

SYNERGY IN THE SOCIETY AND IN THE INDIVIDUAL^{1, 2}

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I would like to dedicate this lecture to the memory of Ruth Benedict,³ who invented and developed the concept of synergy in a series of lectures she gave at Bryn Mawr College in 1941. This concept is not familiar only because her manuscript was lost. When I first read these lectures I was horrified to find that the copy she had given me was the only one in existence. I was afraid that she would not publish it—she seemed not to care much whether it was published or not. I was also afraid that it might be lost. This fear turned out to be well founded. Margaret Mead, her executrix, has hunted through all her files and papers, but has never been able to find the manuscript. But I had got someone to type out as many parts as possible. These excerpts are to be published soon, so I will use only a few of them in this lecture.

DEVELOPMENT AND DEFINITION OF SYNERGY

Ruth Benedict tried in her last years to overcome and to transcend the doctrine of cultural relativity with which her name has been associated incorrectly. My recollection is that she was extremely irritated by this identification. Her *Patterns of Culture* (1) she felt was essentially an essay in holism. It was a holistic rather than an atomistic effort to describe societies as unitary organisms or wholes, with a feel, a flavor, a tone that she tried to describe in her own poetic way. As you may know, she was a poet under another name.

As things stood while I was studying anthropology in 1933-1937, cultures were unique, idiosyncratic. There was no scientific way of handling them, no generalization you could make. Each one seemed

¹Presidential address to the New England Psychological Association, Boston, November 8, 1963. Some of my informal journal notes on synergy have since been published (7).

²Edited from the tape-recorded address by Larry P. Gross, Brandeis University.

³Ruth Benedict (1887-1948) was professor of anthropology, Columbia University, and a poet, under the name of Ann Singleton. Her main field of interest was the American Indian. During World War II she studied Japanese culture, furnishing basic information for Allied propaganda. Among her books are *Patterns of culture*; *Race, science and politics*; and *The chrysanthemum and the sword*.—Ed. note, HLA.

to be different from every other. There was nothing you could say about any culture except from within. Benedict kept struggling with the effort to achieve a comparative sociology. It came as it would to a poetess, in an intuitive way. She kept struggling with words which she did not dare to say in public in her capacity as a scientist, because they were normative, involved rather than cool, words that could be said over a martini but not in print.

Development. As she described it, she had huge sheets of newsprint upon which she wrote all that was known about four pairs of cultures that she selected because she felt that they were different. She had an intuition, a feeling, and she phrased it different ways which I have written down in old notes.

One culture in each pair was anxious and the other was not. One was surly (obviously an unscientific word); they were surly people and she didn't like surly people. The four cultures on the one side were all surly and nasty people, and the four on the other side were nice people. She spoke at other times, as the war threatened us, of low morale and high morale cultures. She spoke on the one hand of hatred and aggression, and on the other hand of affection. What was there general to all the four cultures that she disliked and opposite to what was general to the four that she liked? She spoke tentatively of these as insecure and secure cultures.

The good ones, the secure ones, those she liked, felt drawn to, were the Zuni, the Arapesh, the Dakota and one of the Eskimo groups (I forget which one). My own field work (unpublished) added the Northern Blackfoot as a secure culture. The nasty, surly ones, that she would shiver a little about and shudder over were the Chuckchee, the Ojibwa, the Dobu and the Kwakiutl.

She tried one after another all the generalizations that she might be able to make of these cultures, all the standard can openers, you might call them, that were available at that time. She compared them on the basis of race, geography, climate, size, wealth, complexity. But these criteria failed to work, that is, to be common to the four secure ones and absent in the four insecure ones. No integration was possible on these bases, no logic, no taxonomy. She asked, which cultures commit suicide and which don't? Which have polygamy and which don't? Which are matrilineal and which are patrilineal? Which have big houses and which have small houses? None of these principles of classification worked.

Finally what *did* work was what I can only call the *function* of

behavior rather than the overt behavior itself. She realized that behavior was not the answer, that she had to look for the function of the behavior, the meaning, what it purported, what it tried to say, what character structure it expressed. It is this jump which I think was a revolution in the theory of anthropology and of society, laying the basis for a comparative sociology, a technique for comparing societies and placing them on a continuum instead of regarding each as unique and *per se*. The following is from her manuscript:

