

The Essence of Life

(Asl-e-Hayat)

By

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I. Introduction

The scope of the topic, the Essence of Life, can cover, potentially, all animate as well as inanimate states of existence. Even taking animate life alone, the scope would include both human and non-human forms – an enormous range. For my present purposes, however, I restrict the scope to *human* life alone. Section II defines what I mean by the term “Essence of Human Life”. Its constituent elements are then explored in greater detail in Section III. Section IV summarises the main points, and includes, as well, a brief mention of whether, and to what degree, the discussion pertaining to the Essence of Human life is at all relevant for other forms of life.

The discussion below treats the “Essence of Human Life” as it is understood to be experienced, not as what one might like this experience to be; which is a positive (what is) rather than a normative (what should be) approach. Also, the “Essence” is discussed in terms of its features that are as true today as these were on the first day humans set about populating the Earth. Changes in human life on this planet, while they modify the content of life’s experiences, do not alter its essential nature.

II. Defining the Essence of Human Life

I define the Essence of Human life as: “the *process* of experiencing, expressing and sharing the *awareness* of the Uniqueness of Being” as felt by the Individual, including all its attendant exhilarations and heartaches. An alternative way of describing this awareness is as a process of evolving human *consciousness*: to be, to exist, and to share the experience of the consciousness of “being” with other beings. The Essence of Life is a process of shaping this shared consciousness of being.

There are six inalienable components, features or aspects, that comprise the process of experiencing the Essence of Human Life. They are: (i) The Driving

Forces; (ii) The Individual-Collective Duality; (iii) A Permanence of Change; (iv) A Perpetuity of Conflict; (v) A Fractured Social Consciousness; and (vi) The Abiding Search for Greater Social Harmony. Each one of these six components, explored in greater detail below, is an essential and inalienable feature of the Essence of Human Life -- the "Essence" would not be complete if even one of these aspects is absent.

III. Inalienable Features of the Essence of Human Life

1. The Driving Forces

The first essential feature of the Essence of Human Life comprises the forces that drive the process of human consciousness. These are innate forces within the psyche of humans. They appear as a fundamental, organic need humans have: the need to be recognized as an Individual -- the Recognition need -- as a Unique entity separate from everyone else, a need to express and experience this Uniqueness, the urge to experience the Individual Being, to understand one's Identity. This constant search for Unique ways of Recognition has an unbounded variety of experiences, expressions and manifestations. In addition to this Recognition need, there is, as well, the allied search for Security to ensure continuing Survival: the individual cannot experience its identity without, in the first place, ensuring its survival.

Diversity of Individual Experiences: The foregoing does not imply that all individuals experience these Recognition and Survival needs in identical manner. Quite the contrary. The Recognition need, in particular, is not distributed uniformly across individuals that make up any human population. Humans are not robots, and they experience the need for Recognition in enormously differentiated ways, both in intensity and forms -- as it relates to internal individual experiences -- as well as in its external manifestations. Its incidence follows defined distributional features of any large population, such as portrayed by the statistical normal curve. Similarly, all the cognitive, emotional, psychological, and physical abilities and endowments are distributed according to this or other known statistical distributions. The *capacities* for experiencing and augmenting these innate endowments are, likewise, not uniformly distributed.

This absence of uniformity across human populations allows for a range of human experiences within a society, and for differential development paths that are followed by human societies.

2. The Individual-Collective Duality: A Shared Experience

The second inalienable element of the Essence of Human Life is its Individual-Collective Duality. To experience the “the uniqueness of being” necessarily involves the context or the backdrop against which the experience of “being” occurs, identifying the “uniqueness *from*” context. This implies some reference to a collectivity -- a family, a community or society, and indeed the broader habitat within which the experience occurs. At times this can even be a reference to an alter ego, or a silent partner that co-exists within the Individual’s mind.

This means that there are two essential complements of this consciousness or awareness – the Individual and the broader Collective. The individual’s experience of the *process* of Being cannot be experienced without the Individual’s interactions with the human community, including the wider human habitat, both living and inanimate. The Individual consciousness cannot exist without the idea of a Collective Consciousness. as the individual self is necessarily defined against the wider, external society. It is, by definition, a shared experience. The process implies that the individual’s experience moves in tandem with the social consciousness comprising the wider world around the individual.

