

# 17.2

## IS THERE A NATURAL TENDENCY TOWARDS SYNERGIES

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Supplementary material for Integrating counselling and psychotherapy: Directionality, synergy, and social change (Sage, 2019).

Although personal and political action may be important, an alternative – though not necessarily contradictory – perspective on these wider issues is that all systems (including human ones) have a natural tendency towards more win–win configurations: the *synergism hypothesis* (Corning, 1998). Wright (2000), for instance, writes that non-zero-sumness, ‘is something whose ongoing growth and ongoing fulfilment define the arrow of the history of life, from the primordial soup to the worldwide web’ (p. 7). This can be likened to Rogers’s (1980) *formative tendency*: ‘the directional tendency towards increased order and interrelated complexity found in nature from micro-organisms through crystals and in stellar space’ (Merry & Tudor, 2002, p. 57), or Bergson’s *élan vital*. Corning (2003, p. 1) describes synergies as ‘nature’s magic’ and, like Wright, argues that the evolution of the universe, from the big bang onwards, consists of ongoing synergy formation. He writes: ‘The natural world could be likened to an enchanted loom that weaves a golden tapestry of synergy’ (Corning, 2003, p. 8). As with the intra and interpersonal levels in the present text, this is also hypothesised to be a many levelled structure, a “Magic Castle” in which the synergies produced at one level serve as the building blocks for the next level’ (Corning, 2003, p. 298).

For Corning (2003), as for Wright (2000), this movement towards synergies is a result of their adaptive advantage. When two atoms, for instance, come together to form a molecule, they can achieve a state of energetic excitation that is lower than either alone. Similarly, cooperative interactions in nature tend to produce positive functional consequences, which differentially favour the survival – and reproduction – of the parts (Corning, 1998). A classic example of this is reef corals, where the various organisms have an indispensable symbiotic relationship with each other that allows all to flourish. Within species, too, phenomena such as herd behaviour, mating, and the huddling of emperor penguins together during the Antarctic winters all demonstrate the evolutionary advantages of synergetic actions (Corning, 2003). Research suggests that such huddling reduces the penguin’s overall energy expenditure by 20–50%. On their own, each penguin would die; together, they all survive. From a control theory perspective, Powers (1992) also argues that people have a natural tendency towards aligning their goals with others, as people seek to reduce ‘error’ and resolve conflicts between their perceptions of self and other.

Corning (2003) describes human beings as ‘the synergistic ape’, surviving, and reproducing, through a wide range of synergetic activities. These include habiting in small bands as a means of self-defence, hunting in teams to enhance the trapping and killing of animals, and the mutual cooperation of females during childbirth. Exchange, trade and interdependence between communities can also be seen as serving an evolutionary advantage. Essentially, this is because, as argued in Chapter 16 (this volume) on equality, commodities are worth more to those who have little of them than those who have a lot (Wright, 2000). Take two tribes, A and B. Tribe A has a surplus of bananas but no silk, Tribe B has the opposite. For Tribe A, one more banana in the stockpile is of little value; but for Tribe B, a banana may be an amazing new delicacy. Vice versa

for silk: which Tribe B has come to take for granted but Tribe A experiences with awe. In addition, even if Tribe A and Tribe B produce similar commodities, a system of exchange and gifting – as in, for instance, the Northwest Coast American Indian ‘Potlach’ rituals – can protect each community against times of severe hardship. As one chronicler of Eskimo life puts it, ‘the best place for [an Eskimo] to store his surplus is in someone else’s stomach’ (Wright, 2000, p. 20). At the same time, at the individual level, a movement towards increased specialisation and division of labour also leads to greater interdependence; as does the growing capacity – and need – for networking and communication in our digital age. Hence, as Wright (2000) writes, ‘As history progresses, human beings find themselves playing non-zero-sum games with more and more other human beings. Interdependence expands, and social complexity grows in scope and depth’ (p. 19).

Based on this analysis, Wright (2000) goes on to argue that, while it is easy to mock the contemporary world and its deficiencies, there is a slow but steady movement towards more reciprocally altruistic relationships. That is, people have become increasingly moral, respectful, and caring towards each other: a world at its ‘moral zenith to date’ (p. 208), despite its remaining horrors and brutalities. Along similar lines, Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) describe, ‘an almost unstoppable historical trend’ towards greater equality (p. 267): a world which, over time, becomes fairer; even though many, many injustices remain. In the words of Martin Luther King, ‘the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice’ (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010, p. 270). For both Corning (2003) and Wright, this also equates to a natural movement towards pluralism: a growing acceptance and appreciation, over time, of multiple voices and viewpoints.

At the interpersonal level, the synergism hypothesis is supported by evidence of the stability of ‘nice’, over ‘nasty’, strategies (Axelrod, 1984). At the intrapersonal level, too, there is evidence that human beings have a natural tendency to move towards more synergetic configurations. A series of studies by Chun et al. (2011), for instance, found that participants demonstrated an unconscious tendency towards adopting multifinal strategies (i.e., those that could serve multiple goals concomitantly); and research also suggests that people may move towards more multifinal strategies as they get older (Riediger, Freund, & Baltes, 2005). Closely related to this, Sheldon et al. (2003) found that participants, over periods of time from 20 minutes to six weeks, tended to place greater emphasis on intrinsic goals, and moved away from more extrinsic goals. Hence, as thinkers from Aristotle to Jung, Rogers and Powers have suggested, there may, indeed, be a natural tendency for people to move towards more integrated, organised and unified ways of being; forging, ‘interconnections among aspects of their own psyches as well as with other individuals and groups in their social worlds’ (Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 5). Certainly, human systems may also have a natural inertia and resistance to change: a tendency to stuckness at Nash equilibria points (see Chapter 9, this volume). But, like ratchets on a wrench,

once synergies are achieved, their overall value may mean that they are hard to break down (Axelrod, 1984).

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