

**The Fully Functioning Society: A Humanistic-Existential Vision of an Actualizing,  
Socially-Just Future**

Short title: A humanistic vision for society

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**Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to address the question, “What kind of future society would we, in the humanistic psychology movement, want to see?” The paper argues that a “good” society is one in which people can actualize their wants to a maximum extent, and where each person has an equal opportunity to do so. The paper suggests that suggest maximization of wants can be achieved through the development of synergies: means of actualizing wants that help, rather than hinder, others from actualizing their own wants. On this basis, it is argued that a future society should encourage the actualization of wants that are inherently synergetic -- such as the desire for relatedness and compassion for others -- while also helping people to find non-dysergetic ways of actualizing more individualistic wants. In particular, it is argued that a society that values creativity and diversity can help people to actualize needs for competence and significance without undermining this in others. The paper then goes on to consider strategies for ensuring equality of opportunity to actualize wants; before considering the role that humanistic psychology can play in this process.

Keywords

social justice

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“A squat grey building of only thirty-four stories. Over the main entrance the words, CENTRAL LONDON HATCHERY AND CONDITIONING CENTRE, and, in a shield, the World State’s motto, COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, STABILITY.”

As a teenager, I was fascinated by the dystopian vision laid out by Aldous Huxley (2007, p. xxx) in *Brave New World*. This was a society of absolute mechanization, dehumanization, and social control; of social hierarchies instilled from birth. Perhaps, most disturbingly, it was a world in which people could no longer establish, or strive towards, personal meanings. The possibilities of an authentic existence had been drowned out beneath the clamor of “the They” (Heidegger, 1962).

It was also a vision of the future that contrasted sharply with the Shangri-la that my parents had instilled in me as a child: of a communist utopia (see Cooper, 2006). This was a world without social stratifications, inequality or suffering. There was no need for money. It was a society, my parents explained, that thrived on the innate goodness of humankind. It was the end of history.

So what kind of future society would those of us in the humanistic psychology movement like to see? Perhaps a first point to make is that it feels somewhat uncomfortable trying to answer this question. Any vision will inevitably be idealistic, over-simplistic and open to ridicule -- “utopian”, by definition. However, if we, as a social movement, do not articulate the kind of society that we would like to see, we may make it more difficult for ourselves to achieve progress in this direction. As we know from the research, setting clear and explicit goals facilitates their attainment (Locke & Latham, 2002). Moreover, without a

positive vision for the future, there is the danger that we, in the humanistic psychology movement, can fall into cynicism and curmudgeonliness: criticizing the ideas of others, but without putting forward any positive alternatives in their stead.

From an existential standpoint (e.g., Heidegger, 1962), it can also be argued that there is always a future in the present, even if we do not admit it. That is, we always have some implicit sense of where we are going towards. Hence, the question is not whether we have a vision of the future or not, but whether we are explicit about it or not. By being explicit, we give ourselves the opportunity to develop and refine our vision through dialogue and critical self-reflection. It also gives us a chance to communicate these ideas more effectively to others.

The aim of this paper, then, is to ask the question, “What kind of future society might we, in the humanistic psychology movement, want to see?” That is, “What kind of society do we think will be a ‘good’ one: that actualizes our values, our beliefs about human nature, and also our commitment to social justice?” Of course, the aim of this paper is not to provide definitive answers. Rather, through building on the work of Maslow (1971), Fromm (1991), and other humanistic existential social theorists, it aims to bring this question to the fore, and look at ways by which we might go about addressing it.

### **What Makes a Society “Good”?**

A starting point for addressing this question is to ask what we, in the humanistic psychology movement, might define as a “good” society. Across philosophy and the social sciences, this question has been answered in many ways. For utilitarians, for instance, a good society is one that promotes the greatest amount of happiness -- that is, the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain -- across its population (Mill, 1972). Maslow (1971, p. 7),

on the other hand, a founding father of the humanistic psychology movement, defined a good society as one that, “fosters the fullest development of human potentials.” This could be considered a modified utilitarian position. There remains an emphasis on maximizing the quality of human experiencing but, as with other existential and humanistic writers (e.g., van Deurzen, 2009), this quality is not equated solely with happiness. Rather, it is understood in terms of living authentically, meaningfully, and actualizing one’s potential.