3. Social Consciousness: A Dynamic Experience

The third essential dimension is the *dynamic* nature of the Essence of Human Life. The “Essence” is not static or fixed, given for all times. Rather, it continuously evolves with time, both in its Individual and Collective dimensions. The duality – Individual and Collective – evolves continuously. The internal perceptions of the Individual evolve all the time, as do the Individual’s changing interactions with others. Changes are, as well, brought about by the changing habitat, both through human interventions, such as through changes in technology, as well as through natural changes in the habitat. For all these reasons, the Essence of Human Life is a dynamic, changing concept. It never rests: the human consciousness is evolving constantly.

4. A Perpetuity of Conflicts

The individual-society interaction generates a continuing powerful imprint on the nature of “Being” and on the “Experience of Being”. The fourth essential element characterising the Essence of Human Existence is the perpetual nature of the Individual-Society conflicts, whether passive or aggressive. The need for expressing one’s Being provides a continuing basis for conflicts among individuals

who each experience a similar urge to express their uniqueness. It shapes and conditions the nature and scope of the *opportunities* available to the individual for exercising the Individual's experience of "Being". These opportunities address the fundamental bone of contention underlying all social conflicts: the struggle for securing a larger share of available resources for the Individual, which provides a basis for expressing one's uniqueness.

In addressing these conflicts there is a mitigating force that holds the community together: the shared need for survival and security. These needs provide the glue for co-operative behaviour among individuals of the community, which offers a way for containing individual-society conflicts. Together with this factor, it is the Individual's search for recognition that lies behind the process of forming groups. The process is aimed at strengthening the individual's Identity while at the same time catering to the Survival of the community in its wider setting.

To shape and contain these conflicts, Groups are continuously formed from among members of the community. This process of group formation and destruction is the vehicle for shaping the evolution of social consciousness. The groups are defined by factors such as race, ethnicity, tribe, region, city, nationality, religion, and other social, cultural, and linguistic features. A large variety of groupings is used to camouflage the fundamental bone of contention – a share in the riches of the Earth, which is one of the main ways to express the uniqueness of Being. As the society evolves, the Earth's resources are apportioned through a well-controlled structure of these groupings, which is organised in the form of a hierarchy, and is supervised by the elites of the community.

5. A Fractured Social Consciousness: Confining Degrees of Structured Empowerment

The fifth and the most disturbing feature of the Essence of Life is that the continuing battle just noted produces a highly structured society made up of structured groups, which severely confines the degrees of empowerment available to the Individual by structuring them in hierarchical groups in society. The hierarchical structure defining individual's access to society's resources in a highly cascaded and confining manner is the most devastating and despicable writ of human doing.

Why does society divide into hierarchically structured empowered groups? A noted previously, the need to experience the "uniqueness of being" is not uniform across the human population. The intensity with which the need is felt, and in

consequence the action taken to achieve the objectives, also varies across individuals. Given these distributional differences, some individuals are better equipped at securing the resources of society than others. This leads to differential values attached by society to different groups of individuals -- some individuals form the top layer of society while other groups are structurally less privileged. This produces structural discriminations: aside from the top layer, all groups become bound to pursue their uniqueness drive only within structural confinements of different degrees of impoverishment.

In this setting, the vast majority of the society is controlled through a slew of cascaded groups. Society is divided using race, tribe, ethnicity, region of birth, religious, ideological, political, social and cultural divisions. They are used by the controlling or the elite group to keep the vast majority grounded under the yoke of streamlined inequality of opportunities. The large majority of individuals pass their entire lives trapped in hierarchies of society's creation, forever struggling against the structured and fractured social consciousness. They represent a continuing spectacle of the most reprehensible and glaring examples of large groups of humans being subjected to continuing servitude through the limited availability of opportunities.

