in the *Dao De Jing*, the actual model presented is "all is one, and one is all" – all phenomena, all objects, even all perception arise and fall as the *dao*. We are the *dao*, the *dao* is us.

○ But even then, the *dao* is not a "thing" or even an intangible entity: the *dao* is no more (and no less) than *the sum of all of our relationships*.

❖ Early Non-Foundational Cultures: In Daoism (2)

o Two scholars of Chinese philosophy, Roger T. Ames and David Hall, note in an introduction to their translation of the *Dao De Jing*:

As a parody on Parmenides, who claimed that "only Being is," we might say that for the Daoist,, "only *beings* are, " or taking one step further in underscoring the reality of the process of change itself, "only *becomings* are." That is, the Daoist does not posit the existence of some permanent reality behind appearances, some unchanging substratum …

❖ **Foundational versus Non-Foundational Cultures: Some History (1)**

o Even Western cultures include examples of monist, non-foundational thought…

o Plato may have been a foundationalist, but there were other thinkers in ancient Greece who adopted positions much closer to non-foundational monism…

o The Skeptics: doubtful of any position abstracted from pure existence. A fragment of Aristocles says:

Pyrrho declared that things are equally indifferent, unmeasurable and inarbitrable. For this reason neither our sensations nor our opinions tell us truths or falsehoods. Therefore for this reason we should not put our trust in them one bit, but should be unopinionated, uncommitted and unwavering, saying concerning each individual thing that it no more is than is not, or both is and is not, or neither is nor is not.

❖ Foundational versus Non-Foundational Cultures: Some History (2a)

o Non-foundational approaches have not been dominant in Western philosophy, but have never disappeared, either. An explicit expression was offered by the American pragmatists in the late 1800's and early 1900's…

o William James wrote, in "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth":

Truth, as any dictionary will tell you, is a property of certain of our ideas. It means their "agreement," as falsity means their disagreement, with "reality." Pragmatists and intellectualists both accept this definition as a matter of course. They begin to quarrel only after the question is raised as to what may precisely be meant by the term "agreement," and what by the term "reality," when reality is taken as something for our ideas to agree with…

❖ Foundational versus Non-Foundational Cultures: Some History(2b)

o James continues:

You perceive that there is a problem here. Where our ideas cannot copy definitely their object, what does agreement with that object mean? Some idealists seem to say that they are true whenever they are what God means that we ought to think about that object. Others hold the copy-view all through, and speak as if our ideas possessed truth just in proportion as they approach to being copies of the Absolute's eternal way of thinking. This thesis is what I have to defend. The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself…

❖ Foundational versus Non-Foundational Cultures: Some History (3)

o Richard Rorty further developed this perspective up to the time of his death in 2007:

Socrates and Plato suggested that if we tried hard enough we should find beliefs which everybody found intuitively plausible, and that among these would be moral beliefs whose implications, when clearly realized, would make us virtuous as well as knowledgeable... unwobbling pivots that determine the answer to the question: Which moral or political alternative is objectively valid? For Deweyan pragmatists like me, history and anthropology are enough to show that there are no unwobbling pivots, and that seeking objectivity is just a matter of getting as much intersubjective agreement as you can manage.

o "Intersubjective agreement": clearly the same as the Daoist idea of a "truth" only coming from consensus.

❖ Foundational versus Non-Foundational Cultures: A Quick Look at Science (1)

o Prominent pockets of monist non-foundational perspectives exist in the sciences as well as in Western philosophy…

o Strong flavor of non-foundational monist thought in Darwin and in the modern understandings of biological evolution.

o Contemporary picture of biological evolution: ongoing change in the absence either of a (transcendent) designer or a (higher) objective

o Life forms both contribute to and are in turn influenced by broader patterns of bio-geo-chemical processes — as part of the whole living system at any given time.

❖ **Foundational versus Non-Foundational Cultures: A Quick Look at Science (2a)**

o Physics: in its general form, an archetypal example of a dualist, foundational perspective, but there are clear instances of non-foundational monism…

o Einstein's theory of special relativity presented idea that distance and time are not fixed, but actually vary with motion — thus can not serve as support for some dualist system as a fixed, eternal, and/or transcendent absolute.

o General relativity theory expanded this concept — that gravity, too, affects local space and time. Thus force, space, and time are all, in a sense, "unified," with *none as fixed background or reference*.