In my own work, adopting a position that is more teleological than Maslow (1971), I have argued that a good society is one that maximizes the extent to which people can actualize their *wants* (Cooper, 2012, 2013, 2014). Here, wants refers to the things that people desire; and particularly their “highest order” wants, such as relatedness, autonomy and competence (self-determination theory, Ryan & Deci, 2000). Actualization, in this context, refers to the fulfilment of wants (for instance, experiencing intimacy); but also an orientation towards wants (for instance, knowing that being close to others is meaningful for us), and a sense of moving towards our wants (for instance, feeling that we are getting better at forming relationships with others). As with Maslow’s social philosophy, this approach is similar to utilitarianism in that it defines a good society in terms of maximizing the overall quality of human living. However, as a modified form of utilitarianism, it does not assume that this quality has a single, universal source. Rather, from a “person-centered” and pluralistic standpoint (Berlin, 2003; Cooper & McLeod, 2011), it holds that a quality of living must ultimately be defined by the individual themselves, in terms of what it is that they wish to strive for in their lives.

A good society, then, can be defined as one in which as many people get as much of what they want as much of the time. However, this statement, in itself, does not say anything about the distribution of wants. That is, supposing that 80% of the people could get all of

their wants actualized, but at the cost that the other 20% had their wants impeded. Would that be a good society? From a classic humanistic position, such a question might be considered redundant, on the grounds that the maximization of wants and their equitable distribution are synonymous. For Rogers (1961), for instance, as we actualize our human potentiality, so we free up our innate tendency towards prosociality. Hence, the more that a society supports people to actualize their authentic wants, the more it will inherently strive to ensure their equitable, socially just distribution. Equally, it could be argued that the question is redundant because greater equity inherently leads to greater wellbeing and actualization. Wilkinson and Pickett (2010), for instance, have shown that more equal societies have better psychological, social and health outcomes; and they attribute this to lower levels of envy and social comparison. In addition, research indicates that contributing to the wellbeing of others is one of the greatest sources of personal fulfilment (Sheldon & Schmuck, 2001).

On the other hand, however, it can be argued that the principal of maximizing the actualization of wants, and the principal of ensuring their equitable distribution, are essentially independent. That is, it is quite possible for the majority of a population to maximize its wellbeing, while turning a blind eye -- or even causing -- the suffering of a minority. Certainly, this is a position that some writers on the existential and humanistic spectrum have argued: for instance, Fanon (1961) in relation to colonial privilege.

Given the limited evidence to show that these two principals are wholly inter-related, it may be safest, at the present time, to work on the basis that they are independent -- at least to some degree. That is, that any vision for the future needs to consider means for ensuring the equitable distribution of wants, *as well as* their overall maximization. However, as will be discussed later in this paper, exploring the relationship between these two principals is a key area for further research activity.

### **The Synergy Principle**

So how can a society achieve this? Let us begin with the first question, of maximizing the actualization of wants. And let us ask this question under the assumption of limited resources. That is, that a society cannot just create more food, land or leisure time: it is restricted in how much it can meet people's wants.

To address this question, we can begin by noting a critical feature of wants: the principal of *equifinality*. This means that the same want can be achieved through multiple means. That is, person A is not restricted to actualizing want K through means X. They may also be able to actualize it through means Y, Z or various others means. As a concrete example, Jeff may have a desire to feel good about himself. He can actualize this through going for a run; but he can also actualize it through giving to charity. And when Jeff shouts at people while he is driving, he also experiences a temporary boost to his sense of self-worth. Equally, other members of this society can actualize their want for self-worth in a range of ways: some of which may be similar to Jeff, some of which may be different. So Amrita, for instance, feels good about herself also when she goes for a run; and she can also enhance her sense of self-worth by buying records and listening to new music, and by keeping in mind her personal strengths.

