

2016 U3A Course based on
Dancing With the Unknown
A Book about FEELINGS and the Everyday Experience of MIND and SOUL

Session 15 – October 24, 2016

Last time we were thinking about how change occurs in our lives and part of that was acceptance and commitment and living according to one's values. Today I want to say more about values – or value – as a very important component of what our mind does. Chapter 17 of my book is called *Values*. We say we value some things in our lives more than others – they are more precious or meaningful and we wouldn't like to lose them – or we say we are grateful to be able to do the things we do so we value the fact that we have that ability. These are thoughts and emotions and feelings that we experience and they mean something to us.

An earlier version of this Course was called The Feeling of Meaning. That was because I wanted to emphasise the importance of our feelings as generators of meaning. This feeling part of our mind that links with both thoughts and emotions, but is not quite the same as either of them, seems to be the most influential part for obtaining our sense of meaning. This is not a theory – it is evident in our experience as I explained earlier. If you don't feel something you can't see much meaning in it, but whatever you feel – that is the first taste of the meaning. You might convert that into a more abstract meaning using language so that the story part of your mind is an important form of meaning as well.

At the beginning I described the meaning we experience as a subjective sense of satisfaction, but it can be defined in many ways and, paradoxically, it seems to defy our attempts to give itself a meaning – to say exactly what meaning means! It often denotes the significance or relevance of something or its *value*. This, too, is an elusive concept.

The proactive nature of our perception makes it difficult for us to distinguish between some value that is intrinsic and already present in what we are observing and the value we have given to it with our own mind as we perceived it. Is it simply our version of the value or do other people see it the same way? In our individualistic culture nowadays we tend towards saying that values are mostly personal preferences, but at the same time most of us like to think that things exist whether we perceive them or not so in that case they must have a value in their own right. The more obviously we ignore this the more self-centred we become.

What I want to say today about values is based on everything we have been doing in this Course up to now. It stems from the two foundational ideas on which this Course is constructed: (1) that feelings are our primary source of meaning and (2) that love is our greatest need and is a natural biological capacity that is available to us at all times.

I've also mentioned the idea that living is a movement – we are animate beings, which means that we are made of moving parts – not really parts, we are a moving whole. Feelings are our disposition towards the next act of our mind – the next word or thought or moment of connection. Living carries a yearning to be and belong whose origin is unknown – a constant animation or vitality. That movement is best known through our feelings. Our greatest need is to optimise autonomy and connectedness – to maintain both at a highly functional level by ensuring that neither one takes over at the expense of the other. To achieve that I believe we need a certain kind of movement or force that is called love. It is a manner of being that we did not create, just as we did

not create life, that comes from an unknown source, but which we can avail ourselves of by directing our attention to it and utilising the whole of our mind.

As I have said, this idea of love is not a scientific fact – it's a belief – albeit based on the experience of life. It is a belief in the intrinsic value of aliveness. I also said that the other thing about love is that seeing with love legitimises what we are seeing – that only through love do we see clearly. This was one of Maturana's original claims when he first started talking about love in a scientific way and it is repeated in the book I mentioned a while back called *Something Beyond Greatness* by Judy Rogers and Gayatri Narain where Maturana says 'love is the very act of seeing the other as a legitimate being. To see you must let the other be and not put your expectations and purpose on them.' If you see someone through your own mind when it is upset or needy or distorted by ego in some way you do not see that person as he or she really is.

I think there is some confusion about this aspect of love because there is a lot of fantasy associated with a loving relationship and that is the selfish part of our imagination. We are fantasising about how good we will feel by being with this person, which is pure indulgence – self-consciousness – and not really love at all. That self-conscious part of the imagination was what caused my problems in my earlier life as I have tried to describe. In contrast to that are the words I quoted earlier from Robert Johnson that love is 'the power within us that affirms and values another human being as he or she is . . . at its very essence it is an appreciation – a recognition of value.' In this way it is love that enables us to appreciate value. The intentional feeling of love discloses values to us and without it our sense of values is distorted.

