



A Social Theory Critique of Social Contract Theorists Claims Regarding Human and Social Ontology

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“Social contract theory, and Western civilization with it, seems saturated with the assumption that we are asocial, even nasty creatures rather than the zoon politikon that Aristotle saw in us” (De Waal, 2006, 3).

Abstract: The relational dynamics of the early stages of cultural life were established to maintain social harmony, cohesion, solidarity, and social order. The fundamental relational values also played a role in establishing principles for the progression of civilization. This article explains the insight that can be gained by an analysis of humanity’s initial relational values, which prompts a social theory critique of social contract theorists claim regarding human and social ontology. A special emphasis is placed on explaining the connection between normative patterns of social behavior that have been taught and passed down since the emergence of human culture, relationality as a fundamental social dynamic, and contemporary social theory.

Most people will accept that humans are social by nature. However, few recognize the connection between the relational dynamics established at the earliest stages of cultural life and the principles that shaped the progression of civilization. In fact, throughout the history of civilization relational norms have provided social theorists and socio-political philosophers insight into how to transform the complexity of social life, the vast differences in the interests and values of the individuals and competing social groups of society, and the competition for natural resources into nonviolent means of achieving the good of all.

Keywords and phrases: relationality, social theory, the social dynamics at the earliest stages of cultural life, social ontology, primary values

1. Introduction

It comes as no surprise that social harmony has always been an important principle for shaping social life. Therefore, it is not surprising that it plays a significant role in realizing the goal that social action aims to achieve. However, what will surprise many people is the fact that normative principles for realizing the goal social action aims to achieve were established at the earliest stages of cultural life. These normative principles aimed at promoting social cooperation and offsetting a propensity for self-seeking and aggressive behavior (Fukuyama, 2011, 36-40 & 439-440). Although the story involves perspectives on human existence that were established in the mythological age, it also represents what almost every culture asserts are things that humanity learned at the earliest stages of cultural life that should never be forgotten and that we should continue to teach to each succeeding generation. This article explains the role of relationality in human and social development. The emphasis is on the connection between humanity's inherent social nature and humanity's natural value preferences. The article also explains that the foundational relational norms and principles were handed down from generation to generation for scores of thousands of years. Therefore, the article explains the transformation of the foundational principles of cultural life into principles that were taught, thus perpetuated, by the earliest pre-classical schools of natural and perennial philosophy, and eventually by classical schools of political philosophy, ethics, and social psychology. This included teaching humanity about the generative logoi, the earliest understanding of the laws of nature, and what perennial and classical philosophers referred to as first principles. The laws of nature were regarded as the basis of what establishes the interconnected or interdependent nature of social existence (Aristotle, 1995, 3364-3366; Ames & Hall, 2003, 15 & 68).

Social theory addresses the role of social relations in achieving social goals. Socio-cultural life involves collective behavior aimed at maximizing the benefits and enjoyment the members of society experience in their relationship with each other and the environment. This requires learning to effectively manage the precarious conditions of existence so the members of society can live a stable life and flourish. This includes relational principles that prescribe how to establish social harmony. The transactions between the members of the social group should generate mutual benefit and, as well, incline the members to undertake nonviolent approaches to resolving their differences. Society's relational norms established the foundational patterns of cultural life and continued to play a role in human and

social development during the formation and progression of civilization. Human and social development was based on learning how to balance what is in the best interest of the individual with what achieves the good of all. Relationality was a major factor because it was collective consciousness that established the value for protecting what is in the best interest of each member of the social group. This understanding of social life was established during the stage of human existence that is referred to as humanity's original natural state. These principles were taught to subsequent generations with the expectation that adherence to the relational values will ensure the flourishing and well-being of future generations. The emergence of culture also involved learning to reduce the threat of harm imposed by forces in the environment. However, the relationship with the environment included a sense of relational identity (or kinship) that extended to aspects of the group's natural surroundings (Durkheim, 1982, 40).

Thus, the article explains why the notion of harmonious self-other relations played a role in conceptualizations of social solidarity and nonviolence during the earliest stages of cultural life and continued to influence the earliest schools of semiformal education during the pre-classical and classical eras. Contemporary natural and social scientists agree that this depiction of early socio-cultural life is an accurate view of human ontology. Consequently, proponents of the relational turn in the sciences propose that such principles indeed do advance human and social development in contemporary social life. This article argues that the earliest normative principles prescribing how to live in harmony with each other, with the environment, and in accord with the forces shaping the natural order continue to promote human and social development because they reflect humanity's primary value preferences. Such values are expressed in the worldview of many cultures around the world and continue to be taught by their most cherished wisdom traditions. In other words, the social dynamics in humanity's earliest stages of cultural life reflect an intrinsic value for proper consideration of others, which established a primary notion of goodness. However, this article explains that there is a fallacy in the explanation of social ontology proposed by the main social contract theorists (e.g., Thomas Hobbes in particular). This article argues the fallacy can be rectified by contemporary social theorists emphasizing an accurate view of the role of relationality in social existence. Rectifying the fallacy would reduce some of the crucial problems that hinder humanity from achieving more peaceful and harmonious coexistence at the multiple levels of social engagement and improve the nature-human relationship.