"Take, for example, suicide. Suicide has repeatedly been shown to be related to the sociological environment; it goes up under certain conditions and goes down under others. In America it is one index of psychological catastrophe because it is an act which cuts the Gordian knot of a situation with which a man is no longer able or willing to deal. But suicide, listed as a common trait of culture, may be an act with very different significance in some other culture where it is common. In old Japan, it was the honorable act of any warrior who had lost his battle; it was an act which reinstated honor more than life—the whole duty of man in the Samurai code. In primitive society suicide is sometimes the final loving duty of a wife or sister or mother in the extravagance of mourning; it is the reaffirmation that love of a close relative is more than anything else in life and that when that relative is dead, life is no longer worthwhile. Where this is the highest moral code of such a society, suicide is a final affirmation of ideals. On the other hand, suicide in some tribes is more like the Chinese idea of suicide, as they say, "on the doorstep" of another man; meaning that suicide is an accepted way of revenging himself against one who has wronged him or against whom he holds a grudge. Such suicide in primitive tribes where it exists is the most effective, and sometimes the only, action one can take against another, and it stacks up with action at law in other cultures, not with any of the kinds of suicide we have already spoken of."

Definition. Instead of secure and insecure Benedict finally chose the concepts "high synergy" and "low synergy" which are less normative, more objective, and less open to suspicion of projection of one's own ideals and tastes. She defined these terms as follows:

"Is there any sociological condition which correlates with strong aggression and any that correlates with low aggression? All our ground plans achieve the one or the other in proportion as their social forms provide areas of mutual advantage and eliminate acts and goals that are at the expense of others in the group . . . From all

comparative material, the conclusion that emerges is that *societies where non-aggression is conspicuous have social orders in which the individual by the same act and at the same time serves his own advantage and that of the group . . .* Non-aggression occurs [in these societies] not because people are unselfish and put social obligations above personal desires, but when social arrangements make these two identical. Considered just logically, production—whether raising yams or catching fish—is a general benefit and if no man-made institution distorts the fact that every harvest, every catch adds to the village food supply, a man can be a good gardener and also be a social benefactor. He is advantaged and his fellows are advantaged . . .

“I shall speak of cultures with low synergy where the social structure provides for acts which are mutually opposed and counteractive, and of cultures with high synergy where it provides for acts which are mutually reinforcing . . . *I spoke of societies with high social synergy where their institutions insure mutual advantage from their undertakings, and societies with low social synergy where the advantage of one individual becomes a victory over another, and the majority who are not victorious must shift as they can*” (my italics).

Those societies have high synergy in which the social institutions are set up so as to transcend the polarity between selfishness and unselfishness, between self-interest and altruism, in which the person who is simply being selfish necessarily benefits other people, and in which the person who tries to be beneficial to others necessarily reaps rewards for himself. The society with high synergy is one in which virtue pays.

I would like to deal with some of the manifestations and aspects of high and low synergy. I am using my notes, which are 25 years old; and I must apologize for not knowing which is Benedict and which is my own thinking. I have made use of this concept through the years in various ways, and there has been a kind of fusion.

HIGH AND LOW SYNERGY IN PRIMITIVE SOCIETIES

Siphoning vs. funneling of wealth. With regard to the economic institutions, Benedict found that the overt, superficial, face-value kind of things—whether the society was rich or poor, etc.—did not matter. What did matter was that the secure, high synergy societies had what she called a siphon system of wealth distribution whereas the insecure, low synergy cultures had what she called funnel mechanisms of wealth distribution. I can summarize funnel mechanisms very

briefly, metaphorically; they are any social arrangement that guarantees that wealth attracts wealth, that to him that hath is given and from him that hath not is taken away, that poverty makes more poverty and wealth makes more wealth. In the secure, high synergy societies, on the contrary, wealth tends to get spread around, it gets siphoned off from the high places down to the low places. It tends, one way or another, to go from rich to poor, rather than from poor to rich.

An example of a siphon mechanism is the "giveaway" during the Sun Dance ceremony of the Northern Blackfoot Indians as I saw it. In this ceremony all the teepees of the society gathered in one huge circle. The rich men of the tribe (rich meaning those who have worked hard and accumulated a great deal), would have accumulated mounds of blankets, food, bundles of various sorts, and sometimes very pathetic things—cases of Pepsi Cola as I remember. As many possessions as a man could have accumulated during the previous year were piled up.

I am thinking of one man I saw. At one point in the ceremony, in the Plains' Indian tradition, he strutted, and, we would say, boasted, that is, told of his achievements. "You all know that I have done so and so, you all know that I have done this and that, and you all know how smart I am, how good a stock man I am, how good a farmer and how I have therefore accumulated great wealth." And then, with a very lordly gesture, a gesture of great pride but without being humiliating, gave this pile of wealth to the widows, to the orphaned children, and to the blind and diseased. At the end of the Sun Dance ceremony he was stripped of all his possessions, owning nothing but the clothes he stood in. He had, in this synergic way (I won't say *either* selfishly or unselfishly because clearly the polarity has been transcended) given away everything he had, but in that process had demonstrated what a wonderful man he was, how capable, how intelligent, how strong, how hard-working, how generous and therefore how wealthy.