This was elaborated most clearly by the early 20th century German medical philosopher, Max Scheler. He adopted Roman Catholicism early in his life and his work was the subject of a Doctoral thesis by the man who became Pope John Paul II, but he distanced himself from the church later professing a spirituality he called 'philosophical anthropology,' which he was writing about when his life was cut short in 1928 at age 54. The Nazis destroyed much of his work after he died. At the time his standing in European philosophy was very high, but I feel his work has been neglected since then.

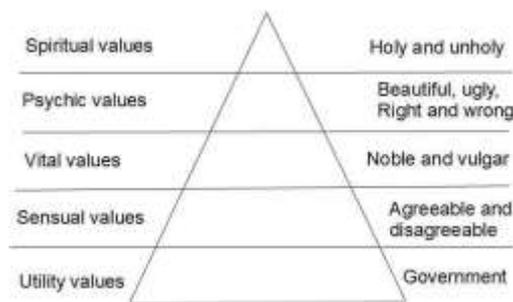
He was a pioneer of phenomenology, though not as a formal methodology, because he described it as 'an attitude of spiritual seeing [of things that] remain hidden' rather than an empirical set of observations. His basic idea was that values are experienced in our feelings. He said that values are not simply feelings, they are meanings, but they reach us through feelings just as colour reaches us through sight. They are not flavours added to improve something nor are they a consequence of something else, they are the primary facts of reality. Our attention process, which determines what our world seems like to us, is guided mainly by what Scheler called 'value-ception' – the perception of value as we understand it.

In psychology this fits with the 'primacy of affect' – the idea that the emotional impact precedes other aspects of perception and thereby forms the framework in which the meaning will arise. The central plank in this framework is what Scheler refers to as love. He suggests that love is what creates value whereas hate destroys it and I would add that cynicism and indifference will deprive us of both meaning and value. Scheler warns that egoic judgments, as distinct from value-ception, are a form of 'poison for our mind.'

In other words love is actually the reason that we have values in the first place. Scheler writes about the 'movement' which is love. It is love that enables our mind to know value because looking with love legitimises – makes real – whatever we see. Hatred on the other hand closes off our sense of value. As he puts it: 'love and hate are acts in which the value-realm accessible to the feelings of a being . . . are either extended or narrowed.' Love and hate are not felt reactions – they are the very ground from which the possibility of value arises. Love is an intentional act of mind that discloses value.

We can't define value precisely because it is neither purely subjective (whatever I take it to be) nor purely consensual (whatever we agree it to be). It is pre-reflective like the subconscious component of empathy or compassion in that it comes to us before we have thought about it. What we can say about value is that it engages our attention. When we find we love doing something or being with someone we are acknowledging that we value that experience – we recognise something of value in it, subconsciously at first, then as part of our story. If we don't continue to appreciate it this value will fade from our awareness as we know from what happens when we take good things for granted.

To remain part of our awareness and our story the experience of value has to consolidate its meaning over time and it is here we see that values are not all the same. Scheler ranked them in a hierarchy with the *utilitarian* values of practicality and basic comfort at the bottom, the *sensual* values of what is agreeable and what is disagreeable just above that, the *vital* or *life* values of what is noble and what is vulgar next highest, the *psychic* values of the ugly or the beautiful higher again and the *spiritual* values of holy and unholy at the top of the pyramid.



You might recognise in this description shades of Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs' that came much later in 1943 apparently without any reference to Scheler. Abraham Maslow was unusual amongst psychologists of his time because he forsook the study of mentally ill people (whose immaturity led to an immature psychology he said) and chose to study only the people he regarded as the healthiest who were the highest achievers in the population. He placed *physiological* needs at the bottom; above that *safety and security* needs and above that the *social* needs of love and belonging. That led to the second highest level, which was *self-esteem and self-confidence*. The highest level he called *self-actualisation* in which he included goals that are higher than oneself and for the 'greater good' such as altruism and spirituality.

In both cases there are spiritual matters at the top and more sensual and practical matters at the bottom. What is different is that Scheler was talking about values that we aspire towards whereas Maslow was talking about needs that require our attention and therefore provide the motivation for our mind to develop. Maslow says that deficiencies in the first four needs lead to anxiety and distress. Scheler particularly emphasises the vital values (noble or vulgar) as the grounds for insecurity and anxiety if they are neglected.