Social order requires formal and nonformal systems that minimize social conflict while maximizing social harmony and social cohesion. In this respect, for millennia cultures have established institutionalized systems for operationalizing the means for transforming self-interests into cooperative prosocial behavior (Geertz, 1973, 44-53 & 249-251). In fact, one of the key factors in the emergence of human culture was institutionalizing normative principles for promoting social cooperation. Social harmony is achieved by avoiding acting in any way that would disrupt social cohesion. It can also be a normative principle that constitutes the nature of social relations. As a normative principle social harmony is based on regarding the other members of society with equal respect and interacting with a sense of mutuality. The principle is rooted in the conviction that the self and the other are not only interdependent but are reflections of each other (Sri Aurobindo, 2005, 347). Cultures put forth social harmony as a normative principle because it establishes the means of transforming the dynamics of social interactions into more socially beneficial outcomes. As a principle for social life, it is also based on the conviction that human and social development are best achieved by recognizing the interdependence of the members of society. Here harmony “Is defined as unity between the body and the mind within the self and compassionate relationships between the self and the other that can be extended to the group” (Wang, 2014, xi-xii).

Social theory is defined as the knowledge, principles, and values that enable individuals, engaged in social interactions, to realize the goals they aim to achieve; and knowledge of how to create conditions of sustainable well-being and flourishing. Social theory emphasizes the constitutive aspects of the socio-political principles and how to put them into practice to achieve “the good all”. The term constitutive means the positive benefits hoped for can be achieved by basing social interactions and communications on such principles. Social theory also involves the construction and dissemination of knowledge of how to integrate the interests of the various segments of society without resorting to force or coercion. Therefore, social theory is essential for propagating knowledge of how to peacefully transform the various interests of the individual members of society into the common good. Social theory prescribes a moral basis for social relations that corresponds with the fundamental ethical principles of socio-political philosophy, social justice, and natural law (i.e., natural law is regarded as a precursor to the concept of human rights). It explains how to reconcile the power differences in society and questions the notion of using “power over” to achieve social aims.

The article also emphasizes that social theory provides knowledge that is vital for managing the crucial challenges facing society and for offsetting the use of hard power. The use of hard power accentuates conflict in that social agents pursue their interests in a way that threatens the identity, preferred way of life, access to natural resources (and their fair use), or even the very existence of other individuals or minority groups in society. The concepts of legitimacy and soft power continue to be a part of a greater socio-political discourse that includes conceptualizations of the nature of power, the role of power in social relations—at the multiple levels of social engagement, and the ontology of social existence. Conceptualizations of legitimacy and soft power provide knowledge of how to reconcile differences in interests in such a way that differences do not escalate into destructive conflict, which is also a reason why it is important for social theorists to highlight the significance of relationality in explanations of social ontology.

The following section of the article provides a critical account of the relational dynamics of the earliest stages of cultural life and explains how the insight gained from an understanding of earliest relational dynamics continued to shape social norms as society evolved into more complex systems. Section three explains the transformation of the principles and ethics established during the earliest stages of cultural life into the views of the philosophical schools established during the preclassical and classical eras (e.g., the early schools of natural, perennial, and classical philosophy) and eventually taught as the fundamental principles shaping the progression of civilization. Section three also explains significance of the doctrine of social harmony being overshadowed by its rival, political and economic Realism. Section four explains why the relational turn in the sciences prompts re-conceptualizing ontology, epistemology, and contemporary social theory. Section four also explains why rectifying the fallacious account of ontology is important to the endeavor of individuals to experience their inherent value preferences and for society to achieve its aims (Boulding, 1978, 225).

2. Human Ontology, Social Relations, and Inherent Value Preferences

“Being human is composed of relations; we do not ‘have’ relations, but we are relations all the way down” (Protevi, 2010, 174).

If considered from the perspective of humanity’s protohuman background, the relational dynamics of cultural life came naturally. What sparked the transition to *Homo sapiens* was new adaptive behaviors and the development of new cognitive

abilities, which, consequently, sparked moral development. Culture introduced the notion that a harmonious social life is best organized on the basis of enacting a collective will. Collective intentionality was a mechanism for achieving a state of existence that was desired by and mutually beneficial for all the members of a social group. Such a state was valued because the feeling of collective security reduced the sense of personal anxiety (Arendt, 1998, 22–25). What is revealed by a study of the history of human existence is that there is a connection between the relational dynamics established during the earliest stages of cultural life and an endeavor to plan social action so that it results in realizing humanity's primordial value preferences. In other words, a cultural group's normative principles were symbolic representations or conceptualized expressions of naturally induced human value preferences. Norms represented culturally prescribed mechanisms for experiencing the primary drives inherent to human nature. Therefore, experiencing humanity's values preferences became a primary social aim, which means that prescriptions for how to achieve this were handed down as a cultural value from generation to generation by means of a culture's worldview.

The essential interdependence between the individual members and a social group was also reflected in the group's collective identity. Collective identity was an aspect of cultural life that provided its members with a feeling of being connected to something of a superordinate nature. The individual members realized that there is an aspect of their collective life that is (potentially) perpetual. The failure of any individual member of the group to promote the perpetuation of the culture could threaten both the individual and the social group. Therefore, there was never a period when individuals existing outside of social circles was a common trait of humanity. "In fact, it is individualism and not sociability that developed over the course of human history" (Fukuyama, 2011, 29). So, isolated individuals who were totally free from others never existed as a general feature of humanity's original natural state. "Humans started out—if a starting point is discernible at all—as interdependent and bonded. Any zoologist would classify our species as obligatorily gregarious" (De Waal, 2006, 4). In fact, the consensus is that relationality was a feature of human existence "all the way down". All the way down means prior to and during the various periods of socio-cultural life. Thus, humanity places a high value on relationality in appreciation for the role it plays in cognitive and moral development.

