Navigating Cognitive Dissonance: A Personal Journey

John A Challoner, January, 2025

Introduction

This article marks a departure from my usual writing, as I delve into my personal experiences with cognitive dissonance. Readers familiar with my past work might wonder, "Does he practice what he preaches?" I hope to answer with a resounding "Yes, very much so."

Recently, I encountered several instances of cognitive dissonance, a mental state in which something feels misaligned without a clear understanding of why[1]. These experiences were unsettling, eroding my confidence and leaving me feeling depressed. Resolving this dissonance became a priority, therefore, prompting me to draw upon my professional and theoretical knowledge.

Understanding Cognitive Dissonance Through Theory

My knowledge of the Morphogenetic Cycle[2] provided a starting point. I realised that these dissonances stemmed from a conflict between my personal beliefs and practices and the apparent societal expectations surrounding me. Specifically, the culture of my society seemed to demand behaviours and values that clashed with my subconscious frameworks, known as schemata[3].

Systems theory[4] further illuminated the issue by revealing how levels of abstraction shape our understanding. Abstraction allows us to aggregate concepts into wholes (holism) or disaggregate them into parts (reductionism). For example, the concept of "justice" is the aggregate of many just acts, while a single just act can be broken down into components of legal and ethical processes[5]. Understanding these levels of abstraction helped clarify the disconnect between my thought processes and societal expectations.

The Role of Levels of Abstraction in Cognitive Dissonance

Societal norms often prioritise certain levels of abstraction. In Western culture, for instance, concepts like "holism" are favoured in addressing social issues. However, this term represents merely one level of abstraction among many[6]. My professional engineering background and systems thinking approach enable me to operate across multiple levels, from the granular (just acts) to the overarching (systems theory). This flexibility, while beneficial professionally, sometimes creates friction with societal norms that favour a narrower scope of abstraction.

Additionally, my exploration of ethical and moral terms, such as care, generosity, altruism, forgiveness, sacrifice, compassion, and benevolence, revealed further conflicts. While these terms align with the Christian values deeply ingrained in Western culture, they often obscure the transactional nature of human interactions[7]. For example, acts of benevolence may appear altruistic but often also satisfy spiritual or social needs for the benefactor. Recognising this transactional dimension can be controversial, as it challenges deeply held beliefs about what is good human behaviour.

Exploring Cultural Perspectives

To resolve my cognitive dissonance, I explored how other cultures frame these concepts. Other cultural traditions do, in fact, recognise their transactional. Sub-Saharan Africa's Ubuntu philosophy emphasises communal well-being, where acts of kindness contribute to a better society[8]. Similarly, Confucianism in China focuses on societal structure and hierarchy, with moral behaviour reinforcing social harmony[9]. Unlike Western perspectives that emphasise spiritual rewards, these frameworks highlight social benefits.

This realisation was pivotal. By viewing human interactions through a transactional lens rooted in social rewards, rather than spiritual ones, I found a framework that resonated more closely with my values.

Personal Resolution and Future Directions

How does this relate to my cognitive dissonance?

Firstly, societal tropes[10] often emphasise certain levels of abstraction, such as justice, while I operate across a broader spectrum. This led to concerns about being perceived as overly reductionist or excessively abstract. Secondly, my belief in the transactional nature of human interactions conflicted with societal narratives of pure altruism or spite. Finally, I questioned the utility of certain religious beliefs, which can obscure practical ways to improve society.

To reconcile these differences, I investigated whether the ethical principles of Ubuntu and Confucianism could be synthesised into a model acceptable to Western society. Ubuntu emphasises culture, one of the two key components of society, while Confucianism addresses societal structure, the other key component. Together, the two traditions provided a balanced ethical approach applicable to the realities of Western society; one that I and, hopefully, others could readily adopt.

Conclusion

By identifying the cultural roots of my cognitive dissonance and reframing my perspective, I have gained confidence in my approach. While criticism remains inevitable, I am better equipped to address it constructively.

In my next article, I will outline the proposed synthesis of Ubuntu and Confucian ethics in greater detail. For now, I leave you with the assurance that understanding and resolving cognitive dissonance begins with acknowledging its sources and embracing diverse frameworks to navigate complex societal challenges.

Finally, readers may have noticed that my process for resolving cognitive dissonance has been a practical reflection of the Morphogenetic Cycle, reinforcing my confidence in its truth.

Footnotes

1. *Cognitive dissonance*: A psychological phenomenon identified by the American social psychologist, Leon Festinger (1919 – 1989) where an individual experiences discomfort due to holding conflicting beliefs or attitudes.

2. *Morphogenetic Cycle*: Introduced by the British sociologist Margaret Archer (1943–2023), this concept explains the relationship between he structure and culture of society and individual agency. In this cycle the structure and culture of a society place demands on an individual. If those demands are satisfactory, the individual automatically affirms their society. If not, then they engage in reflexivity to identify solutions and then attempt to propagate those solutions into society. This process is continuously ongoing, a multitude of individual agents interact with society and there are time delays at each stage.

3. *Schemata*: Subconscious mental frameworks identified by the British psychologist Frederic Bartlett (1886 – 1969) and used to organise and interpret information.

4. *Systems theory*: An interdisciplinary approach to understanding complex systems by examining their components, relationships, and emergent properties.

5. *Levels of abstraction*: The process of aggregating or disaggregating concepts to focus on broader wholes or detailed parts. What is considered holistic or reductionist is relative to the context, a "whole" at one level may be a "part" at another.

6. *Holism*: A perspective that emphasises the whole rather than its individual components.

7. *Transactional relationships*: Interactions where parties exchange resources or benefits, mutually satisfying their needs. Transactional relationships can also comprise an exchange of disbenefits together with various intermediate interactions of a more transient nature. There is considerable scientific evidence to support the view that all human interactions are transactional in nature.

8. *Ubuntu*: A Southern African philosophy emphasising communalism and the interconnectedness of humanity. It suggests that "a person is a person through other people," fostering mutual care and respect.

9. *Confucianism*: An ethical and philosophical system originating in China, focusing on societal roles, relationships, and moral conduct. It emphasises hierarchy and the importance of family and social harmony.

10. *Trope:* A shared cultural schema or pattern of thought that emerges as an aggregate of individual schemata within a society. Schemata are subconscious mental frameworks that individuals use to interpret and organise information, and when these frameworks are collectively aligned across a group, they form tropes. Tropes represent higher levels of abstraction compared to individual schemata and are more holistic, encapsulating collective cultural values, norms, and ideas.