Models such as these may guide us in finding meaning, but they also distort meaning if we take them too literally. Maslow was often criticised because these categories do not exist separately even though they do describe a line of development towards wellbeing. Moving up his pyramid from the lower values towards the higher takes us from the more superficial and selfish uses of the mind towards relationships and a broader context. This could be compared to a maturation of the mind, which might be expected to occur throughout one's lifetime.

Another philosophical psychologist, Harry Overstreet, explains beautifully that, although we generally mature as we age, the human mind does not necessarily mature with age. He was 73 in 1949 when he published *The Mature Mind*, a best-selling book in its day and still regarded as a classic, suggesting that psychological age is not the same as chronological age and irresponsible

behaviour stems from psychological immaturity. For him maturity is the progress from self-orientation to meaningful relationships. His 'linkage theory' that man lives by and through his relationships was prescient of today's social neuroscience. He says the maturing person is one whose 'linkages with life are constantly becoming stronger and richer because his attitudes are such as to encourage their growth. A mind grows towards maturity as it widens its relations to the not yet realised,' which I would equate with the relationship with the unknown.

If our life is a movement in search of wellbeing, which the primary emotion of **Seeking** promotes, what exactly is it we are hoping to achieve? I'm suggesting it is a satisfaction with life, which will be a set of feelings and a sense of meaning. This is not continuous happiness, of course, certainly not ecstasy or bliss or mystical revelations, but it is a certain amount of comfort for our mind, content with knowing that there will be pain as well as pleasure, sorrow as well as joy, and always more questions than answers. There cannot be complete satisfaction – both our feelings and meaning will always be unfinished business. When we get stuck we tend to think of ourselves as the finished product, but we are always a work in progress.

For the purpose of my book (and this Course) I have my own version of a **hierarchy of meaning** for the human mind, which is also a **hierarchy of feelings**. At the bottom is *physiological utility*, which is the basic autonomy and connectedness that keeps us alive – the baseline for feeling or meaning to occur. The next level I call *physical comfort*, which includes basic safety and security and the sensual pleasures or otherwise pains that are an obvious part of our everyday feelings and to which we attach meaning. The third level is *psychological comfort* including anxiety versus peace of mind, equivalent to Scheler's vital values and very much a product of Maslow's social needs at this level. On the fourth level, *aesthetic comfort*, are feelings and meaning that only occur when our mind can distinguish what is beautiful from what is ugly – a very important aspect of meaning that we will get onto in the next Chapter. At the top is *spiritual comfort*, which is a relationship with the unknown that may bring joy or fear or may be disregarded altogether as unimportant by some.

But once again the model is just a flimsy contraption that our left-brain logic creates as an outline and we do well to let it pass through our mind and disappear from view. Each of us decides what we value and what we need and the combination of our intuition and our rationality directs every new moment of our lives. Of prime importance in this process is being aware of what it is that we value – recognising what our values are.

Scheler warns against 'value inversion,' which he said is a 'self-poisoning of the mind' that leads to negative judgments about oneself and others manifesting as disapproval, anger and passive aggression. He suggests that nothing will ever be sacred or highly valued to a self-poisoned mind. His idea of a 'self-inflicted personal sense of inadequacy' reminds me of my own worst experiences and the recurring theme of not knowing that you are loved. Scheler foresaw, at a time when neuroscience and psychology were much less developed than they are today, that the values that our mind believes in and is guided by bring about the kind of experience that we are having. I equate his idea of value inversion with the improper use of my mind.

Tied in with our sense of values are our ideas about ethics and our moral judgments both of which are big subjects in their own right. I can sum up what I have to say about ethics by referring back to the biology – life-promoting versus life-destroying. Much of what is happening by way of the destruction of our environment and antisocial and hateful behaviour is unethical without any doubt. Mankind is its own worst enemy in this regard.