This is not to say that social life was without conflict (both internal and external). The stories of many cultural groups stress that to establish a safe space they had to

learn how to push back the primordial forces of chaos. Some cultural groups report that a legendary cultural character taught them how to manage the threatening forces of existence. Other cultures report that a part of the transition to becoming *Homo sapiens* involved learning to distinguish between what is good and what is bad for both individuals and the social group. The point is there is plenty of evidence that the earliest cultural practices included strategies for cooperation, conflict reduction, and conflict management. There are two aspects of human and social development that played a role in learning how to reduce conflict and promote social harmony. The first is that many of the stories about the earliest stages of cultural life maintain that accompanying moral development was the understanding that “good” is an inherent value preference. Thus, the notion of goodness became an important aspect of a social value system. That is to say that one of the earliest notions of goodness was social harmony, which was reinforced by what Emile Durkheim (who is widely regarded as one of the founding fathers of sociology and anthropology) referred to as collective consciousness (Durkheim, 1995, 450). The second is highly relevant to discussions on humanity’s original state, theories on the earliest social relational dynamics, social theory, and conceptualizations of social ontology, it is the development of new insights on social contract theory.

Goodness became a social ideal in the sense that failure to achieve what was regarded as good increased the likelihood of social disorder, disruption, and could even threaten the existence of a socio-cultural group. The notion of goodness reflected a primordial value because of its connotations having to do with satisfaction, contentment, and consummation, which are primordial value drives. This is the opposite of the primordial sense of bad, which has connotations having to do with dissatisfying, undesirable, and to be avoided. Therefore, fundamental to social theory is the notion that “Good means good for, useful, serviceable, helpful; while bad means harmful, undesirable, and detrimental, a conception which contains implicitly a complete theory of valuation” (Dewey, 1939, 6). In other words, it is clear that goodness is a value that a social group aims to achieve because it implies “what is right” and this value guides social action toward realizing what society values and promotes the perpetuation of the culture. Therefore, the fundamental principles of social action explain the rules or valuative principles that determine what society should aim to achieve. And these valuative principles establish collective intentionality or collective agreement, which is a form of social contract.

When the main social contract theorists referred to humanity's original state in nature, they must be referring to the period when humanity was transitioning from behavior governed by the forces shaping the nature existence to behavior motivated by newly developed cognitive abilities and moral consciousness. In other words, a transformation occurred from human behavior motivated by the principles and laws that govern natural phenomena, (or, in the human case, what is referred to as biological determinism) to human behavior based on collective intentionality, deliberation, and evaluative judgments. With human behavior sparked by biological determination motivations and impulses were determined by nature. Biological determinism or the forces shaping the nature of existence endowed individuals with a value predisposition or preference for relating to the other aspects of existence in ways that support growth, flourishing, and the possibility for experiencing the full potential of being. This biologically rooted value preference (i.e., an internal affective sensory mechanism) is triggered by the brain's "value system" and "self-relevance system", which work together to evaluate the significance of interactions with other things in the environment and other members of the social group (using affective, emotional, and sensory mechanisms to assess long-lasting social bonds). This process involves the brain conceiving of a common relational structure to determine which social dynamics are valuable for personal and social well-being, and which decisions or efforts are worth pursuing (Edelman, 1989, 99-102). Inherent in the brain structure is a value for a deep relational bond with a social group, which was believed to enhance personal security. In fact, a social psychological analysis of human nature suggests that there is a direct correlation between relationality, cognitive development, and an understanding of what is regarded as morally good (Cosmides and Tooby, 1992, 161-162). Thus, the social dynamics during humanity's original natural state reinforced both a primary notion of goodness and a value preference for proper consideration of others.

There are two aspects of the transition from humanity's earliest type of awareness to higher level cognitive abilities that are important to the issues addressed in this article. First, the initial type of awareness established humanity's earliest impressions of the nature of existence. The earliest type of awareness revealed things that are so important to the human experience that every culture asserts that they should never be forgotten. However, what is important to note is that this type of consciousness remains a functioning aspect of humanity's cognitive make-up (i.e., what contemporary neural scientists refer to as core consciousness or primary

consciousness) (Edelman, 1989, 97-99). Second, contemporary social theorists stress that the relational dynamics during humanity's earliest stages of cultural life contributed to cognitive and moral development, which is contrary to the claim of the main social contract theorists. Social contract theorists claimed that humanity's initial natural state was inherently violent and solitary, pre-social and amoral. In their view, morality was not a natural outgrowth of humanity's relational dynamics. Contract theorists regarded social rules as mechanisms that were developed at a later period in an attempt to escape the chaos and violence of the brutal pre-social state. However, according to contemporary neuroscientists and evolutionary psychologists, humanity has an inherent value preference for relationality, which includes viewing the self as fundamentally interconnected to and defined by relationships, rather than as an autonomous individual. Contemporary scientists assert that the "desire" for social relationships is, unsurprisingly, connected with an inherent urge that is motivated by the impulse to experience homeostasis, which is a drive that is rooted in humanity's primordial origins (Damasio, 2018, 255).

