

# COSMIC OPTIMIST vs COSMIC PESSIMIST

## Exploration of Implications

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In his autobiographical work, *Freedom to Live*, Robert S. Hartman presented two valuational polar opposites, described metaphorically as the Cosmic Optimist and the Cosmic Pessimist. These descriptors characterize the morally good person, the person of intrinsic faith, and the morally insecure person, one of intrinsic fear. These polar positions manifest themselves axiologically in how each of these individuals relates to and makes value judgments about other people, the world, the environment, religious thinking, etc. Because each operates and is influenced by a different philosophical base, attitudes, decisions, and other value expositions may be diametrically opposed. In actuality, most people are somewhere on the continuum between these extremes or a mixture of features, but here, for illustration, I will discuss the characteristics at both outside edges.

Let us begin by looking at the representative of extremes of intrinsic fear – the Cosmic Pessimist. This is a person whom Hartman describes as being neither secure in self nor in the world. So how does the world appear to such a person? The world and the people in it are seen as basically hostile, negative, and dangerous. Axiological astigmatism obscures the view and prevents this person from seeing the whole for its parts. The "bad" is easily seen (and often exaggerated), but the "good" is narrowly defined.

Dr. Hartman ascribed certain behavioral tendencies to those who are intrinsically fearful. He or she may be defiant, assuming a superior attitude due to having no faith in the world or others and believing that only he or she can be trusted. This position may lead to aggressive or competitive behavior because almost everyone is seen as a rival or an enemy and must be overcome. The basic insecurity may be reflected in vanity (due to weak ego) and being easily hurt or touchy, all of which may contribute a certain insensitivity to others and self-centeredness. The lack of trust and the self focus may also generate indifference and callousness, ignoring the suffering of others. The intrinsically fearful may also be greedy, cynical, and easily threatened. They tend to be rigid people who are most comfortable in the systemic and authoritarian arena. Life is seen as difficult and dangerous, but, perhaps most importantly, they lack a sense of proportion, confusing the important with the unimportant, the relevant with the irrelevant (Hartman 1994, 113-116).

George Lakoff, who is a cognitive scientist and linguist, also describes oppositional world views which share Hartman's polarities. He presents two models of parenting as representing world views: the "Strict Father" (pessimistic moral outlook) and the "Nurturing Parent" (optimistic moral view).

The "Strict father" metaphor is one in which the relationship to the world is in largely negative terms. The family is a patriarchy in which the father is the final authority, exercising "tough love" and unquestioned power. The father is also the protector of the family in this fiercely dangerous world where it is survival skills for the competitive struggle – not relationships, moral character, or moral action – which determine outcomes. From this adversarial stance, exercising authority is itself a moral imperative. The competitive and goal oriented position sometimes yields ends-justifies-means behavior, even moral objectives being pursued by immoral methods, since outcomes are all that matters. In this perspective, taking human life may be an "operational necessity" (and innocent bystanders are "collateral damage"), without regard to the ideas of life as sacred and human obligations to each other – and to the planet. The focus is on the short-term/here and now, leaving the future to be sorted out by later generations. Individuals with this life philosophy basically do not believe that a peaceful and just world can exist, so they tend to deal with their fears through dominance and rigid thinking (Burnett 2003; Butler 2004).

Meshing Hartman's and Lakoff's characterizations gives us a generalized Cosmic Pessimist.

Now let us turn to the Cosmic Optimist, the person of intrinsic faith as described by Hartman. This is a person who is comfortable with him/herself and creation, a person who feels good in the world and feels that the world is good. The morally secure individual is self-possessed and not easily hurt, living with humility and lack of pretension. Other people are respected and valued for their potential and responded to with humanness, compassion, generosity, and cooperation. The approach to life is one of flexibility, confidence, and a positive belief that problems are solvable (Hartman 1994, 113-116).

Lakoff's morally optimistic person in the "Nurturing Parent" model sees the world as a basically positive place where the role of both parents is to build relationships and to develop self-esteem, sense of responsibility, and empathy for others. Part of one's moral responsibility is to be a happy and fulfilled person, to make the world a better place, believing this is possible. Today's actions are important not only for now, but also in regard to their long term effects (Burnett 2003; Butler 2004).

