

Prof. Rex Li's Writings

Category: Psychology

Sub-category: Multiple Intelligences

Code: Psy 01-011

Title: Summary and Review of Howard Gardner (2008)
Five Minds for the Future
Chapter 3: Synthesizing Mind in Brief

Year Written: 2020

Summary/ Abstract: This is a summary of Gardner's ideas on synthesis based on Chapter 3 (p.47-76) of his book, *Five Minds for the Future* (2008). He offers a taxonomy, some components and motivating forces for synthesis. Also a critique on Ken Wilber's unintelligible synthesis (*A Brief History of Everything*, 2001) and some notable synthesizing scholars.

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Summary and Review of Howard Gardner (2008)

Five Minds for the Future

Chapter 3: Synthesizing Mind in Brief

(1) Synthesis is a formidable task. It is somewhat against human cognition which is domain-specific.

It is hard to teach synthesis (p.47). There is no known standard of successful synthesis.

thesis. And, just to top it off, even when synthesizing is desired and cultivated, we lack standards for determining when a productive synthesis has been accomplished, as opposed to when the proposed synthesis is premature, misguided, or even fundamentally wrong-headed. As turns out to be the case with each of the other minds

(2) Kinds of synthesis (p.47 – 50)

- (i) Narratives
- (ii) Taxonomies
- (iii) Complex Concepts
- (iv) Rules and Aphorisms
- (v) Metaphors, Images, Themes
- (vi) Embodiments without Words
- (vii) Theories
- (viii) Meta Theory

R: Again a display of Gardner's breadth, see his quotes below on complex concepts:

Complex concepts. A newly stipulated concept can tie together or blend a range of phenomena. Charles Darwin achieved such a synthesis in his concept of natural selection; Sigmund Freud developed the concept of the unconscious; Adam Smith introduced the concept of the division of labor. In literary analysis, T. S. Eliot created the concept of the *objective correlative*—the embodiment of an emotion in a particular situation, such that the reader will infer the intended emotion without its being explicitly mentioned. In business, Michael Porter construed strategy as a synthesis of five forces that together determine potential profit. And note the plethora of concepts in financial analysis: the business cycle, price-earnings ratio, the eighty-twenty principle (also known as Pareto's law).

(3) Components of Synthesis (p.51 – 52)

Then Gardner listed “four loosely ordered components”: (p.51)

- (i) Goal
- (ii) Starting Point
- (iii) Selection of Strategy, Method and Approach
- (iv) Drafts and Feedback

(4) Against Interdisciplinary

Gardner argued that primary school kids' interdisciplinary approach is only “common sense”, “common experiences”, not real interdisciplinary.

The dangers of inadequate synthesis are perhaps most manifest when it comes to interdisciplinary work. To begin with, much activity in the early years of schooling is misleadingly labeled as “interdisciplinary.” Children may well benefit from carrying out evocative classroom projects or from pursuing a unit on generative topics like “patterns” or “water” or the “cradle of civilization.” But these endeavors do not involve disciplines in any legitimate sense of that term. In making a diorama or a dance, in thinking of water or cities in a variety of ways, students are drawing on common sense, common experiences, or common terminology and examples. If no single discipline is being applied, then clearly interdisciplinary thinking cannot be at work.

(5) Juxtaposition ≠ real inter-disciplinary

Even when students have begun to master the disciplines singularly, there is no guarantee that a combination of disciplines will be appropriately or productively linked. Courses may well and appropriately involve both history and the arts. One can read about the battles of the Spanish Civil War in a history text *and* one can also look at the painting *Guernica*, or read the novels of André Malraux or Ernest Hemingway, without making any particular effort to link or compare these sources. We might term this approach “disciplinary juxtaposition”—a failure to realize the illumination that may accrue when different perspectives are synergistically joined.

(6) Motivating Forces for Synthesis (p.56-58)

Concepts, problems, phenomenon etc. exist. That demand synthesis. Gardner quotes work in business and medicine.

(7) A Successful Synthesis (according to Gardner, p.59-60)

Bill Bryson (2003). *A Short History of Nearly Everything*.

(8) An Excessive and Unintelligible Synthesis

In various works, including the aforementioned book, Wilber attempts to order all of our knowledge into taxonomies, grids, hierarchies. The frames that he uses include going from the physical to the psychological, from the lowest forms of cognition to the highest planes of consciousness; locating all disciplines in terms of their contributions to his holistic view; grouping together dozens of theorists into an overarching frame; and, above all, trying to relate all of these dimensions to the highest realm, the realm of the spiritual—“where Spirit becomes conscious of itself, awakens to itself, begins to recognize its own true nature.”⁸ By “the spiritual,” Wilber is not referring to a particular religion; indeed, as his admirers insist, he has bridged the Eastern and Western concepts of the spirit. Wilber believes he has discerned a remarkable consensus among thinkers the world over, “whether living today or six thousand years ago, whether from New Mexico in the Far West or from Japan in the Far East.”⁹

To convey the somewhat problematic nature of the Wilberian enterprise, it is best to give a few examples from his own writings. Asked about the relation between depth and consciousness, he says, “Consciousness is simply what depth looks like from the inside, from within. So, yes, depth is everywhere, consciousness is everywhere, Spirit is everywhere. And as depth increases, consciousness increasingly awakens, Spirit increasingly unfolds. To say that evolution produces greater depth is simply to say that it unfolds greater consciousness.”¹⁰ Explicating his procedure, he reports:

I simply started making lists of all of these holarchical maps—conventional and new age, premodern and modern and postmodern—everything from systems theory to the Great Chain of Being, from the Buddhist vijanas to Piaget, Marx, Kohlberg, the Vedantic koshas, Loevinger, Maslow, Lenski, Kabbalah and so on. I had literally hundreds of these things, these maps, spread out on legal pads all over the floor . . . I thought that I might be able to find the single and basic holarchy that they were all trying to represent in their own ways . . . [I]t was very obvious that each holarchy in each group

*was indeed dealing with the same territory but overall we had four different territories so to speak.*¹¹

Without doubt, this is a noble effort; if Wilber did not attempt it, others surely would. Why, then, am I ungratified, unsatisfied? I think it is because Wilber emerges as the ultimate “lumper.” He is always poised to see connections; to join theories, stories, examples together; to accentuate their commonalities; to pinpoint their order in a yet greater order. An example of his compulsion to lump comes from this quotation: “In recent times, cultural evolution has been championed, in various ways, by Jürgen Habermas, Gerald Heard, Michael Murphy, W. G. Runciman, Sisirkumar Ghose, Alastair Taylor, Gerhard Lenski, Jean Houston, Duane Elgin, Jay Earley, Daniel Dennett, Robert Bellah, Erwin Laszlo, Kishore Gandhi, and Jean Gebser, to name a few.”¹² Far from being an isolated example, statements of this sort appear dozens if not hundreds of times in his voluminous writings.

“Lumpers” are contrasted with “splitters.” Splitters make distinctions, enjoy contrasts, always ask, “Why do these *not* connect? What is the difference, what is the *crucial* distinction?” On a continuum of lumpers to splitters, I fall somewhere in the middle. Yet, confronted by one of Wilber’s texts, I feel myself strangely antagonistic to lumping. When everything connects to everything else—in, what Wilber likes to term the Great Chain of Being—then one is hard pressed to make priorities, distinctions, illuminating comparisons. It would be difficult to know how to disprove Wilber, indeed, where to start, where to discern the tensions and struggles that permeate Bryson’s text but which are inevitably papered over in Wilber’s compulsive search for connective tissue. His effort virtually paralyzes the critical mind.

I admit that my preference of Bryson over Wilber is a matter of taste. And I remain grateful to Wilber for opening my eyes to many literatures and to making a place for my own writings in his own vast scheme. For those committed to lumping, Wilber is a prophet.

(9) The Good and The Poor Synthesis

The good can make sense and make leaps, while the poor just leap and slip!

I've observed that two very different kinds of individuals are drawn to interdisciplinary work: those who are curious, well informed, and prone to make well-motivated leaps; and those who spurn orderly linear thinking and are attracted to leaps that may be wild or sloppy. This distinction may be observed at the workplace as well as the classroom. Some executives are gifted with the capacity to take in huge amounts of information but then, in John Gardner's felicitous phrase, are able to "unclutter their minds" and focus on what is truly important.¹⁴ Others leap from one half-baked idea to another, never disciplining their thought, and leaving their employees and outside observers increasingly confused.

(10) The Problem of Integration (synthesis) in Education (p.68)

We don't have clear standard for judgment.

buoy the potential for making connections. The problem with these pedagogical interventions is readily stated. In most cases educators fail to invoke explicit standards in judging *which* connections, *which* integrations, *which* syntheses are valid, and in which ways they are (or are not) meritorious. To judge a project, one must invoke criteria that come from the appropriate domain—what makes a good essay, a striking mural, a compelling narrative, an effective trademark, a viable business plan—as well as criteria that suit the subject(s) of the project: is this an accurate description of the

(11) Tests are developed on synthesis (p.70-71)

(12) Multiperspectivalism (p.72-75)

Taking up different perspectives on an issue.

(13) The Trend of Specialization continues (p.74)

But we live in a time where our most talented minds know more and more about increasingly narrow spheres. The division of labor that Adam Smith noted in the marketplace of commerce has swept the marketplace of ideas as well. And there is no reason to ex-

(14) Notable Synthesizing Scholars (p.75)

Neither of these interventions is likely to be effective, however, unless two conditions prevail. On the one hand, we need role models—individuals who are themselves gifted at multiperspectivalism, interdisciplinarity, and/or synthesizing. In recent years, Jacob Bronowski, Stephen Jay Gould, and E. O. Wilson have elegantly filled that role in biology; in the sphere of management, Andy Grove at Intel, John Browne at BP, John Reed at Citicorp, and Bill Gates at Microsoft are often cited as examples of individuals with wide knowledge and admirable synthesizing or integrating capacities. Bill Clinton, an outstanding synthesizer, recently reflected on this capacity: “I think intellect is a good thing unless it paralyzes your ability to make decisions because you see too much complexity. Presidents need to have what I would call a synthesizing intelligence.”¹⁹

Biology

Business

politics

✓

R: A very rich chapter with endless names, cases, examples. Good chapter on what synthesis is about, why we need it, how to do it, step-by-step.