This view suggests that there is something inherent in human nature (i.e., core consciousness or primary consciousness) that, although impacted by the forces of civilization, could still be nurtured by a process of self-cultivation, which would result in discerning how to act in ways that maximize the experience of humanity's inherent value preferences. What is important to note is that there is an aspect of human consciousness—primary consciousness (i.e., the foundational structure of human consciousness)—that motivates functioning in a way that is in line with humanity's inherent nature. Value drives motivate human behavior that aims at experiencing a desired end state, and values determine what is believed to be the best course of action for achieving what is valued (Schwartz, 1994, 20-25). This suggests that humanity's primordial control mechanism, primary awareness, and primary value preferences provided a harmoniously unified or integral sense of experience that humanity has since been seeking to find ways to duplicate by means of social norms and practices (Damasio, 2018, 25-27 & 169-174). Contemporary scholarship stresses, in accordance with the most respected wisdom traditions of the world, that a harmoniously unified or integral sense of experience is a type of awareness that results from fitting together the three major aspects of human consciousness "Into integrality, a process whereby partials merge or are merged with the whole" (Gebser, 1984, 292 footnote). Therefore, all the evidence of contemporary social scientists points to the fact that principles explaining the connection between individuals,

others, and the forces shaping the nature of existence, reflect primordial values deeply embedded in human consciousness. Acting in accordance with this fundamental human value preference is the key to achieving collective social values like mutual respect, sustainability, and the mutual flourishing of each individual member of society, and moving beyond isolated interests by focusing on deep connections and shared meaning rather than just individual gain. In addition, many world cultures continue to stress that acting in accordance with this inherent value preference would restore the experience of harmonious unity with others and nature.

The precarious conditions of existence placed pressure on individuals and social groups to learn how to detect possible contingencies and to develop cognitive skills specialized for reasoning about how to turn them into outcomes that are good, desirable, and satisfying. In fact, contemporary theorists point out that “Some of the most important problems humans had to face could best be solved by social cooperation” (Cosmides & Tooby, 1995, 1203). Learning social harmony involved determining the benefits and drawbacks of cooperation, social exchange, reciprocation, forming peaceful alliances, learning how to react to threats, and determining the benefits and drawbacks of reciprocal altruism. Reciprocal altruism is the strategic intention to act benevolently toward another person. The recipient would then look forward to having an opportunity to reciprocate. In this respect, it is evident that there were aspects of the earliest human experience that involved cooperation as forms of social activity that included a social contract. Social contacts were an attempt to transform the uncertainties and contingencies of existence into predictable and controllable outcomes. Thus, although the contract theory is nearly as old as philosophy itself, the established theorists failed to recognize that the concept can be defined as “A pact or an agreement made by all the individuals who compose it, which addresses the mutual obligations and expectations within a society” (Encyclopedia of Applied Psychology, 2004, 494).

Contemporary paleoanthropologists, social theorists, and political philosophers assert that whenever individuals living together in a society agree that they will live in accordance with certain norms and moral standards they establish a social contract. This means social contracts certainly apply to the earliest attempts to organize cultural life. The type of social contracts formed by the earliest cultural groups are defined as “Dynamic social exchange relationships, the neurological and social psychological processes that generate them, processes aimed at achieving group advantages, and the practice of reciprocity” (Frederick & Wasieleski, 2002,

290). This means that social contracts were reflections of the relational dynamics of cultural life (Cosmides, 1989, 197). Social contracts (i.e., procedures and rules that govern interactions within and between social groups) can be defined as (1) “Establishing social exchange relationships and (2) the biological inclinations and social learning processes that produced them, (3) governed by ancestrally determined patterns of cognitive development (4) intended to achieve beneficial outcomes for individuals and/or social groups in (5) a context of social reciprocity” (Frederick & Wasieleski, 2002, 290). The agreement to engage in cooperative exchange took place to establish a symbolic or conceptualized expression of social values that would liberate humanity from being overridden by fears. “Social contracts were an expression of an innate human impulse to form mutually beneficial cooperative relationships. These linkages among individuals and groups carry advantages for the contractors, and achieving those advantages constitutes the main motivating drive of social exchanges” (Frederick & Wasieleski, 2002, 283). Social contracts were agreements to promote mutually beneficial relations for purposes of trade, security alliances, reciprocal altruism, and to ensure friendly interactions with extended kinship groups. Therefore, the social contract represented the ability to come to an agreement on the moral and/or political terms and obligations that will enhance the culture’s existence.

Therefore, a critical analysis of social ontology reveals, as Mahatma Gandhi stated, that prescriptions for achieving goodness are as old as the hills therefore are lessons that are deeply embedded within human consciousness and the pursuit of truth reveals the importance of harmonious relations with others (Gandhi, 1946, 43). A contemporary analysis of the relational dynamics established with human culture and the endeavor to sustain those relational dynamics as a means of progressing civilization are indications of the validity of Gandhi’s claim. Social theorists play a forefront role in enhancing human and social development by emphasizing the significance of the relationality when discussing social ontology and as an important concept in the sociology of knowledge. This includes stressing a more accurate perspective on the social ontology and the social contract, stressing the consequences of a fallacious view regarding social ontology and the social contract, and what a more accurate view could mean for social relations at every level of social interaction (Jarstad et al., 2023, 3).

By emphasizing the relational aspects of social life, social theorists have more effective conceptual tools for explaining the importance of relationality

for establishing “the good” in any particular cultural context. By explaining the significance of the relational turn in the social sciences, social theorists play a role in helping humanity to understand the connection between inherent human values, nature-human interconnectedness, the interdependence between the members of society, and the significance of relationality for achieving social aims. In other words, by stressing the significance of the relational turn in the sciences social theorists are in a position to stress why it poses a challenge to the long-standing predominance of substantialism in natural and social science research. Substantialism prioritizes material entities over relations. However, social theorists are more effective in promoting harmony by stressing that a fundamental characteristic of life is the relational dynamics that generate complementarity, integrality, and wholeness (Miller, 2025, 128-133).

