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## Foundations: Eating. Loving. Praying.

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## Foundations: Eating. Loving. Praying.

George Conesa

*Essay*

*“If you're born in a cubicle and grow up in a corridor, and work in a cell, and vacation in a crowded sun-room, then coming up into the open with nothing but sky over you might just give you a nervous breakdown.”*

~Isaac Asimov, Foundation

### Introduction

Abraham Maslow (1943) borrowed significantly from the foundational work of Kurt Goldstein (1939) and ended up crafting a pyramidal, sequential existential model of “motivations” that spoke, and still does, to audiences who then and later would be defined as humanistic psychologists and related professionals -- positive, transpersonal, and self-esteem psychologists. A narrowing apex of human-only aspirations and motivations makes it, still, an anthropocentric (and co-opted) reformulation. The clearly important qualification, even as supportive explanatory interstices, of how evolutionary imperatives (e.g., coincidences and randomness) contributed to our humanity, is woefully neglected.

That is, in Maslow’s anthropocentrically closed-ended pyramidal geometry, “nature,” once again writ in the myopic language of the social sciences, amounts to little more than basic physiological needs separate from a rich evolutionary past, where ‘eating,’ ‘loving,’ and ‘praying,’ to oversimplify Maslow’s motivational rungs, are arranged as almost incommensurable realms: oil, vinegar, and smoke. To be fair, there is some kernel of validity in making them causally sequential boxes to tick off on the way to “self-transcendence.” At some point, only a person on a path of self-actualization can forgo eating and lovemaking for a lofty cause, but the other way around -- babies refusing to eat in order to accelerate their self-transcendence -- is highly unlikely. Contradictions arise when Maslow’s aspired to teleologies come face to face with cross-cultural existential realities (Wahba and Bridwell, 1976; Tay and Diener, 2011).

In contrast, Goldstein imagined that at every stage of their development, organisms are, to characterize, wrestling with the imminent and inescapable realities (bio-socio-psychological) of *energy* (e.g., food and sleep), *safety* (e.g., hygiene; home and a family), and *possibility* (e.g., learning; opportunities and luck), and importantly, simultaneously. To oversimplify, Maslow would like us to eat before loving or praying, whereas Goldstein intuits that human motivations are dynamically complex and multifactorial -- in others words, integrally transactional and ongoing. It is Goldstein’s more complex idea that this essay supports.

Nevertheless, going beyond Maslow and Goldstein, an even more integrated model of human motivations might account for the way that evolutionary endowed modules and mechanisms -- emotions, higher aspirations, the necessities of survival -- interact in subtle and complex ways to produce a food worshipping ape that hopes the gods will feed the masses -- wild game, fish, or corn. On this ontological note, Dring et al.'s (in this volume) theorizing about the relationship between ontology, education, and food systems, is worth revisiting here:

We argue for denaturalizing dominant pedagogical models of food systems education while also problematizing efforts to incorporate different ways of knowing, teaching, and learning that do not acknowledge the harms that arise from a falsely universalized way of being. This is the propensity of the modern/colonial way of being that sees knowledge as a “commodity to be exported to those whose knowledge was deviant or non-modern” (Mignolo, 2011, p. 13).

Educational interventions at the level of methodology/epistemology tend to presume the problems with the current dominant food systems are problems of ignorance, instead of deeper problems of ontology and investment in the continuity of the promises offered by the house of modernity, including denials of the hidden harms, and processes, that are required to sustain the house itself.

Dring et al., insightfully so, make explicit the case for accounting for the deep semiotic roots and nature of food systems, these systems having evolved with specific meaning-tagging of diminishing resources (also, plenty and exploitation), sympathy for kin (also, at the exclusion and enslavement of “the other”), and sometimes leading to behavioral stasis (agricultural monocultures and restricted diets):

We argue that forms of food systems education that are disconnected from their ontological roots are destined to reproduce the same food systems with the same consequences for life on Earth. We argue that ways of being based on the house of modernity—colonialism, capitalism, the nation-state, universal Enlightenment rationality, anthropocentrism, binary gender, and separability—are positioned and internalized so that solutions and reforms serve to reproduce these same systems of oppression.