❖ Foundational versus Non-Foundational Cultures: A Quick Look at Science (2b)

o David Bohm further attacked the "objectivist" worldview with, in collaboration with Stanford neuroscientist Karl Pribram — development of the holonomic model of the brain. Directly related to their ideas of a rather different kind of physics, where observed phenomena are reflections of a kind of "whole," rather than individuated events.

o Others have seen the universe itself as a system, without, again, a single set of organizing principles, but as an autonomous entity in the true sense of that word — growing and creating its own *nomoi* as it evolves. (Such an idea has been popularized by Stephen Wolfram in his 2002 book *A New Kind of Science*, but the concept is much older; see Konrad Zuse, *Rechnender Raum* [*"Calculating Space"*]).

❖ Foundational versus Non-Foundational Cultures: Some Questions for Our Model (1)

o Non-foundational cultures: *How do non-foundational cultures evolve in the absence of a fixed point for understanding?* In general evolution, one does not require any "fixed points"; it is a process that depends only on random change and internal dynamics.

o Foundational cultures: *What is it that a notion of a second, transcendent/eternal world, is actually used for in foundational cultures*?

o Why do foundational cultures have fixed points when they don't seem to need them? What is to be gained by being conscious? Do we actually need plans, intentions, and ambitions in our individual lives, and if so why?

❖ Foundational versus Non-Foundational Cultures: The Problems of the Bipartite Brain (1)

o As we walk along, we conclude that the world is flat.

o From reasoning on a wider, abstract level, we conclude that the world is round.

o However, one might need to adjudicate between different understandings…

  o In foundationalist cultures, one conceives a fixed "reality" as a device to try and decide between these two.

  o In monist or non-foundational cultures, the differing understandings are accepted without appeal to such a mediating device.

  o Questions about which of two understandings are "really" the case are characteristics of dualist or foundational cultures, but not of monist or non-foundational ones.

❖ Foundational versus Non-Foundational Cultures: The Problems of the Bipartite Brain (2)

o What this suggests is:

  o primordial human cultures may have been monist/non-foundationalist and…

  o the current prevalence of dualist/foundational cultures may reflect one or more events where there arose conflict between understandings of the cognitive unconscious and the storyteller.

o From this perspective, it is interesting to peer into the (pre-?) historical record and ask: Is the presumption of primordial non-foundational human cultures is a reasonable one?

o Also: What sorts of events might have produced conflicts of the sort that would yield dualist cultures? Is some explanation for their current prevalence?

❖ **Foundation versus Non-Foundational Cultures:**
Looking to the Origins of the Split and the Evolution of a Schismatic Mind (1)

o We have already examined some history, but on a deeper level, we end with this as our "jumping-off point"…

o Where and when did the split take place? Origin is lost, but we find traces…

o Epicurus (341-270 B.C.E.) rejects the existence of the Platonic "Forms," and the transcendental realm that those implied, and through his "many worlds" idea rejects any absolutes ethics.

❖ **Foundation versus Non-Foundational Cultures:**
Looking to the Origins of the Split and the Evolution of a Schismatic Mind (2)

o The scholar Suzuki describes the concept of the *dao* as a move distinctly *away* from absolutes, and away from framing Daoism in any kinds of terms of a transcendental absolutism:

> The Tao is our actually walking on this "way" or coursing on or through it. No, it is more than that. It is the walking itself, or the coursing itself, which is Tao. The Tao is not where we follow the way as indicated in the map. We are the Tao, the walker and the Tao are the same. Confucius also talks about the Tao... but his Tao is more objective and lies outside us.

o A clear contrast between this monist approach and that of Confucius, who makes a foundationalist model out of Daoism.

❖ Next Steps… (1)

o First Paper: Further development of the definitions of foundational and non-foundational thinking in first paper…

o Second Paper:

- o elaboration of the historical examples of foundational versus non-foundational thinking and a conjecture into the origin of the split (through examination of myth, early philosophical writings, etc.)

- o a statement on *the impact* of foundationalist thought…

❖ Next Steps… (2)

o The impact of foundationalist thought — some first insights…

o The sociologist and theologian Peter L. Berger:

- o In the highly modernized Western countries the process of abstraction has gone so far that a great effort is required to wrench free of it, even in a simple act of perception (let along in actual living). In the countries of the Third World the collision between modernizing abstraction and older, more concrete forms of human thought and experience can be observed every day, often in dramatic situations.

o The scholar George Steiner:

- o The result of this incessant dialectic [between the transcendent and the everyday] was a profound unbalance at the pivot of Western culture, a corrosive pressure on the subconscious. Once again, as with abstract monotheism, men had enforced upon them ideals, norms of conduct, out of all natural grasp. And again, these challenges to perfection continued to weigh on individual lives, on social systems, in which they could not be honestly met.

❖ Question Session