3. The Roots of the Classical Philosophical Ideals that Shaped the Progression of Civilization

The normative ethics and principles that were established during the earliest period of Indian civilization are still valued and practiced by Indian people. The ideals play a role in building up a unity of outlook among the people, which was to survive and overshadow all diversity

(Nehru, 1994, 99–100).

The living conditions in humanity’s original natural state were, indeed, precarious. So much so that humans learned to make artifacts that would have a lethal impact. Therefore, aggression is evident. However, although this does clearly indicate that humanity engaged in aggressive behavior, this does not support the prominent social contract theory claim that early humans were asocial individualists and that the concepts of morality and justice as we understand them did not yet exist. Hobbes famously wrote that life in humanity’s original state was “Solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes, 1996, 84). This picture is radically at odds with what we now know to be the shared characteristics of all known human societies. Across small-scale societies there is a modal pattern of social organization characterized by a multi-generational system of resource sharing, long-term adult pairing bonds, and a prolonged period of childcare, which means children were cared for by their parents as part of the social process. Hunter and gatherers were highly interdependent long before the invention of agriculture, contrary to the claim that agriculture and its associated divisions of labor paved the way for higher interdependencies.

The first alterations to the hunting and gathering period came with the emergence of agricultural villages. There are three important things about this transition that are relevant to the issues addressed in this article. First, the earliest understanding of a germinating logoi (i.e., an understanding of what establishes the interconnected and unifying aspects of existence) carries over into the village cultural worldview, which shaped their understanding of the meaning of existence. Second, the primary function of social norms continued to be promoting social cohesion. Normative behavior promoted social cooperation, which conferred survival benefits. Rules were not a means to short-term goals but were ends in themselves, which greatly enhanced the stability of social life (Fukuyama, 2011, 40). Third, the transition from roaming freely without borders to settling into agricultural villages involved making territorial claims and defending them. Therefore, an increase in wealth as the outcome of improved productive abilities, which increased the need for boundaries, all meant an increase in the need to protect property and to manage threats.

Threats and conflicts expanded to a larger scale as societies evolved into city-states, kingdoms, and empires that engaged in conquering and invasion. Thus, with the emergence of civilization conflicts became more violent. It was a time when there was an increase in social activity based on hard power and political Realism (Miller, 2024, 64 & 261). Realism is the belief that developing the technology of power is the most important knowledge required by society. Consequently, in response to the heightened conflicts, throughout the major centers of civilization schools of socio-political philosophy and social theory were established as part of an attempt to address and resolve the most pressing issues confronting humanity and guide humanity through those turbulent times. Schools of social theory were established at a time when there was an urgent need to save humanity from disorder, conflict, and violence. “The scholarly sages of the time were aware of the need to formulate a school of thought powerful enough to diminish society’s destructive forces. In undertaking this challenge, they devised schools of social theory and socio-political philosophy aimed at reviving pristine traditional values in order to offset the struggles of political powers for dominance over rivals” (Miller, 2024, 268).

This represented an attempt to revive the pristine values established during the earlier periods of human existence, which included reestablishing relational strategies for integrating the various elements of society into a harmonious unity. The most prominent social theorists and socio-political philosophers asserted that if the relational principles and virtues established in humanity’s original natural state

were not adhered to, the human condition would deteriorate (Plato, 2003, 175). They claimed that humans become fragmented when core aspects of their lives are not integrated. Consequently, the earlier worldview was transformed into perennial philosophy and dialectics in the Far East (i.e. that which seems oppositional is actually complementary); natural philosophy and ideas regarding natural law in the West; and conceptualizations of ahimsa (i.e., nonviolence) in South Asia. Thus, the initial stages of pre-classical social theory and socio-political philosophy were based on values and principles established in earlier periods of cultural life.

In the Far East, Taoism and Confucianism were amongst the most outstanding schools of thought to emerge at the time. Both Lao Tzu and Confucius expressed their ideals and principles in terms that would shape Chinese cultural values, philosophy, state ideology, and social practice for over 2,000 years. The principles they proposed established a paragon theory for living in harmony with each other and nature. These principles are “Important because they encompass early Chinese ideas about humanity’s interconnectedness with nature, principles prescribing self-cultivation, governance, retribution, and a central principle—the doctrine of the unity of humanity and nature” (Chen, 1963, 10). Therefore, the classical Chinese schools proposed that the solution to conflictual tendencies in human relations is “returning to humanity’s natural state of existence”, which is also stated as “returning to the source”. Returning to the natural state of existence meant reviving the relational values of humanity’s original natural state (Fung, 1976, 100). Returning to the source was thought of as living in accordance with humanity’s core consciousness thus experiencing humanity’s natural value preferences. Therefore, the earliest Chinese social theorists and philosophers taught how to establish a harmonious link between nature, individuals, and society. They taught that by living in accordance with humanity’s inherent relational preferences “The whole world could be made peaceful” (Confucius, 1869, 30).

Ancient historians stress that the West was also facing a series of wars resulting from the rise of empires and their tendency toward conquering and invasion. This sparked the emergence of social theories and schools of socio-political philosophy aimed at guiding humanity through this period by prescribing means to establish social order and justice. Western social theories and schools of philosophy taught that cultivating the virtues inherent in human nature is the basis of social order, the good life, and achieving desired social outcomes. Therefore, the most respected schools of philosophy prescribed an approach to human and social development

in which individuals would develop personal virtue, which would manifest as civic virtue. Self-cultivation, according to classical Greek thought, trains individuals in that which will enable achieving a sustainable peace (Plato, 1934, 5 & 188; Plato, 2003, 166-175).

