

The Perennial Psychology

A TIMELESS APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING HUMAN NATURE

FIRST EDITION



JONATHAN COOK

Editor-in-Chief of LiveReal.com

“Know thyself”

- THE DELPHIC ORACLE

*“If most of us remain ignorant of ourselves,
it is because self-knowledge is painful
and we prefer the pleasures of illusion.”*

- ALDOUS HUXLEY

PUBLISHED BY:

LiveReal.com

8601 Lincoln Blvd
Suite 180 #572
Los Angeles, CA 90045

© Copyright 2020

LiveReal LLC. All Rights Reserved.

May be shared with copyright and credit left intact.

www.LiveReal.com

info@LiveReal.com

THE PERENNIAL PSYCHOLOGY

A Timeless Approach to Understanding Human Nature

(in a nutshell)

Below is a brief summary of the book “The Perennial Psychology,” by the author.

The following pages describe some of the key conclusions that were arrived at through the course of the book. It’s fairly brief.

On the negative side, they don’t present the evidence that led to those conclusions. They’re “back of the book answers,” so to speak, that don’t “show the math.”

The full version of the book does “show the math.” It includes the evidence, assumptions, and insights from various thinkers and traditions that led to the conclusions presented here.

The primary topic here – the “self” – is as personal as it gets, by definition. Because of that, the usual approach at LiveReal is the opposite: present evidence first, and let readers to come to their own conclusions.

That said, the book is long, and time, these days, is often short. The below, then, tries to say a lot in a few words.

Hope you enjoy it.

Introduction

“Know Thyself.”

The advice “Know thyself” has been around for thousands of years.

The phrase implies that we *don't already* “know ourselves.”

But how could that be true? How can we *not* know ourselves? Aren't our “selves” what we know *best*?

We're often encouraged to enjoy ourselves, distract ourselves, and esteem ourselves, but rarely to *know* ourselves.

This is no small matter. After all, for each of us, it concerns something as intimate and important as it gets: our own *self*.

Given that, it seems like a question worth exploring.

1) How can we Understand Ourselves?

If our aim is to “Know Thyself” – how can we?

*“...man must find his own Soul.”
- Chandogya Upanishad*

*“To attain any assured knowledge about the soul
is one of the most difficult things in the world.”
- Aristotle*

*“People will do anything, no matter how absurd,
to avoid facing their own souls.”
- Carl Gustav Jung*

If we want self-knowledge and not mere distractions, modern life offers several different routes.

Science. Philosophy. Religious traditions (based on revelation). “Common sense.” Introspection. Art. Spirituality. One’s own feelings. And so on.

What approach works best? Which of these can help the individual navigate life?

Each approach has both strengths and limitations. Philosophy is good at thinking things through by way of reason and logic, for example. Psychology excels at rigorous empirical experimentation. Common sense works for practical applications to everyday life. And so on.

Spirituality has played a central role in human life for the entirety of known history. If we really want to understand ourselves, we can’t ignore this. Spirituality must be acknowledged, and not in a peripheral way. Academic psychology makes an effort to be “spiritually neutral,” but fails.

These various approaches sometimes squabble, contradict, and compete with one another. But to limit ourselves here – to see only empirical scientific research as valid, for example, and all others as invalid – narrows our view, unnecessarily.

The approach that seems likely to work best, then, is a multi-pronged approach with a system of “checks and balances.”

Refusing to limit ourselves here liberates us. If we’re serious about solving the problem, we’ll want to use every possible weapon in our arsenal. We can throw everything we have at it.

2) What makes us tick?

Why do we do what we do?

“If a plant cannot live according to its nature, it dies;
and so does a man.”

- *Henry David Thoreau*

“We are far indeed from knowing all we want.”

- *Francois duc de La Rochefoucauld*

Many great thinkers throughout history have boiled human behavior down to a few core, underlying motives: sex (Freud), power (Nietzsche), self-esteem (Rogers), death (Becker), meaning (Frankl), and so on.

There are nearly as many theories as there are theorists. Each perspective is valid in ways. But what we need, it seems, isn't a grand reduction of motives down to a single, all-encompassing one, but a larger, “meta” framework that allows room for each of these motives. Each of the thinkers mentioned above assume this framework, either implicitly or explicitly.

The framework suggested here goes something like this.

The human being lives at the intersection of opposing forces. For example: happiness vs misery, perfection vs imperfection, survival vs mortality, and so on.

The opposition between these forces create a general state of tension.

We long for release from this tension, or a resolution to it, in multiple ways. Some efforts to resolve it are more successful than others. What we want, ultimately, is an ultimate resolution to the ultimate tension.