Now we can envisage three potential kinds of relationships between the means of Person A towards their goal (e.g., means X), and the means of Person B towards their goal (e.g., means U). It may be that X and U have a *synergetic*, or win-win, relationship. That is, the more that Person A does of X, the more it helps Person B do U (and potentially vice versa). For instance, through giving his records to charity shops, Jeff feels good about himself, and he also makes it more likely that Amrita can feel good about herself through

buying these records from a charity shop. Second, it may be that X and U have a *dysergetic*, or win-lose, relationship. That is, the more that Person A does of X, the more it impedes Person B from doing U (and potentially vice versa). So, for instance, Jeff can temporarily feel good about himself when he shouts at other drivers in his car. But this means of boosting his self-worth fundamentally undermines Amrita's attempts to maintain her sense of self-worth, by keeping in mind her personal strengths. In addition, it may be that X and U have a *neutral* relationship. That is, the extent to which Person A does X has no bearing on the extent to which Person B does U. For instance, Jeff feels better about himself when he goes for a run, but it has no impact on Amrita's capacity to boost her self-worth by going for a run. Nor her ability to feel good about herself by buying new music or reminding herself of her strengths.

What this illustration shows is that, within the same set of resources, the overall amount to which people actualize their wants can be higher or lower. And the key to this is the degree of synergy that exists in the way that people strive to actualize their wants. That is, if a society supports people to actualize their wants in synergetic ways, more people are able to get more of what they want more of the time. If, on the other hand, it encourages people to actualize their wants in dysergetic ways, then the overall extent to which people can get what they want will be reduced. An example of this is the extent to which a society supports and encourages violence. Violence can be seen as one means by which people strive to get what they want, be it status or resources. But it is also a highly dysergetic one, in that one person's actualization of their wants is likely to have a profoundly negative impact on another. Hence, while a humanistic or existential perspective can acknowledge the intelligibility behind violence, it can also point to the "badness" of it, for it reduces the overall attainment of wants within a society. And it can also point to the inherent "goodness"



of dialogue and negotiation, because these are means by which people can work out how to attain their wants in the most compatible ways. Synergies have a certain “magical” quality in that, effectively, they create something out of nothing. They are a way of getting more out without putting more in.

Maslow (1971) was very aware of the importance of the concept of synergy. In his paper “Synergy in the social and in the individual”, he describes social arrangement in both traditional and contemporary cultures that have high synergy (such as philanthropy) and low synergy (such as the college grading system, where one person’s success is another’s failure). And, indeed, as with the present paper, Maslow suggests that the synergy principle, “opens up the way for a supracultural system of values by which to evaluate a culture and everything within it,” because it “furnishes a scientific basis for Utopian theory” (p. 199).

### **Differential Synergetic Potential**

So how can societies maximize synergetic social relationships? A first point to note here is that different wants are likely to lend themselves to synergies to greater or lesser degrees. For instance, the want for sleep is probably relatively neutral. That is, how people go about achieving it is unlikely to have much impact on others, either positive or negative.

On the other hand, relatedness has a highly synergetic potential. This is because, by definition, it is a mutual act; and it requires, and supports the actualization of, the same want in another. When we love someone, or cherish them, or experience deep relational contact with them (Mearns & Cooper, 2005), we support their potential to experience the same feelings towards us. Love begets love, friendship fosters friendship, community draws out communal feelings in others: the want for relatedness the potential to support the actualization of the same wants in others. And this synergetic potential extends to many

other relational-type wants. For instance, the desire to be compassionate to others, to care for others, or to live a life of virtue all have the potential to contribute to the wellbeing of others, as well as the self. Sexual desire too: it is not always the case, but where one person's sexual arousal and pleasure catalyzes those same feelings in another, there is an enormous potential for synergy.