They taught that relationality is fundamental to human nature and this feature of cultural life is an expression of humanity's inherent social disposition (Aristotle, 1995, 1998). They asserted that adherence to the relational principles that are fundamental to human ontology and social arrangement would establish conditions by "Which anyone whatsoever might do best and live a flourishing life" (Aristotle, 1998, 194). Therefore, the foundational principles of Western social, political, and ethical thought explained the connection between the laws of nature and human reasoning (i.e., human reasoning was thought of as a latent quality that the relational dynamics of cultural life transformed into an emergent property). They claimed that the human condition is enhanced by integrating what is inherent in human nature, with what is known on the basis of right reason, and understood as a result of the discernment afforded from self-cultivation (Plato, 2005, 327-347; Plato, 2003, 175, 227, & 241-245; Annas, 2011, 1-3).

As classical Greek schools of thought evolved into those of the Greco-Roman era, there was even a stronger conviction on the part of the intellectual elite that adherence to what was taught by classical social theorists and philosophical schools would establish social practices that would manifest as social justice, natural rights, a republican state, and could even usher in a millennium of peace. Thus, they proclaimed that basing social action on such principles would be a safeguard against political Realism and imperialism. Realism is the belief that "The standard of justice depends on the power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept" (Thucydides, 1916, 360). Realists conclude that an analysis of social processes reveals that competing with others to achieve one's self-interest dominates social behavior thus the pursuit of others to realize their self-interests poses a threat. Political realists believe that the threat naturally results in competing with all others to gain competitive advantage and/or that the threat is best managed by maintaining a power advantage/dominance. Therefore, there is an emphasis on the individual social agent. In political Realism the concept of social identity is deeply subjective and framed from the perspective of individuality. Even though the ideal principles of Western Civilization's classical schools of thought are foundational to its civilization, political

Realism ultimately became the established paradigm. Thus, political Realism poses an enormous challenge to social theorists who promote cooperative social behavior, social harmony, and the essential interdependence of social life.

The Indian worldview proclaims that in the earliest stages of human existence people lived in harmonious social relations. In the Satya yuga all aspects of social life were in harmony with Dharma and Vedic values. This means that the earliest humans would naturally act in accordance with the forces shaping the nature of existence. In fact, according to the Indian worldview the earliest period of human existence represented an ideal human and social state (what is regarded as a Golden Age). It is believed that humanity's intrinsic goodness was the dominant feature of personal and social life. In other words, humans acted on the basis of their inherent nature and value preferences. This contrasts with the established social contract claims that the earliest humans were brute, individualists, amoral, and asocial. As stated earlier in the article, Thomas Hobbes, in particular, claimed that the earliest social life lacked an organizing structure such as a social contract. He also claimed that the earliest humans lacked an understanding of right and wrong, justice and injustice. Therefore, he believed that individuals had the natural right to do whatever they deemed necessary to protect their self-interests from the threat of others.

However, India developed as a civilization by promoting ancient relational principles and ideals, which are based on the integral concepts of oneness, mutuality, and seeing others as a reflection of the self. As put in the words of India's Nobel Prize-winner, "The more perfect the harmony, the more perfect becomes individuality. Therefore life, on its negative side, maintains separateness from all else, while, on its positive side, it maintains unity. Individuality finds its fulfillment in unity" (Tagore, 2008, 100). Indian philosophy also states that social harmony would be enhanced by training individuals in practices that bring out their pristine virtue (i.e., this also implies the importance of "returning to the source"). That is to say, Indian philosophical ideals prescribe a means by which self-cultivation would enable individuals to realize their inherent nature (svabhava). In fact, the goal of life can be regarded as realizing one's inherent nature (i.e., self-actualization). Thus, teaching individuals to adhere to their inherent nature involves training them in how to experience a harmonious sense of unity within the self (body, mind, and spirit), between the self and others, and between the self and the forces shaping the nature of existence, which is based on integral knowledge. "Integral knowledge means self-revelation or knowledge of the self and knowledge of our interconnectedness with

nature thus cancelling our division from it by the idea of the ego of separateness” (Sri Aurobindo, 2005, 681-682). Consequently, Indian principles of self-cultivation, India’s meditative principles, and those prescribing a holistic approach to health and well-being have helped an incalculable number of people worldwide to manage the complexities of modern life.

The aspects of Indian social theory that promotes social harmony influenced the civilizations of Southeast Asia and the Far East. Most noticeably is the principle of Ahimsa (e.g., compassion, harmony, nonviolence), which is regarded as the highest truth and the highest teaching. Thus, interacting with others based on the principle of Ahimsa is regarded as one’s highest duty (i.e., the highest Dharma). Such principles established a means of achieving social cohesion, order, harmony, and solidarity by nonviolent means and this guided the human experience for scores of thousands of years. For example, Indian sacred literature explains the connection between personal freedom and community life, as individual freedom and the need for social relations are essential for both personal and social development, which makes the two intertwined. In India the relationship between the two was addressed in its earliest sacred literature in connection with the term Swaraj (i.e., self-rule, the self-determination of every Indian citizen in a personal sense, self-actualization, and liberties experienced in society). But in socio-political terms it means eliminating the conditions that trap individuals and social groups in illusion, suffering, disharmony, injustice, and oppression (Gandhi, 2009, 39; also see Sen, 1999, 53–65 & 85–86).