So, what is the “ultimate resolution to the ultimate tension”? This longing for a direct experience of “ultimate resolution” could be described as a longing for “God.” Many thinkers and traditions throughout history have expressed this idea in various ways.

“The young man who rings the bell at the brothel
is unconsciously looking for God.”

- *Bruce Marshall*

3) The Origins of Human Nature

Where did “human nature” come from?

“Such widespread phenomena as depression, aggression and addiction are not understandable unless we recognize the existential vacuum underlying them.”

- Viktor Frankl

“The essential error of all the false methods lies in the fact that the proposed remedy does not reach the root-cause of the natural man’s misery. Critical analysis of man’s condition does not go deep enough into the determining cause of his inner phenomena; it does not follow the links of this chain down to the original phenomenon. It stops too quickly at the symptoms.”

- Hubert Benoit

“Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs” is a popular, simple, and useful map of human motives. It works by assuming several human “needs,” and then proceeds to label, describe and organize them. It implies that our primary task in life is to “satisfy our needs” as we “climb” the “hierarchy.” It’s silent, for the most part, about the origin or nature of those needs. The question of where they came from, or why they are what they are, is left largely unexplored.

Spiritual and philosophical traditions, however – Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Taoism, Platonism, and others – offer perspectives on the nature of those needs. There are broad areas of agreement across these traditions where core ideas overlap. They describe many of the same things in different ways using different languages and metaphors.

These areas of overlap are available in our direct and immediate experience:

- I) Existentially, a Core Disorientation;
- II) Emotionally, a Core Dissatisfaction;
- III) Intellectually, a Core Ignorance; and
- IV) a Core Vacuum at the Center.

This state of affairs creates a “problem,” which is the origin of drama. Our efforts to solve this “problem” unfold to become the “stories” of our lives. In this way, we spend our lives working to solve the riddle of ourselves.

4) What We're Made of: Our Inner Architecture

What are we made of? What are the ingredients of our "selves"?

"Our ordinary life only touches the fringe of personality, it does not cause a commotion in the deepest parts of the soul."
- D. T. Suzuki

A car is "made up of" wheels, a frame, an engine, and other parts. But what are human beings made up of?

A brief survey reveals common denominators – to the point of unanimous agreement – between Hinduism, Plato, Aristotle, Buddhism, Christianity (Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, etc), Sufism, Gurdjieff, Aurobindo, and others.

- the intellectual center ("mind") | to think
- the emotional center ("heart") | to feel
- the doing center ("will") | to act

"Consciousness" or awareness connects these three centers as a kind of unifying thread.

But is this all there is?

No. Freud, Jung and others posited the "subconscious," or parts of ourselves that we aren't often aware of. Plato said that "all learning is remembering," implying that we have a memory of some sort of knowledge that can be coaxed up to the surface of awareness. Socrates described himself as a "midwife," which implies that he helped individuals "give birth" to something. But what? In other words, what lies at the bottom of the subconscious?

We can describe this "something" as the "higher component of human nature." It's been referred to by many names – eg, the "real self" the "Self," and so on.

But what is it, exactly? It seems to be something that we intuit as a unique, special, central source of hope and idealism that is typically buried or hidden in us. It's the force behind stories of the "triumph of the human spirit." For lack of a better word, we can call this the "conscience." It's a source of knowledge within us. ("con" as "with," "science" as "knowledge").

If this truly exists, it carries implications. It means that over the course of life, we can either make this source of knowledge more conscious, or to bury it more deeply.

5) Our Great Task in Life

Having mapped our “ingredients,” what do we do with them?

“A person’s salvation lies precisely in his becoming a person.”
- Soren Kierkegaard

“Seek your own salvation with diligence.”
- The Buddha’s final words

Kierkegaard said that “a person’s salvation lies precisely in his becoming a person.” The Buddha’s final words were, “Seek your own salvation with diligence.” Putting these together, we can gather, then, that “each of us should seek to become a person.”

But what does that really mean? As paradoxical as that sounds, we could phrase it differently: we should seek to *become ourselves*.

This, as it turns out, is a difficult challenge. It rarely goes as planned. We begin life as a kind of do-it-yourself furniture assembly kit. The pieces are all there, but our task is to assemble them into some sort of working order. This seems to happen automatically early in life. But beyond a certain point, it stops. From there, it’s up to us.

Our “great task,” then, is first to 1) become a self, and then to 2) go beyond the self, or become “selfless.”

6) The Battlefield of the Heart

How does our “Great Task” in life succeed or fail?