Ontological explanations such as Dring et al.'s, that take up the challenge of reconciling a host of human historical conditions while taking account of our long past, hold great promise as means to bringing greater coherence to seemingly unrelated facts at the interdisciplinary interstices of the evolutionary sciences, education, and psycho-social studies.

The next sections explore examples of these complex interactions as part of a larger and more inclusive story of “foundations” to the extent that in a serious examination of an “ecology of selfhood,” no ancient brain module or recent historical event should be left unturned.

### **The Foundations of “Purity”**

In his in-depth exposé about fraud in the US organic food industry, writer Ian Parker frequently makes references to the liminal marketing zone where con men take advantage of a voracious demand for products advertised as “organic.” In the quest for immaculate purity, quite the opposite happens: fraudulent parties take advantage of ineffectual and disorganized systems (overly trusting customers, feebly defined attributes, and poorly regulated farm and distribution practices) precisely when the very definitions of what qualifies as “wholesome” vary greatly

across a spectrum of buyers and sellers. Parker wrote: “[the con men]—*exploit a market willing to pay premium prices for qualities that are hard to detect at the point of sale.*” (2021:53) As travelers on the road sit on a horseless cart, the con man stops by and tries to sell them a Pegasus or a unicorn when all that is needed is a healthy and reliable donkey (and all the other cons: when donkeys are painted zebra-like and sold as exotic rare creatures, or narwhal tusks pass for proof of unicorns). To the extent that desperate folks have never seen a Pegasus or unicorn they are more than willing to pay a high premium for a skeletal dog.

The caveat “buyer beware” often comes too late or is hardly discouraging when one is promised the moon, the stars, and health to boot. But as is often the case, folks continue to feel tired or degraded in some way-form, their relationships fail, and they continue to defecate and urinate with little transcendence happening away from an ape body. No amount of “pure” Tibetan salt ever made a monk enlightened neither.

Now to the consumers. Taking a speedy tour of the epistemology of consumption, there is an undercurrent (and sometimes very explicit) declaration that certain foods and manners of ingesting have all to do with “spirituality.” Kosher foods, Halal, taking the eucharist, Ayurvedic medicines and foods, are examples of this. But not all these mindsets, practices, and attitudes of “purism” are similarly expressed, varying as they do across an epistemological continuum.

To borrow terms and ideas from the scholar of religion Martin Marty (1960), and apply them to culinary categories, there are *sects* and *cults*. *Sectarians* (sects) make claims about purity in terms of their rejection of something: “We do not eat pork.” *Lilliputians* and *Blefuscueans* are at odds with each other on how best to crack a boiled egg. *It is an epistemology of contrast by rejection.*

On the other hand, *cultists* follow leaders or a singular vision of perfection. One often sees foodies enchanted with a particular chef or a very specific idea or fad of cooking: ultimate barbecue, air fryers, or tapas bars: “If Martha Stewart puts Spam on her pasta, I shall too.” *Theirs is an affirmation tropism epistemology.*

Much that has to do with food and eating (and loving and praying), and the reasons why we do it, are complex including, unconscious predilections rooted in evolutionary adaptations (Luca, Perry, and Di Rienzo, 2010; Dunbar, 2022). To circle back, the organic food movement is justified (argued) from a complex epistemology of rejections (‘no’ to a long list of unhealthy foods and supermarkets and stores) and affirmations (‘yes’ to these nutrients which will reconstitute my “being,” or to the guru-chef who instructs me on how to procure and prepare them, and to all the food co-ops one can find between San Francisco and Timbuktu).

The ease of interactivity and juxtaposition of mundane but necessary behaviors and habits (e.g., eating), our sense of “perfection” or the ideal, and their correspondence (affinity) to the places we inhabit (*terroir*) become a powerful engine for cultural norms and, equally, for their descent into socio-religious factional experimentation (sects and cults). None can be said to be ontologically (and by association, teleologically and theologically) universal (see Dring et al. in this issue), but some try to make their case louder than others. Any eating, loving, or praying outside ideological lines can be perceived as blasphemous.



In this helter-skelter plurality there is, however, an “ecopsychological” undercurrent: the recurring themes of flight from city to countryside, from complexity to frugality, from overcrowding to family members and a few friends, from spoiled foods to wholesome ones, from chronic illness to health, from intemperance to salubrious habits, or from slave labor to crafts-people-shift, in short, an Epicurean ideal (Conesa-Sevilla, 2019).