Identifying the types of wants that have the greatest synergetic potential is important because it indicates the kinds of goals and values that a society may be best off being oriented towards. Here, for instance, the analysis would suggest that a society that can nurture interpersonal relatedness and "social capital" would do well for its citizens. How could it do that? It might, for instance, foster relational skills in its young people at an early age; or support the strengthening of local communities; or help people develop their abilities in the art of loving, friendship and sex. In our current society, for instance, there are probably many more classes on car mechanics than on how to maintain and develop friendships. And yet, the current analysis would suggest that the latter may have much more potential to increase the wellbeing of a society as a whole.

### **Attaining Competence**

In contrast to relatedness, there may be wants that have lower synergetic potential, or actively lend themselves towards dysergy. Of particular significance here may be the desire for competence, one of self-determination theory's three highest level needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Competence differs from relatedness because it tends to be defined *in contrast to* others, rather than *alongside* others. That is, as Maslow (1971) notes in relation to college grades -- and as empirical research has demonstrated (Morse & Gergen, 1970) -- our sense of self-worth is in contrast, at least to some extent, to the worth we perceive in others. This

means that if we see others doing well, it can make us feel worse about ourselves; and, if we see others doing badly, it can boost our relative sense of self-competency. In this respect, it could be argued that the desire for competence has an inherently dysergetic potential: in striving to attain it, we may be drawn into undermining the competence of others, rather than enhancing it.

For my parents, from their communist perspective, the solution here was to eradicate competitive strivings: if no one tried to do better than anyone, then no-one could feel worse. Yet from a self-determination theory perspective (Ryan & Deci, 2000), the desire for feelings of competence are as innate as the desire for relatedness. And the same could be said for such potentially dysergetic wants as the desires for autonomy, uniqueness or significance. That is, these wants have the potential to pull human beings in opposing directions, but they may also be inherent to the human condition; and, indeed, from an existential or humanistic stance, essential to wellbeing (e.g., May, 1983). In fact, from this perspective, the failure of Soviet-style communism can, perhaps, be attributed to its “brutal contempt for individual dignity” (Fromm, 1961, p. 4). That is, its unwillingness to recognize that human beings need to achieve, differentiate and actualize themselves (Maslow’s, 1968, "growth motivations"), and not only have their “deficiency” needs met.

So what kind of society might allow more people to achieve more feelings of competence without undermining the self-worth of others? Here, it might be argued that one of the problems with our contemporary western society is that success is judged according to only a very few narrow criteria, such as employment status, money and physical appearance. This means that there are only a small number of avenues by which people can achieve, and that we are constantly thrown up against one another to attain a sense of self-worth. Imagine a small group of people, for instance, where there is only one criterion for success: say

attractiveness. Here, one person “wins”, a few others may feel good enough, and at least half the people feel less than average. Now imagine the same group where there are many different criteria for “success”: say attractiveness, fitness, friendliness, creativity, and articulateness. Here, by creating a differentiated field of accomplishment, there is the potential for many more people to experience a sense of achievement.

What is being argued here, then, is that a future society may be “good” to the extent that it prizes accomplishments in a diverse number of domains. So, for instance, people are not just venerated for being rich or beautiful; but also for being loyal friends, or skilled baristas, or talented bus drivers. Every walk of life has the potential to have areas in which people can excel, and can be recognized for excelling. And such a society also needs to support a growing specialization of activities. So it is not just, for instance, that people are beer makers; but makers of porter, or lambic beers, or cream ales. And within each one of these specialties grows sub-specialties that people can excel in.

What this points towards is the value a “craft-based society”: people, working individually or collective, to produce -- and exchange -- things that have been forged through their own skills and experience. A brilliant porter brewer here, a brilliant cream ale maker there: each can be recognized for excellence in their own field without impinging on the self-worth of others. And here, in contrast to the system of industrial mass production, the worker is no longer a “crippled”, “alienated” appendage of the commodities that they produce (Fromm, 1961). Rather, their work is a free and unalienated expression of their authentic being.