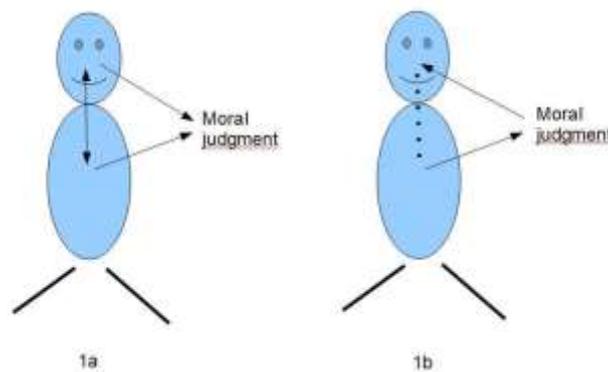
Our sense of meaning is shaped to a considerable extent by the moral judgments that we make. These are part of our personal values so they predispose our attention towards some things and away from others and are a major factor in the shared meaning within a group. This works to bind our societies together in a beneficial way, but at the same time it is what produces most of the division and antagonism between different societies. This is described by Harvard psychology professor, Joshua Greene, in his book *Moral Tribes*. He thinks there are two kinds of moral

problem: ‘me versus us’ which is the autonomy/connectedness issue I have been describing here and ‘us versus them’ which is the issue of tribal conflict.

He explains (as I have) that our biology equips us naturally to deal with the first issue and balance our individual needs against those of our society as a whole so we can trust our feelings and intuition to take care of that. He is more pessimistic about the tribal conflict, which he says can only be solved rationally – if we can manage to negotiate rationally!

Our mind, by its nature, is *The Righteous Mind*, which is the title of Jonathan Haidt’s most recent book. He said he could have called the book ‘the moral mind,’ but that would not have conveyed the idea that we are ‘intrinsically critical and judgmental.’ His point is that this kind of mind made it possible for human beings to form large, cooperative societies in which altruism abounds (without even needing the glue of kinship) while at the same time guaranteeing that, between these groups, there will always be moralistic strife. Morality ‘binds us and blinds us’ he says.

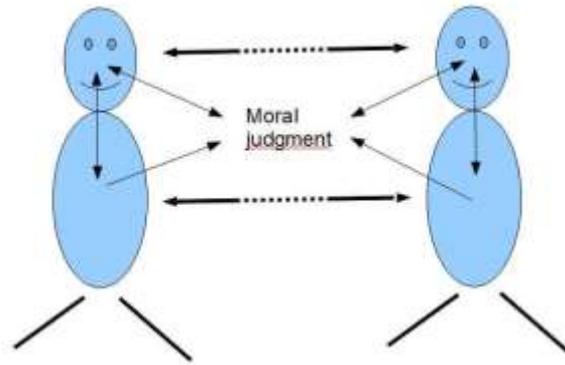
The classical explanation for moral judgment describes it as a ‘dual process’ arising from both emotion and reason as shown in Figure 1a below.



But Jonathan Haidt’s first principle of moral psychology is that ‘intuition comes first, moral reasoning second’ and the latter is used to justify the former. He developed this into a ‘social intuitionist’ model of moral judgment in which ‘the intuitive dog wags the rational tail.’

Our adaptive unconscious makes quick and quite rigid judgments which our conscious mind then rationalises and justifies after the event. Its main motivation for doing this is to satisfy the requirements of social relationships. Haidt gives examples of how we are all quite like ‘politicians’ in that it is more important to look good and fit in than it is to be absolutely honest. We lie so well we believe what we are saying, which will generally be whatever supports our ‘team’ best. This is especially the case if the connection between our own head and our heart – our intuition and our reason – is not very strong as indicated by the dotted vertical line in Figure 1b and the social engagement is superficial.

The quality of our social engagement is the issue here and the honesty carried by love. If our conversation is honest and authentic it is constantly re-shaping our minds at both a conscious and an subconscious level. Other people influence our thinking by talking about their likes and dislikes, what they are for and what they are against. As we explain our judgments to them our own knowing changes as well. Referring back to the metaphor of the rider and the elephant – both of these need to spend time together. This is illustrated in the diagram over the page.