The Cosmic Optimist sounds much like Abraham Maslow's fully actualized person – one who is secure in personal needs who can work toward maximizing potential and self-fulfillment through seeking knowledge, peace, beauty, and unity (Gwynne, 1997). This is a person who is connected to the intrinsic oneness of all creation and is able to see things in their true relation.

It might be instructive to speculate briefly on what the Hartman Value Profile of the Cosmic Pessimist might reflect. It is likely to show one who devalues the Intrinsic in the world (Dim I<sub>1</sub>-), meaning that people are not to be trusted, the sense of empathy is diminished, and the connection with the "oneness of the universe" is weak. The Extrinsic

in the world is probably overvalued (Dim E<sub>1</sub>+); Status, practically, and "things" are important. System and order may also be overvalued (Dim S<sub>1</sub>+), reflecting rigid thinking and inflexibility. Internally, we might see the Intrinsic self disvalued (Dim I<sub>2</sub>-) due to the insecurity of not understanding "who" one is, or, alternatively, the Intrinsic self is greatly overvalued (++) indicating a kind of arrogant overconfidence. The Extrinsic self, the role in the world, might be overvalued (Dim E<sub>2</sub>+), but confused, unclear. And the sense of self system, the moral self, might be overvalued (Dim S<sub>2</sub>+) and rigidly defined in an effort to compensate for the confusion and insecurity. This person is likely to have an impaired ability to discern the relevant in the complex (INT%) or to have a sense of proportion (DI).

I believe the Cosmic Optimist would reflect discerning and balanced scores on the Hartman Value Profile.

Having reviewed these behavioral and attitudinal tendencies, let us look at how life situations may be affected.

An example may be drawn historically from the Catholic church's reaction to the discoveries of Copernicus and Galileo. The revelation that earth was not the center of the "universe," as it was understood, and that there were other bodies in the heavens, was a challenge to the theological thinking of the time and was considered heresy. People were imprisoned and executed for endorsing these radical ideas. Galileo made attempts to reconcile his position with the Bible, but he was imprisoned, castigated, and censored anyway. Of note is the observation that this was a western church problem. Apparently other cultures and religions were able to integrate advancing knowledge of the heavens without so much resistance. The rigid and fearful thinking of those in control of church dogma is an example of intrinsic insecurity. They were willing to take the lives of those who thought differently because they feared losing control, feared the theological implications, feared that it would wreck the church structure – all this presented in high-minded rhetoric, of course. Related events include the Inquisition and the Salem witch hunts. To be fair, there were those who were devout and sincere in their opposition (and not so harshly extreme), but they still represent the intrinsically fearful.

I believe that the church may once again be at a challenging place because of expanding knowledge and understanding. In 1919, the Milky Way was the only galaxy thought to exist. Then, Edwin Hubble began exploring the heavens with his telescope, seeking to answer two very large questions: how old is the universe and how big? Our current understanding is that the universe is 13 to 15 billion years old and contains an overwhelming number of galaxies, maybe 140 billion (Bryson 2003). Integrating this perception with theological thinking which is far more limited in scope and grasping that we are part of, not separate from, this much greater existence, is a challenge with which the insecure may have difficulty.

The "witch hunts" in the 1950s which were conducted by the House UnAmerican Activities Committee under the leadership of Senator Joseph McCarthy give us another example from our more recent history. It was an era in which "communists" were

perceived to be everywhere, threatening our American way of life and our security. Citizens were encouraged to turn in their neighbors if they were suspicious of them. Retrospectively, nothing much good came from this approach.

These illustrations, and I am sure we could come up with many more, show us how our insecurities can be exploited. The "fear" approach tends to make people endorse actions and behaviors which otherwise they might find unacceptable. They (and we) are exploited by manipulators who have their own agendas – usually to support what I call the ego-power-greed triad. It is an atmosphere in which magnified fear and distorted interpretations can lead to sanctioned violence.

How might the Cosmic Pessimist see the environment? It is there to be exploited and used. The idea of living in harmony with the environment is an alien concept. There may be denial that resources are finite, or there may be some acknowledgement of this fact for the vague future, prompting actions to get all one can before somebody else gets it. Remember, only the short term is important and long term effects are demeaned. The orientation of goal directed survival in a dangerous and untrustworthy world influence how one regards nature. Little appreciation is given to the life sustaining system we as humans are a part of on this planet and which must maintain its balance in order to support us.