The above list is a “ball park” recipe for a reasonable and sustainable life, not a teleology -- not written in the stars. Gods are not hanging on our every word or *panoptically* scrutinizing our deepest desires, neither are eco-gurus casting broken Earth spells as fanciful legerdemain.

Beyond the above-described Epicurean ideal, a structural and functional model for asking questions about *ecopsychological affiliations* and understanding the degree to which humans are, to use a casual and non-academic phrase, “one with nature” (shown in opening editorial/clarification as figures 1 and 2; Conesa-Sevilla, 2019; 2019).

### Foundations and Teleology

Time and time again, the existential intersection of *energy*, *safety*, and *possibility* is causally integrated in a consubstantial manner to, oftentimes, mean and count more than its individual components (e.g., notions of ‘integrity,’ ‘harmony,’ ‘balance,’ and/or ‘quality’). They are so at a basic organismic level in matters of health and wellbeing. In semiotic terms, they amount to a *pansemiosis*, if you will, because meaning matters (is dead-centered) in the quality, direction, and purpose of all these exchanges (Conesa-Sevilla, 2005). A. Maslow’s, S. Freud’s, K. Goldstein’s, to name just three thinkers, give us “existence” models that have this in common: their foundations are explicitly or implicitly theories about how *energy*, *safety*, and *possibility* are integral: play with and against each other or line up in concert as optimal development some of the time. The fact that we refer to them as “psychological,” “sociological,” or specifically about “motivation,” does not undermine their systems orientation – implications and applications.

Our understating or realization that a given cure or intervention ‘works,’ its confirmable effects, takes time. To make this relationship more explicit, the time-distance between here-coined *Hormiiasis* (the beginning of a treatment or cure) and how long it takes for a patient to realize that it is working as a function of a total environment of interrelated factors, also here-coined *Hyphoiati* (healing that occurs when recognizing the “web of life”), may be so long that at some point faith and prayer are the only and constant companions of sickness. To reiterate, con men are very good at exploiting these time differences – talk “the talk” and leave town.

Taking an aspirin for a headache or wanting to lose an extra twenty pounds by adhering to an unusual and hard to maintain diet, require two very different coping strategies. The timeline of the former may be so instantaneous that no incantations or magical formulas are needed. It belongs to the situation of *Hormiiasis* (the beginning of a treatment or cure), to the extent that “beginning to ache” and “finally cured,” are two ends of a shorter experiential leash.

And then there is the usual and not always accurate consolation of “If it does not kill you, it makes you stronger.” The teleological implication of this bit of ‘wisdom,’ is that an end result is almost certain as part of some superstitious and strange algorithm: if A, then 42.

Apropos, at this juncture, it is pertinent and perhaps useful to address the problem of teleology, the notion that all developmental processes inevitably end in a certain way, “the certain way” often taken to mean an anthropocentric ideal (e.g., self-transcendence in Maslow’s theory). Correctly so, biologists talk about cells and tissues of a zygote growing and changing to produce the adult (ontogeny); that is, growth processes end up in the differentiation of tissues—atomy and physiology. But in phylogeny, teleology is a false concept. Organisms do not purposefully develop traits in order to handle future challenges. Humans were never poised to be absolute vegans or to burn Palo Santo during a meager meal. During life science lessons, some teachers might incorrectly say something like, “Fish wanted to find a way to live out of water, so they developed legs and lungs and became amphibians.” One of the problems of thinking in teleological terms or teaching from a teleological perspective (in phylogeny) is that we obscure scientific facts, potentially confusing students--ourselves. There is much in the natural world to inspire wonder and further learning from our science lessons without resorting to unscientific ideas (Brunold, 2022).

The ontological realization “the glass is half empty” almost naturally conjures up the need for a “life plan” of personal growth toward reimagining self as “half full” when advised or cajoled by well-meaning but idealistic counselors. An Eastern philosophical perspective, on the other hand, will contest both views by claiming that any water in the cup is likely to prevent further growth or learning. What’s a New Age faddy to do?