Morality has traditionally been associated with fairness. We learn as children what is fair and what is not fair based on our experience and you are taught that what is harmful to someone else would be harmful to you too. But if morality was simply about fairness there would not be the huge cultural differences about which social habits are considered immoral. There is more to morality than fairness because it is woven into our stories and here I am talking about more than our own personal story – about the tales that are told and written by and for our whole society. We will be looking at the importance of these stories in one of the remaining sessions.

We are particularly sensitive in stories to matters that we find disgusting. Disgust is an important emotion that originates in the insula region of our brain that I failed to mention earlier in the Course. Panksepp says he would have included it as a primary instinctive emotion except for the fact that it is culturally acquired and different cultures find different things disgusting. For example mouth kissing is taboo in some cultures and other attitudes around touching the body and sexual relations vary according to the culture.

Our olfactory senses of taste and smell are just as important for making meaning as sight and hearing. Smell has a closer association with our emotional memories than any other sense; a certain smell can take you back to an important past events in an instant. When we lose our sense of smell, temporarily, we also have less mental acuity and sexual energy. Longer-term inability to smell is associated with memory loss and cognitive decline. There is some evidence that exercising your sense of smell invigorates the mind.

The feeling of disgust is highly contagious and can be communicated through smell at a subconscious level. In one experiment women's facial expressions were observed closely while they carried out visual recognition tasks while also being exposed to sweat pads from men that had felt either disgust or fear (from watching different films). The women's facial expressions matched the emotion the men had felt although they were not consciously aware of this.

A major researcher in this field, Paul Rozin, from the University of Pennsylvania, has written about the important place of this emotion in our psyche. The basic idea has always been that our sense of disgust exists to protect us from eating contaminated food which could poison us or infect us with disease. But it has evolved into levels of meaning that go far beyond simply what we put in our mouth.

Decayed or spoiled foodstuffs and most things that are slimy and smelly are disgusting to most people so the survival value of good hygiene must be part of the evolution of disgust, but there is more to it than that. Our aversions are not necessarily logical. We regard some animals as much dirtier than others, cockroaches and rats, for example, for no clear reason. Many of us eat some animals, but would not think of eating others such as cats or koalas. There is more than just guarding your mouth behind the fact that it is much less desirable to drink a glass of water after you spat in it than it was before.

Rozin showed how this idea develops in children. Before the age of about four a child might be deterred from drinking some juice that had what looked like a fly in it, but quite happy to drink it after the offending object had been scooped out. After this age a more subtle meaning of contamination has been developed so the juice is definitely not drinkable even though the fly has been removed.

Sharing food together is the most basic social activity and the manner of eating is a sensitive interpersonal issue. The quality of any social engagement is affected by the way food is put into the mouth and chewed; it can be quite disgusting if someone alongside you 'eats like an animal.' What we call our 'table manners' evolved around this powerful emotional influence. The challenge of becoming civilised is said to have peaked around our experience of eating together.

Rozin said disgust has to do with our sense of ourselves as animals. The only bodily products that humans don't feel disgusted by are tears, which are also the only ones that other animals don't produce. We know we are related to other animals, but we also revile against the animal nature we find in ourselves. We associate our humanness with qualities other than the animal ones, these having a more sinful connotation. Here there is a close association with shame.

Rozin came to the conclusion that disgust is not only there to guard our body – it also guards our soul. Our moral judgments of right and wrong, virtue, harm and fairness are not simply reasoned intellectually; they stem from our 'moral gut,' which is our subconscious emotional mind. Our senses of attraction, compassion and caring, contrasted by our sense of revulsion and our self-protecting instincts, are, like all our emotions, embodied forms of knowing that are reflected in the way we feel.

Disgust is a feeling that tells us about context. One theory about disgust is that it arises to alert us to the fact that something shouldn't be here – it doesn't rightly belong in this context or it does not fit properly into some larger picture that is important to us in ways we can't necessarily explain.

This will lead us I hope into a session next time we meet about our aesthetic sense and why we need an appreciation of beauty as part of our sense of value and wellbeing.