I remember my confusion as I came into the society and tried to find out who was the richest man, and found that the rich man had nothing. When I asked the white secretary of the reserve, who was the richest man, he mentioned a man none of the Indians had mentioned, that is, the man who had on the books the most stock, the most cattle and horses. When I came back to my Indian informants and asked them about Jimmy McHugh, about all his horses, they shrugged with contempt. "He keeps it," they said, and as a conse-

quence, they hadn't even thought to regard him as wealthy. White Headed Chief was "wealthy" even though he owned nothing. In what way then did virtue pay? The men who were formally generous in this way were the most admired, the most respected and the most loved men in the tribe. These were the men who benefited the tribe, the men they could be proud of, the men who warmed their hearts.

To say it another way, if White Headed Chief, this generous man, had discovered a gold mine or stumbled across some pile of wealth, everyone in the tribe would have been happy because of his generosity. If he had been an ungenerous man, as happens so frequently in our society, then the tendency would have been as it is for our friends who have suddenly acquired great wealth; it is apt to set them over against us. Our institutions encourage the development of jealousy, envy, resentment, distance, and finally a real likelihood of enmity, in a situation like this.

Among the siphon systems of wealth distribution that Benedict listed, the giveaway of this type was one. Another was ritual hospitality as in many tribes where the rich man will immediately have all his relatives come to visit and he will take care of them. There were also generosity, mutual reciprocity relationships, cooperative techniques of food sharing and so on. In our own society, I think our graded income and property taxes would be an instance of a siphon mechanism. In theory, if a wealthy person gets twice as wealthy, this is good for me and you because so much of that goes into the common treasury. Let us assume it is used for the common good.

As for funnel mechanisms, examples are exorbitant rent, usurious interest (by comparison we know nothing of usurious interest even on the waterfront; as I recall it, the Kwakiutl rate of interest was 1200% a year), slave labor and forced labor, exploitation of labor, excessive profits, relatively greater taxation of the poor than of the rich, and so on.

I think you can see Benedict's point about the purport, the effect, or the flavor of the institution. Giving away money is in itself, as sheer behavior, meaningless. I consider this to be true at the psychological level also. So many psychologists do not realize that behavior is a defense against the psyche as often as it is a direct expression of it. It's a way of *hiding* motivations and emotions, intent and purport, as well as of revealing them, and therefore must never be taken at face value.

Use vs. ownership. We can also look at the relation of ownership

to actual use of possessions. My interpreter who spoke English quite well had been to the Canadian schools, had got some college education, and was therefore wealthy, for in this kind of tribe intelligence correlated very closely with wealth, even in our sense. He was the only man in the society who owned an automobile. We were together most of the time, so I could see that he hardly ever used his car. People would come and say, "Teddy, how about the key to your car?" And he would pass over the key. As near as I could make out, owning the car for him meant paying for the gas, fixing the tires, coming out and rescuing people in the middle of the reservation who didn't know how to handle it, and so on. This car belonged to anybody who needed it and could ask for it. Obviously the fact that he possessed the only car in the whole society was a point of pride, of pleasure and gratification rather than attracting to him envy, malice and hostility. The others were glad he had the car and would have been glad if five people had cars instead of just one.

Comforting vs. frightening religion. The distinction in terms of synergy also holds for the religious institutions. You will find that the god or gods or the ghosts or the supernaturals in the secure or high synergy societies tend uniformly to be rather benevolent, helpful, friendly, sometimes even in a way that some in our society might call sacrilegious. Among the Blackfoot, for instance, the personal ghost that any man would have for himself privately, the one he had seen in a vision perhaps on a mountain top, could actually be invoked at a poker game. There was so much comfort with these personal gods that it was perfectly alright for a man with an inside straight to call a halt to the game and go off in a corner and commune with his ghost to decide whether to draw or not. In the insecure or low synergy societies on the other hand, the gods, the supernaturals and the ghosts were uniformly ruthless, terrifying and so on.

I checked this relationship with some students at Brooklyn College in a very informal way (around 1940). There were a couple of dozen youngsters whom I had tested as secure or insecure in a questionnaire that I had constructed. I asked those who were religious in a formal way one question: Suppose you woke up out of your sleep and felt somehow that God was either in the room or looking in at you, how would you feel? The tendency was for the secure people to feel comforted, and protected; and for the insecure to feel terrified.

