

Summary of Argument for Dissertation

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The following is a summary of the argument for my dissertation which asks the question, "To what extent did the Buddha define a natural system theory?" The full text can be found in the following four posts:

- [Complexity in Science](#)
- [Compartmentalization in Science and Society](#)
- [Challenges to Psychology as a Science](#)
- [Challenges to the Study of Vipassan? Meditation](#)

This is a philosophical study which proposes that what Systems Philosophy has in common with the full traditional context of Vipassan? meditation may point to significant barriers in the challenges of psychology as a science. The limitations of our understanding of vipassan? has much to do with current literature & research falling into one of two polarized realms of psychology: reductionistic mainstream science; and quasi-scientific clinical theory. First, we look at the limitations of reductionism and the compartmentalization that it creates. Second, we will look at the goals of Freud's positivist science to account for the complexity of human experience. Then we will look at how this polarization affects an understanding of vipassan? meditation which itself explicitly aims to transcend polarization in generalized principle. To conclude we propose that a comparison of an existing natural systems clinical theory and vipassan? theory may point the way out of this polarization.

Reductionism is the essence of engineering, and this engineering-orientation dominates modern science. This approach does not work for problems of complexity, which are problems with many interdependent variables. Nature has a quality which cannot be reduced, and the closest that science has come to describing this quality is with the idea of chaos, which accounts for a mysterious mix of order and disorder. The study of chaos gave rise to complex systems research methods which allow science to sit a little more inside this mysterious quality of nature while maintaining a foothold in the objective realm.

Philosophically, reductionism leads to compartmentalization and isolation in order to divide-and-conquer. Compartmentalization has its purpose but causes even more problems when left to grow unmanaged, for example "population health" under the ACA, management of the NHS in the UK, suicidal people, functional brain modules, aspects of the psyche, etc. Approaching complex problems as engineering puzzles requires the division of problems in to smaller problems, and this philosophical stance has left our society, and our sciences, highly compartmentalized. The original Enlightenment ideal for science included the philosophy of dividing problems analytically but also synthesizing the results to see what it all meant. But analysis is just easier, and we have gotten so

good at analysis that we have become overwhelmed by the immeasurable canyons of analytic data and have lost sight of the necessity for synthesis.

Psychology emerged from Freud's recognition that medicine had overdosed on biological reductionism. He created a new branch of science which attempted to account for the complexity of human behavior. Freud emphasized that wonder at this natural human phenomenon should lead to even more wonder at its mystery, and this seemed to help his patients. Despite calling himself an analyst, he was also a synthesizer. Unfortunately, psychology as a science of human behavior still suffers from the challenge of integrating analysis and synthesis. On one hand, Freud and subsequent clinical positivists hold to theories which aim to illustrate the complexity and wonder of human life. These theories have yet to transcend the compartmentalization of clinical psychology as a proprietary field. On the other hand, modern postpositive science (APA, NIMH/RDoC) requires testable theories with reducible concepts. The division in these two perspectives is paradigmatic, and has led to the confusion of basic research terms which poses a challenge to developing a science of human behavior that accounts for the wonder of human life while also being able to communicate it to the other sciences.

The Buddha is touted to have created a system of science which accomplishes this. However, while Buddhist-informed practices are exploding in popularity, our understanding is limited by our own polarized paradigmatic assumptions. Existing understandings of vipassanā theory (i.e. "mindfulness") either fall within either imprecise or inaccurate analogical comparisons to positivist clinical theory or reductionistic experiment which loses the deeper benefits of the teachings and may even cause harm in some cases. In Western science, systems philosophy most precisely provides a framework for integrating analysis and synthesis within the objective realm, and there is evidence (Macy, Fenner, Midgley) to suggest that the Buddha may have explicitly promoted such a paradigmatic leap. Applying the systems paradigm to human behavior might be the key next step to uniting the positivists and postpositivists and progressing clinical psychology as a science.

Murray Bowen has probably produced the only substantive systems theory of human behavior in use today. A rarity in clinical theory, Bowen theory generates testable hypotheses which also account for the complexity and wonder of human life. What is most interesting is that specific concepts in Bowen theory show striking similarity with specific concepts in the essential Buddhist teaching, known as vipassanā meditation. This set of similarities may, in fact, be unique among Western theories. Thus, a comparison with Bowen theory provides a focus that is more manageable for this study than constructing a natural systems theory of human behavior based on vipassanā from the ground up.

This study hypothesizes that what these two theories have in common, both technically and philosophically, may point to fresh solutions to the problems stated above.