Economics is obviously tied to the environment because it is based on the use of material resources. Then we are all prone to get caught up in the unhealthy processes because we are participants in the economy. Up to the last century of humankind's existence, these issues did not matter very much because there were not enough of us engaged in activities to substantially upset the balance. Now we are approaching a critical level of population where the impact of our actions can create disastrous consequences. Earth is a system which will return to stasis, but humans may not do well in the process and could be added to the list of extinctions. We need to be mindful that "in a systems or holistic approach, there are no side-effects, only effects, just as any consequence is a consequence whether intended or not" (Smith, Jan. 2004).

So, here we are – some of us trying to be Cosmic Optimists and intrinsically secure, some caught up in Cosmic Pessimism and insecurity, but most of us are somewhere in between. What can we do?

At the Second Mexican International Congress of Formal Axiology in Oct. 2001, I addressed the subject which I called "The Psychology of Goodness." There I stated that the dream is that "the legacy of formal axiology which Dr. Hartman left us becomes a world transforming dynamic: that the psychology of goodness in action in individual lives be an affirmation great enough to overcome the negatives of greed, ego, power, selfishness, abuse, etc., and we truly begin to realize the intrinsic age."

In order for this to occur, we must have a climate which encourages the mindfulness of ethical responsibility, of real value-based decision making, which supports our intrinsic faith and quells our intrinsic fears – a climate which supports behaviors consistent with

values which are axiologically sound. This, in contrast to an atmosphere which exploits fear and promotes greed and selfishness. In this time, as in any time, the very real threats to our security and the values we hold dear must be clearly identified. Conversely, those pseudothreats and exploitations used to manipulate must also be understood for what they are.

Changing dysfunctional paradigms, many of which are based in the insecurity mode, is difficult. However, I believe there is hope. Because we are so technologically sophisticated, our technology can be used to address global needs, with an understanding that the health of the global society has become as much our concern as issues inside our own borders. When Maslow's hierarchy of needs (physiological, safety, love, esteem, self actualization) is not being met on the lower levels, when injustice and deprivation and abuse abound, violence, yea even terrorism, is a consequence. When needs are met, reasonable people can deal with other issues. When greed and manipulation are exposed, responsible people can deal with that. We must find ways to make the insecure feel more legitimately secure so that their responses are axiologically sound rather than fear based.

We hold a key – formal axiology – for helping the world through better decision making. Economics and the environment are areas which I believe the exposition of good and ethical decision making can have a dramatic and positive effect. I believe that if we will come to treat our home, Earth, better, it will lead to grasping the concept of our interconnectedness as people.

The Rio declaration of 1992 stated the following in Article 15:

In order to protect the environment, the precautionary approach shall be widely applied by States according to their capabilities. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation (Smith 2002)

In Jan. 1998, the Johnson Foundation had a meeting of lawyers, scientists, policy makers, and environmentalists who formulated this similar precautionary principle:

When an activity raises threats of harm to the environment or human health, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically (Smith 2002).

These statements are a global call for ethical behavior and responsibility and are an illustration of the kind of approach which can be applied to begin to make some paradigm shifts.

I will conclude with another example which I believe to be axiologically sound in its essence. It is entitled "Principles of Earth Ethics."

1. Act in ways that enhance community, foster dialogue, and recognize the interdependency of people and natural systems.
2. Act in ways that affirm the diversity of people, cultures, and resources.
3. Act in ways that encourage self-organization and creativity and increase local decision making.
4. Act in ways that use less material from the crust of the earth and focus on renewable resources.
5. Act in ways which create less stuff and focus on services needed and delivered.
6. Act in ways that maintain and enhance the health of natural ecosystems.
7. Act in ways that efficiently use resources and increase social equity (Smith 2001).

Here we have a demonstration of positive actions which can be taken and encouraged on an individual level, a referent for reflecting on our own behaviors and their potential impact. I believe this kind of affirmative approach can help us overcome the negativities and insecurities and move toward creating the climate to meet the Hierarchy of Needs.

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