Now on a much larger scale, it is approximately this kind of thing that you can find in the secure and insecure societies. Western notions

of the god of vengeance and wrath as over against the god of love indicate that our own religious documents are composed of a kind of a mixture of what you might call secure and insecure religion. In the insecure societies the persons who have religious power generally use this for personal profit of some sort, for what we would call selfish purposes, whereas religious power in a secure society is intended to be used, as in the Zuni for instance, for bringing rain, for making the crops better, for bringing benefit to the whole society.

This kind of contrasting psychological purport or upshot can be distinguished in the style of prayer, the style of leadership, the family relationship, the relationships between men and women, the phrasing of sexuality, the style of emotional ties, of kinship, of friendship and so on. If you have the feel for this differentiation, you should be able to predict right on down the line what you could expect in these two kinds of societies. I will add just one more thing, a little unexpected I think to our Western minds. The societies with high synergy all have techniques for working off humiliation, and the societies with low synergy uniformly do not. In the latter, life is humiliating, embarrassing and hurting. It *must* be. In Benedict's four insecure societies the humiliation wrangled, lasted, somehow never ended; whereas in the secure societies there was a way of bringing it to a close, of paying your debt and being done with it.

HIGH AND LOW SYNERGY IN OUR SOCIETY

It must have occurred to you by now, that our own society is one of mixed synergy. We have high synergy and low synergy institutions.

We have a wide pervasiveness of high synergy in philanthropy, for instance, which does not occur in many other cultures at all. Our society is a very generous culture and frequently in a very nice, very secure way.

On the other hand, there are obviously institutions in our society which set us against each other, making us into rivals necessarily, which put us into a situation where we must scrap for a limited amount of goods. This is like the zero-sum game where one can win and the other must therefore lose.

Perhaps I can illustrate by a simple familiar example, the grading system as it is used in most colleges, especially grading on a curve. I have been in situations like that, and could see very well how it felt to be placed against my brothers, to have their good become my hurt. Supposing my name begins with Z and the grades are called off

alphabetically, and we know there are only six A's. Of course, I must sit there and hope that the people before me will get poor grades. Every time someone gets a bad grade, this is good for me. Every time someone gets an A, this is bad for me, since it lowers my chances of getting an A. And it is easy enough even to say, "I hope he drops dead."

This synergy principle is so important, not only for a general objectively comparative sociology, not only for the tantalizing possibility that this comparative sociology also opens up the way for a supracultural system of values by which to evaluate a culture and everything within it, not only because it furnishes a scientific basis for utopian theory, but also for more technical social phenomena in other areas.

For one thing, it seems to me that not enough psychologists, particularly social psychologists, are aware of the great and important things that are happening in an area which does not even have a very good name yet, which we may call organization theory, or the social psychology of industry perhaps, or the theory of enterprise or business. The book read as a primer by most people interested in this field is McGregor's *The Human Side of Enterprise* (4). I suggest that you look at what he calls the theory Y level of social organization as an example of high synergy. It illustrates the possibility of arranging social institutions, whether in business, in an army or in a university, in such a fashion that the people within the organization are coordinated with each other and are perforce made into colleagues and team-mates rather than into rivals. I have studied such a business during the last few years, and I assure you it is possible to describe it, to some extent at least, in terms of high synergy, or secure social organization. I hope that these new social psychologists will try using Benedict's concepts to contrast carefully such an organization with one which is based on the doctrine that there is a limited amount of good and "if I get some you must get less."

I would refer you also to Likert's recent book, *New Patterns of Management* (3), which is a collection of extensive, careful researches on various aspects of what we can call synergy in industrial organizations. There is even one place in which Likert actually discusses what he calls the "influence pie" (p. 57), trying to work with a paradox which he found difficult, namely, that the good foremen, the good leaders, the ones who would rate high in terms of actual results gave power *away* more than the others. What could you say about the fact that the more power you give away the more you have? Likert's

treatment of this paradox is interesting because you see a Western mind struggling with a not very Western concept.

I would say no Utopia can be constructed henceforth by the knowledgeable person without making peace with the concept of synergy. It looks to me at this time as if any Utopia, or Eupsychia (which I think is a better name), must have as one of its foundations a set of high synergy institutions.