“...and the battlefield is the heart of man.”
- Fyodor Dostoyevsky

“This is the place where the most terrible fight must be fought.
And where is this place?
In a person’s innermost being.”
- Soren Kierkegaard

“He who conquers other is strong;
He who conquers himself is mighty.”
- Tao Te Ching, XXXIII

“He who has conquered himself by the Self, he is at peace with himself;
but he whose self is unconquered becomes his own enemy.”
- Bhagavad Gita, VI 6

“...remember the battle, do no more.”
- Job 41:8

As discussed in the earlier chapters, we have a “higher potential” that we can either use or lose. It’s not unlike the way a caterpillar has the “potential” to become a butterfly, or the way an acorn has the potential to become an oak. In the same way, we can either develop this potential (the “conscience,” or the higher faculties of our nature) – or bury it more deeply.

That, as Dostoyevsky phrased it, is “the battlefield is in the heart of man.”

Based on how this “battle” develops, we develop “compensations” and “masks.” Our “self” grows either stronger or weaker as time passes. It becomes either more *integrated* or *dis-integrated*.

An example of “dis-integration” of self is addiction. In addiction, an otherwise minor desire (such as an enjoyment of video games or beer, for example) eventually takes over and dominates the entire self.

But if addiction is a form of the “wrong order” of things, then what is the “right” order?

Here, the analogy of the kingdom is employed. A healthy self is like a happy kingdom, while a self that is dis-ordered is like an unhappy or dysfunctional kingdom.

7) The Inner Quest

What, then, should we do?

“...only one thing is needed.”
- Luke 10:38-42

“...exert yourself to the utmost to solve the great problem of birth and death.”
- K’ung-ku Ching-hung

“Thus men will lie on their backs, talking about the fall of man, and never make an effort to get up.”
- Henry David Thoreau

“We do not receive wisdom, we must discover it for ourselves, after a journey through the wilderness which no one else can make for us, which no one else can spare us...”
- Marcel Proust

Given the understanding of human nature outlined above, what can an individual do to maximize his or her psychological fitness, or to develop a strong, unified, fully-developed self?

As mentioned earlier, it doesn’t just happen on its own. It requires conscious effort, or “inner work.”

What, then, is this “inner work”?

That’s a big question – like asking “how does a clock work”? It can quickly become complex.

Spiritual and philosophical traditions, however, have often boiled the matter down to a few simple directives that are as far-reaching and practical as they are profound. These directives, if followed, can act as a kind of “North Star” that our psychology naturally aligns itself to.

At this point, we revisit the original dilemmas outlined in Chapter One, and explore how this dynamic can ultimately help resolve them.

Additional Content

A few alternate trails to explore.

Premodernism, Modernism, Postmodernism, and Beyond
“Emptiness” and “No-Self”: Mistaken Views
The Drama of Life: Triumph and Tragedy
Study humans objectively, or subjectively?
Various examples of polarity
On the body/mind problem
On religious skepticism
The proctologist’s view of religion
The Universality of “Human Nature”

Hi,

This is Jonathan, the author of *The Perennial Psychology*, and Editor-in-Chief of LiveReal.com.

Hope you're well. I just wanted to share a few quick thoughts.

Why did I write *The Perennial Psychology*?

Psychological health – mental clarity and emotional strength – is, of course, no small matter. Depression, anxiety, panic, addictions of every stripe, toxic stress, meaninglessness, and so on can make life miserable.

The effort to overcome these can be a battle. Yet many enter this struggle relatively unarmed. While many who work in the field of psychology have made great strides, it remains a young discipline. While I found several helpful insights within mainstream psychology, I also felt that it was missing something essential. The book is part of an effort to rectify that situation.

In that sense, the book is really one piece of a larger project.

The site, www.LiveReal.com, is an ongoing effort to help individuals confront “The Big Questions” of life in a way that leads to greater “Existential Fitness.”

That might sound a little hokey. But the aim and vision for this effort is real and tangible: a life of vitality (body), mental clarity and emotional strength (mind), intimacy or not-dysfunctional relationships (heart), all grounded in Big-Picture reality (soul). The book lays some foundation for a view of human nature that fosters this vision of “the good life.” We plan to continue building on this foundation.

It's a difficult challenge. A world free of depression, anxiety, and addiction that fosters sanity, clarity, and reality won't come easily.

But the effort continues. With your support, we'll keep working to provide tools and insights that will empower individuals to not just meet and overcome that challenge, but to thrive.

It's a heck of an adventure.

Thanks for your interest. Visit www.LiveReal.com for updates and deeper dives, and stay tuned for more.

Warm regards and all the best,

Jonathan
[LiveReal.com](http://www.LiveReal.com) | The last great frontier is yourself

To purchase *The Perennial Psychology*

go to

<https://www.amazon.com/Perennial-Psychology-Timeless-Approach-Understanding-ebook/dp/B084DTZWZB>

or visit

www.LiveReal.com