Central to the functioning of this specialized, craft-based society would be a valuing of creativity. Not only because creativeness is a natural expression of the authentic, actualizing individual (Maslow, 1971; Rogers, 1961), but because creativity is an inherently

*heterogenic* force (i.e., facilitating diversity). That is, creativity generates new possibilities, new domains, and new areas for growth: not only porters and cream ales, for instance, but coconut lagers, midnight blue beers, and Sumerian-inspired Stone Age ales. And with each of these creative developments comes the possibility for new specializations and more, new, creative evolutions. Through creativity, society has the capacity to branch outwards, to differentiate and grow; and, by doing so, it create the conditions by which a larger number of human beings can succeed concomitantly.

With this, also, would come a prizing of cultural differences and diversity. Cultural heterogeneity provides a means whereby each person can actualize their authentic being as a unique and distinctive person. It allows people to tap into deep veins of tradition and wisdom, but in a way that contributes to -- rather than detracts from -- the wisdom of others. Cultures are like the threads of color within a tapestry: distinctive, but essential constituents of the beauty of the textile as a whole. Here, we may be referring to ethnically-based cultures, but we can also extend this logic to cultures based around gender, sexuality, or any other dimension. In recent years, for instance, there has been a flourishing of trans and gender variant identities: for instance “agendered”, “bigendered”, “genderfluid”, and “genderqueer”. All these have the potential to help people express their unique, authentic identities; but in a way that makes for a richer, fuller and more stimulating world for everyone. Indeed, this is an example of a powerful synergy of wants across a population.

### **Equalizing Opportunities**

What, however, of social justice? Do the strategies outlined here for maximizing the actualization of wants necessitate their more equitable distribution? To some extent, they may. Through a greater emphasis on relatedness, for instance, the values of mutuality and

care for others should come more fully to the fore; as would a rejection of oppressive or exploitative modes of relating. And with more opportunities to succeed in a greater number of activities, there should be more “haves” and less “have nots”. A prizing of difference and diversity, of course, would also contribute to a fairer society: with fewer blocks placed in people’s ways out of prejudice and discrimination. However, these are *post hoc* arguments, and there may be many other forms of social injustice, more deeply engrained, that are not simply allayed by a greater emphasis on synergetic activities.

What this means for the present analysis is that the vision presented here must be supplemented by understandings and methods from the field of social justice. Not only, for instance, do we need to prioritize relatedness, but we need to do it in a way that equalizes access to it. Similarly, a “good” craft-based society needs to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to express, and actualize, their creative desires. A commitment to social justice requires us to “keep an eye to the margins”: to remain mindful of how a striving to actualize wants across society may disadvantage some and advantage others. This may point towards the importance of government in any future society, which can hold a wider overview of the distribution of opportunities, and ensure that everyone has potential to actualize their wants. Here, however, is a complex relationship that needs much greater consideration. As argued above, for instance, if a state tries to impose an absolute equality on all its members, this may lead to an overall reduction in want attainment. Perhaps the answers here lie in a delicate dance between the principle of social justice and the principle of maximizing the actualization of wants; or, perhaps, an exploration of the points at which these two principals are synergetically related.

## **Discussion**

How might the humanistic psychology movement go about contributing to the development of the kind of society outlined in this paper?