SYNERGY IN THE INDIVIDUAL

Identification. The synergy concept can also be applied on the individual level, to the nature of interpersonal relationships between two persons. It makes a fairly decent definition of the high love relationship, what I have written about as Being-love (5, pp. 39-41; 6). Love has been defined variously as if your interests were my interests, or as if two hierarchies of basic needs pooled into one, or as if my feet hurt when you have a corn, or as if my happiness rested upon your happiness. Most of the definitions of love that have been offered imply identification of this sort. But this is also a good parallel with the notion of high synergy, that somehow two people have arranged their relationship in such a fashion that one person's advantage is the other person's advantage rather than one person's advantage being the other's disadvantage.

Some recent studies of sex life and family life in the lower economic classes in this country (e.g., 2) and in England (8) describe what they call the exploitative relationship, which is clearly a relationship with low synergy. Here there is always the question of who wears the pants in the family, or who is the boss, or who loves whom more, with the conclusion that whoever loves more is a sucker or must get hurt, so that if one person has to get hurt the thing to do is "play it cool," and so on. All of these are low synergy statements and imply a limited amount of good, rather than an unlimited amount.

I think that the concept of identification, which has come not only from Freud and Adler but from other sources as well, can stand broadening on this new basis. Perhaps we could say that love can be defined as the expansion of the self, the person, the identity. I think we have all experienced this, with children, with wives or husbands, with people who are very close to us. There is a feeling, especially with helpless children I would say, that you would rather have the cough than have your child cough during the night. It just hurts more when the child coughs than when you do. You are stronger,

therefore, if you could only take the cough it would be better all around. Clearly this is a melting of the psychological skin between two entities. This is, I would suggest, another direction for the notion of identification.

Fusing the selfish-unselfish dichotomy. Here I would like to take a jump beyond Benedict. She seems too often to have been talking in terms of a straight-line continuum, a polarity, a dichotomizing of selfish and unselfish. But it seems obvious to me that she clearly *implied* a transcendence of this dichotomy in the strict, Gestalt sense of the creation of a superordinate unity which would demonstrate that what had seemed a duality was so only because it had not yet developed far enough into unity. In highly developed, psychiatrically healthy people, self-actualizing people, whichever you choose to call them, you will find if you try to rate them that they are extraordinarily unselfish in some ways, and yet also that they are extraordinarily selfish in other ways. Those who know Fromm's work on healthy and unhealthy selfishness or Adler's on *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, will know what I mean here. Somehow the polarity, the dichotomy, the assumption that more of one means less of the other, all this fades. They melt into each other and you have now a single concept for which we have no word yet. High synergy from this point of view can represent a transcending of the dichotomizing, a fusion of the opposites into a single concept.

Integrating the cognitive and the conative. Finally, I have found the concept of synergy useful for the understanding of intrapersonal psychodynamics. Sometimes this usefulness is very obvious, as in seeing integration within the person as high synergy, and intrapsychic dissociations of the ordinary pathological sort as low synergy, i.e., as a person torn and set against himself.

In the various studies on free choice in various animal species and in human infants, I think a further improvement in theoretical phrasing can be made with the aid of synergy theory. We can say that these experiments demonstrate a synergic working or fusing of cognition and conation. These are situations in which, so to speak, head and heart, rational and non-rational speak the same language, in which our impulses lead us in a wise direction. This applies as well to Cannon's concept of homeostasis, which he called the "wisdom" of the body.

There are situations in which especially anxious, insecure people

tend to assume that what they want must necessarily be bad for them. What tastes good is probably fattening. What is wise or right to do, or what you ought to do, is very likely something that you have to spur yourself on to do. You have to force yourself to do it, because of this deep assumption in so many of us that what we wish for, what we yearn for, what we like, what tastes good, is probably not wise, not good, not correct. But the appetite and other free-choice experiments indicate on the contrary, that it is more likely that we enjoy what is good for us, at least with fairly good choosers and under fairly good conditions.

I will conclude with a statement by Erich Fromm that has always impressed me very much. "Sickness consists essentially in wanting what is not good for us."

SUMMARY

This paper is dedicated to Ruth Benedict upon whose work in the comparison of primitive cultures it is based. In going beneath the surface of cultural behaviors Benedict found synergy to be a differentiating characteristic between those cultures which were non-aggressive and secure, and those which were hostile and insecure. High synergy societies were organized so that what was good for one was also good for all, whereas in low synergy societies, what profited one, meant less for the others. The writer of the present paper goes on to show how synergy is variously incorporated in our culture, in economic and managerial situations as well as interpersonal relationships and intrapersonally, and in each case high synergy corresponds to a fusion of what the individual wants personally with what is good for him and at the same time good for others.

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