In fact, Indian sacred literature also illustrates the crises that can occur by failing to effectively manage the impact of political Realism. The Mahabharata is widely seen by scholars and analysts as a rich source of insight into political Realism, offering pragmatic lessons on the consequences of an endeavor to gain power and dominance and the problems resulting from using force or coercion as a means of gaining power. Indian sacred literature points out that Realism, at best, results in win-lose outcomes (i.e., one party gains to the extent that the other suffers loss). However, it is also likely that the outcome will be lose-lose (i.e. no one gains in that everyone suffers). Ahimsa, the solution, influenced nonviolence social theories, approaches to conflict management, relational theories, and nonviolent approaches to social movements throughout the world. Such principles, values and ethics have been the basis of the ideals shaping the progression of Indian civilization. Consequently, India’s philosophical principles, ethics, and values are the reason why

its ideals have had a civilizational impact. Thus, both classical Indian and Western philosophers refer to such principles as “the master science”. The master science is defined as the study of human nature, human motivations, social interactions, and the nature of social activity (i.e., social ontology), as well as what best contributes to sustainable peace. Therefore, the master science was regarded as “That science from which all other sciences have their beginning and end” (Kautilya, 1987, 105; also see Aristotle, 2004, 3-4).

A detailed analysis of the relational dynamics practiced in the earliest stages of human culture and the role that relational principles, ethics, and value preferences played in establishing civilization and its progression reveals that certain principles have constitutive power thus are effective when applied to social practice. Triangulating information gained from such an analysis reveals that endeavors for human and social development can be enhanced by emphasizing the significance of living in accordance with such constitutive principles to improve social dynamics, social relations, and social performance at all levels of social interaction. Constitutive principles refer to the foundational rules or laws that define how system components interact, and those laws determine the behavior and performance of systems. In other words, philosophical inquiries into the nature of social ontology and the sociology of knowledge explain that when constitutive principles shape social practices and institutions, they have the power to create harmonious interactions between the actors in the system. In this respect social theory is enhanced by stressing how relationality contributes to constituting more Constructivist-type forms of social relations and the power to regulate the very behavior that they constitute. “Those powers are deontic powers, in that they are rights, duties, obligations, authorizations, permissions etc. These powers are crucial in the existence of human civilization because they give us desire-independent reasons for acting” (Searle, 2018, 53).

4. The Relational Turn in the Sciences

Living in accordance with relational norms, the principle of integrality, and relating in accordance with the principle of ahimsa are regarded as the highest duty

(i.e., the highest Dharma, Ahimsa Paramo Dharma, अहिसा परमो धर्म)

(Anushasana Parva, 1900, 26-27).

The relational turn in the sciences is a paradigm shift that views reality as fundamentally composed of relationships and processes. These relational dynamics exemplify interchanges between system components rather than as discrete, self-

contained entities. It addresses the limitations of traditional (substantialist or Cartesian) approaches that separate the knower from the known and the human from nature, which are seen as contributing to dualism and to producing incomplete knowledge. In other words, the relational turn in the sciences addresses human fragmentation and the inadequacy of ontological and epistemological attempts to provide reliable knowledge. The relational turn in the sciences influences ontology by pointing out that entities (i.e., individuals, species, or social and ecological entities) do not precede their relations; rather, they are constituted by their interactions and interdependencies. The primary unit of analysis becomes the process or the network of relationships, not the isolated thing itself. The relational turn influences ontology and epistemology by providing a means of delving deeper into the underlying nature of existence (ontology). Consequently, by delving deeper into the nature of reality (than materialism, which only deals with measurable or observable domains of reality) it also analyses the underlying relations, processes, and interchanges that actually shape the nature of reality thus providing a more accurate epistemological method for generating knowledge regarding the underlying aspects of reality. In addition, the relational turn is having an impact on social theory in that it shifts the focus from individual entities to the constitutive nature of social relations, viewing them as primary for understanding social activity, which impacts fields like justice, policy, and sustainability, challenging traditional views of self and institutions by seeing them as emergent from relationships.

Global scholars became increasingly attracted to the relational turn in the sciences when social theorists raised the question of whether there is a reliable basis for knowledge that puts together fragments of information that were seemingly irreconcilable. In other words, can the prior paradigms be reconciled, thus regarded as an *ex-post factum* of our pursuit for reliable knowledge, if they are superseded by a relational view of the nature of existence (Apel, 1998, 43–44)? In addition, does the relational view better enable scientists to bridge what heretofore had been a gap between the noumenal structures or generative mechanisms that manifest as reality and human cognition (see Kant, 1998, 10 & 347–351 for an explanation of the problem of a gap between the generative *logoi* and human cognition)? If relationality is a better perspective on epistemology and ontology, this would mean that the relational turn in the sciences creates “A progressive deepening of our understanding of being and a progressive deepening of our understanding of the categories that are manifest in the natural and social world” (Bhaskar, 2007, 197). This would mean that

the relational approach has greater explanatory value for analyzing the connection between the overlapping domains of the real, perception and experience, and what is regarded as empirical facts by a particular domain of science. Therefore, by enabling delving deeper into the underlying nature of existence the relational turn prompts a reconceptualization of both ontology and epistemology.

The early positivists claimed that primordial awareness represented a primitive level of knowledge development, which in epistemological terms can be equated to myths. They claim that this early irrational type of knowledge has ultimately been superseded by positivism/science (Comte, 1903, 26). However, contemporary psychologists point out that primary awareness (i.e., what psychologists have referred to as an archetypal type of consciousness) remains a core aspect of human consciousness. Humanistic and Positive Psychologists stress that this core aspect of the inner self continues to motivate individuals to realize and be true to their inherent nature (i.e., it remains a primary value drive). Therefore, the ultimate end value that people aspire to is to experience what is motivated by core consciousness, which if achieved fulfills subsidiary instrumental value drives (Maslow, 1993, 88; Maslow, 1954, 97-100). This means that the drive for experiencing an integral connection with existence remains an aspect of human consciousness and many cultures around the world continue to institute in more or less complex forms a means of reconnecting with that aspect of their cultural values (Eliade, 1967, 59-60). In fact, for many cultures around the world the main aim of social existence continues to be reviving that pristine type of awareness and experience.