*Loving* is an existential function leading somewhere and so are *Eating* and *Praying*. All three can and do, in the hands of a self-referential ape, amount to, idiosyncratically so, much more (or less) than their original biological and/or cognitive evolutionary foundations. And that could be a problem for humans. In contrast to tigers, parrots, or slugs, who ‘in the moment’ and Zen-like existence modalities satiate their drives and move on, only humans can and will starve for love or a religious cause.

Furthermore, only perturbed humans, or some seeking to work toward an ideal image ideal, will go to great lengths to stitch a sustenance quilt of specialized ‘magical’ nutrients, ritualized practices and prayers, and join the many cults devoted to “wellbeing,” with dubious gains toward a notion of “perfection” -- “perfection” itself becoming, oftentimes, a cleave-contrast to make “other folks” seem less enlightened or human.

In short, faith exercised in matters of eating, loving, and praying is equally a dividing force and a tribal glue meant for “members only” (Dunbar, 2022).

## Conclusion

Playing with the idea that the human-centered motivational trio (eating, loving, and praying) are the mathematical foundations for a *psychohistory* (as in Isaac Asimov’s fictional science making use of history, sociology and statistics), what then can one expect or predict?

For one, we can *expect* more of the same: folks loving food instead of other people; emotional eating; folks feeding their dogs crappy foods because ‘they love them;’ showing our love for “our fellow men” by sending a miserly amount of money to a church that may or may not help

starving children in a faraway (“and let’s keep it that way”) and ‘god-awful country;’ fast and pray; praying and feasting; loving-feasting-but not praying; fasting-loving-praying; or any other combination that describes our conflicting superimposition and categorization of basic needs into fanciful anthropocentric prescriptions for “health,” spiritual elevation, or gluttony.

Secondly, we can *predict* more of the same with both hopeful and dystopian developments. In a not-so-distant future, it might be possible to genetically modify humans to photosynthesize. But then, would we be ‘human’ at all? Given the current status of world politics (aggressive totalitarian regimes bent on genocide), global climate deterioration (we are past the point that any meager set of corrections will change the inevitability of profound changes to our biosphere), and overpopulation -- disaster scenarios all around -- praying for any amount of food and hoping to find love might become unfruitful quests.

It is not at all surprising that many writers, including Isaac Asimov, have tried to understand, in fiction and in fact, why humanity (Americans) is so bent on looking the other way when so many things are going wrong, when more learning is required.

Apropos, in his famous essay “A Cult of Ignorance” (1980), Asimov wrote:

There is a cult of ignorance in the United States, and there always has been. The strain of anti-intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means that “my ignorance is as good as your knowledge ... To be sure, the average American can sign his name more or less legibly, and can make out the sports lines—but how many non-elitist Americans can, without undue difficulty, read as many as a thousand consecutive words of small print, some of which may be trisyllabic?

His words are, of necessity, biting in their admonishment and more pertinent today because, in hindsight, one can easily draw what amounts to an historical regression to recent false claims of malfeasance during elections; incestual information bubbles; bizarre-by-any-standards conspiracy theories; and despicable and forceful assaults on reason, education and educators, science and scientists, justice, and equality. To be fair, all tribes -- “woke” and “right” -- have drawn indelible red lines, to reiterate, highlighting the two epistemological flavors, “*rejection*” and/or “*affirmation tropisms*,” with grey-compromise-discussion areas so absent as to eliminate the probability of better reasoned and civil dialectics.

No *psychohistory*, science-fictional or factual, is needed to illuminate the direction we seem to be heading. Asimov’s hopeful-corrective recommendation seems as unlikely today as it was when he wrote:

I believe that any human being with a physically normal brain can learn a great deal and can be surprisingly intellectual. I believe that what we badly need is social approval of learning and social rewards for learning. We can *all* be members of the intellectual elite...

A critical (scientifically tested) understanding of the historically quizzical arrangement of food pyramids, the physiological ‘push a lever’ of emotions and thoughts and desires during eating, loving, and praying could have helped us, long ago, bypass many-a-confounding ideology or fleeting caprice turned into novelistic historical or personal melodramas—or unhelpful



psychobabble. Our relatively great strides in nutritional science, agronomy, and food technology seem not to have broken the stubborn psychological motivation synthesis *eating-loving-praying* in its manifold ontologies.



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(Cover art: “Prayer before the meal,” by Jan Steen, 1660)