One of the key findings that comes out of research on the “prisoner’s dilemma” game (in which two players have to decide whether to cooperate with, or defect on, each other) is the centrality of trust to win-win, synergetic relationship (Axelrod, 1984; Wright, 2000). Synergies are like an arch bridge, they cannot be built up one side at a time. Rather, they require both sides to be prepared, and to trust and have faith that the other side will be ready to meet them. Once the synergy is established, like the setting of a key stone in the arch bridge, they can be extremely strong; but until that time they are highly vulnerable to collapse. Hence, for instance, as argued earlier, the prizing of people with gender variant identities has the potential to be a powerful synergetic act. However, it requires members of the gender variant group to trust that they can “come out” without being persecuted; and members of the cisgendered majority to trust that they are not being threatened or undermined by the new gender variant. If this starts to break down -- if, for instance, the gender variant minority feels that they are being ridiculed or shamed by the cisgendered majority -- then it can lead to a vicious downward spiral of distrust, where conflictual, dysergetic relationships are more likely to come to the fore.

This issue of trust is raised because one of the unique qualities of the humanistic psychology movement is its advocacy of the view that human beings are essentially “constructive and trustworthy” (Rogers, 1961, p. 194). That is, we hold that human beings have an inherent tendency to act in prosocial, rather than antisocial, ways. Such a perspective may be of tremendous importance because, like the wood frame around which stone arch bridges used to be built, it creates the scaffolding by which synergies can be put into place. In a world in which people are assumed to be destructive, irrational and selfish, it may be

hard for people to take the leap of faith that synergies require. By contrast, if people hold a basic trust in humankind, they may be more willing to hold out for constructive solutions, in the belief that others are seeking these too.

In the humanistic psychology movement, we are also adept at helping people communicate more effectively with others: a second key ingredient of win-win relationships in the prisoner's dilemma game (Axelrod, 1984; Wright, 2000). If people cannot communicate effectively, they are less likely to know what the other is "up to", and more likely to develop suspicions and unease. By helping people to trust, recognize and articulate their true feelings and experiences -- along with developing skills for dialogue and negotiation (Cooper, Chak, Cornish, & Gillespie, 2012) -- the humanistic psychology movement can support people to become more assertive and transparent in their communications, and thereby more able to enter synergetic relationships.

From a humanistic therapy standpoint, we can also support this social movement by helping people to understand more of why they do not trust, and why they fail to actualize synergies in their lives. Indeed, I have argued that, in essence, every therapeutic process consists of helping people find greater synergies: both on the inter- and intrapersonal plane (Cooper, 2012, 2013, 2014). In other words, when we do therapy, what we are essentially doing is helping clients to actualize more of their wants more of time, by helping them find more synergetic ways of doing this. For instance, by learning to talk about their feelings in a safe way, a client can move from the position of "*either* I express my vulnerabilities or feel positive about myself," to "I can express my vulnerabilities *and* still feel positive about myself." Alternatively, a client may move from a position of "either my partner is going to be happy or I am" to one of finding ways in which both partners may be satisfied. Hence, at the individual or dyadic level, humanistic therapies can support a move towards the existence



of greater synergies in the world; and also a culture in which people are more skilled at looking for -- and trusting in -- synergetic solutions.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has laid out a vision for a “good” future society, based on a particular reading of humanistic and existential themes. It is a vibrant and colorful world -- a “rainbow society” -- in which all people have the opportunity to achieve meaning and significance in their lives. It is a society that fosters specialization, and in which there is the potential for ongoing creative development as new possibilities and opportunities unfurl. It is not a conflict free world, but it is a society which encourages and supports people towards synergetic acts, so that the good of one contributes to the good of others. And it is a society that welcomes and celebrates relatedness in all its form: love, intimacy, friendship, community. This world is, of course, speculative, but it is derived from a set of principles that are specific and grounded either in evidence or ethics.

No doubt, there are many other principles -- humanistic, existential or otherwise -- on which we could develop a vision for the future. However, the main aim of this paper is not to promote a particular set of assumptions or future world view. Rather, my hope in this paper is to invite us, as a humanistic psychology community, back to the question of the kind of world we would like to see: to develop, discuss and debate the sort of society that we are hoping for. As a field, as people with deep insights into the process of human growth and development, we may have much to contribute to the evolution of a more rewarding, more socially just society.

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