In addition, contemporary social theorists, psychologists, and ethicists stress that a failure to develop a unified sense of consciousness sparks repression and the lack of congruence with the authentic self creates anxiety that individuals experience as various forms of psychological tension (Brown, 1985, 4; Heidegger, 2001, 229-231; Heidegger, 1998, 189-90). Consequently, contemporary natural and social scientists stress that all the evidence points to numerous cultures around the world continuing to prescribe a means of recapturing a sense of harmonious unity with existence. This is intended to transform what was initially a primary awareness into symbolic expressions that have integral value (Sri Aurobindo, 2005, 681-682). Social theorists and political philosophers described these symbolic expressions or conceptualizations as not only insight into the principles shaping the natural order but insight into the deepest and innermost core of political philosophy, the Philosophy of Science, and the Philosophy of Social Science (Cicero, 1999, 111).

Proponents of relationality stress that what is taken to be a reliable knowledge is, in fact, symbolic representations of complex processes and relations. Relationality alters or expands the established understanding of ontology by explaining processes and relations by using such terms as integrality, systems, and the interconnected web. This provides humanity with better conceptual tools for delving deeper into the nature of existence, and with such tools, humanity is able to transcend subject-object and nature-human dichotomies. Thus, an expansion of the established paradigm allows for more accurately discerning how relations, processes, and transformations play a fundamental and essential role in existence. Consequently, relationality requires “A crucial rethinking of much of epistemology and ontology” (Barad, 2007, 83), which has implications for both social ontology and ethics. It becomes evident that the benefit of establishing complementarity between epistemology, ontology, and ethics is that it provides a more effective means of integrating the various aspects of social activity in order to balance a focus on the material aspects of existence with the inclusion of what humanity (or society) regards as having intrinsic value.

However, the problem is that within the liberal tradition, with its emphasis on individuality, relationality and the contextual significance of collectivity are often downplayed. An analysis of social ontology reveals that the aim of establishing harmonious social relations have been disrupted by the persistence of basing social interactions, at the multiple levels of social interactions, on dominance, hard power, and the endeavor to gain a power advantage over “the proverbial other”. The ability to override the dominance of political and economic Realism is achieved by promoting a resurgence of the constitutive principles that played a role in establishing civilization and is now emphasized by proponents of the relational turn in the social sciences. “Relationalism, or placing greater emphasis on relations, processes, or interactions than on substances, entities or ‘things’, is burgeoning in the social sciences and beginning to gain traction” (Brigg, 2024, 1). Social life is relational and asks for an awareness of relationality that needs our minds, our bodies, and our hearts. If we learn to perceive, feel, and sense ourselves not only as part of the world but as interwoven, entangled, and embedded in/with this world, our relationship to the living can change towards more caring modes of being (Lehner, 2022, 48). The concepts, principles, and values underlying the relationality concept connect theorizing with actually practicing and experiencing the interconnectedness we have with the environment, each other, and existence.

Early social theorists were amongst the first to stress that the relational dynamics, which are inherent to the human disposition, could be cultivated to promote a positive social transformation. The theory proposes that re-establishing the relational dynamics that enable humanity to realize its inherent value preferences requires teaching humanity to reconnect with its inherent nature and value preferences. It is in this respect that the relational approach advocates “returning to the source” (Confucius, 1869, 264-267 & 283-284). The article stresses that the fallacious perspective of social relations fails to capture the empirical reality of human relations and social ontology. Therefore, the fallacious outlook typically presents a deterministic view of human behavior, which is counterproductive to social theorist endeavors to promote social well-being. By offering a more accurate description of social ontology, human nature, and social development social theorists can be more effective in promoting empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution. In other words, social theory is enhanced by emphasizing the significance of the relational turn in the social sciences (Emirbayer, 1997, 291-297).

This article proposes that the key to putting the relational approach into practice is teaching individuals to experience an integral way of thinking (e.g., how to improve the quality of life in multiple dimensions—such as gross level of peace, life satisfaction, and level of happiness). Integral knowledge means experiencing our interconnectedness, which cancels our sense of division from others and nature (Sri Aurobindo, 2005, 681-682). Thus, the practice of a relational approach to social existence can resolve the various forms of fragmentation that plague the human experience. Because of a lack of emphasis on the significance of relationality, too much of what goes on social research “Is sanitized and anaesthetized, as if researchers, participants, or readers were disembodied, decontextualized minds, that focus on a mechanistic view of learning as linear cause-and-effect” (Formenti & West, 2018, 9). The relational approach emphasizes overarching explanatory stories, that are experienced based, embodied, emotionally and ethically satisfying, and practically orienting. This approach critiques the idea of an objective individual who stands apart from the observed to make empirically reliable claims about what is best regarding the observed (i.e., experience is reduced to parts, differentiated, and categorized). Within conceptualizations of the practice of a relational approach to social theory, “A part is a manifestation of the whole, rather than just a component of it. Neither exists without the other. The whole exists through continually manifesting in the parts, and the parts exist as embodiments of the whole” (Senge et al, 2005, 6).

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