The defining feature of this hierarchically structured system is differentiated access to, and control over society's resources by groups among society. The chief dividing factors among groups are the differential degrees of access to society's resources, physical, organisational, social, psychological, and emotional. The access to these resources is highly structured availability of resources differentiated by groups.

6. Progressively Greater Social Harmony

Despite the gloomy state of evolution of human consciousness just evoked, the sixth and final feature provides a glimmer of hope.

The ongoing struggle in society is for shared consciousness of the uniqueness of the value of the Individual: its recognition as of value in and of itself, a value that is not graded or ranked by groups. This struggle for access to uniformly shared social consciousness is ever-present. The essence of human life is a constant struggle for higher and higher levels of shared consciousness. Given this constant urge for recognition, brave souls emerge from time to time to challenge the stifling social structure. Religious and social reformers are among the leaders that typically lead movements to advance the cause of improving existing degrees of social

inequities -- that is, until such time that these movements themselves become part of new structural discriminations.

Guiding the search for ways of satisfying both the recognition and the survival needs of both the individual and the society, there is an innate human faculty for exploring more co-operative arrangements between the individual and the community. Using this faculty, society follows a learning curve over time: the perpetual conflicts in society (noted above as the fourth element of the essence of human life), have a saving grace in that through them society learns better approaches to developing a progressively more harmonious society. This process of social learning aims to balance two types of potentially opposing forces. At the Individual level, there is the need to balance the demands of security and individual recognition. The second balancing is between individual needs and group needs within society. Through these efforts, there emerges, progressively, a more harmonious and self-sustaining human society over time, with progressively greater equity in the opportunities for experiencing and expressing individual rights in all their dimensions. It is well worth emphasizing that the learning experience works in a non-linear, non-smooth, and slow painstaking fashion.

The process is one of a continuing journey -- a fully harmonious relationship between the individual and the group resulting in a wholesome, unfractured, shared human consciousness, is a moving target, representing a very long-term, likely never-ending, goal. While the journey is extremely slow, the learning experience is firmly directed towards a more self-sustaining harmonious human society, where the rights of every individual as equals are progressively recognized within an un-splintered and commonly shared human consciousness.

As Rousseau once observed, human beings are born free in nature but right from the beginning they are confined in (structural) chains. Progress towards a common, universally shared, social consciousness among the humankind inches forward towards consciousness of equal treatment of all humans at a glacial pace—it has taken more than 100 thousand years to achieve acknowledgements of limited universal rights of humans. The living reality present at any given moment continues to consist of a superstructure of socially structured inequalities. The human imagination has not emerged from its continuing dark holes of overwhelming inequalities by groups of various ilk.

That progress along the forward path is exceedingly slow can be seen that the preceding hundred thousand years of human existence provides only a prologue to

the slow-moving drama that continues to unveil. As glimmers of universal equality dawn on human consciousness, such as through (the very limited) recognition of the UN charter of rights for all, it is evident that its slow materialization might take thousands of years yet for it to begin to be seriously implemented in practices of all communities and nations. In the meantime, which is an eternity, society's path is marked by a pervasive, visible and largely permanent form of continuing societal inequalities.

IV. Concluding Remarks

The essence of human life: a summary

The Essence of Human Life was described above as the shared social consciousness, which the Individual experiences and shares in meeting its innate urge to assert the individual "I". In broad terms, it is a "process of experiencing individual uniqueness" in the context of an expanding shared social consciousness.

This shared social consciousness forms the "Essence of Human Life". It has six essential or inalienable features:

First, the source or the driving force of shared social consciousness lies in the urge for recognition which resides in every human, albeit in greatly differentiated degrees.

Second, this consciousness necessarily has an Individual-Collective duality. No Individual expression of "I" is possible without recognizing and invoking the existence of a Collective "non-I". The Individual and the Collective are necessary complements in defining the shared consciousness.

Third, this duality lays the basis for the *dynamic* nature of social consciousness, as there is constant change in the Individual-Collective interaction. All human consciousness has a dynamic element: it cannot exist without change, development and evolution. Human consciousness would die out if it was static.

Fourth, the Individual-Collective duality also lays the basis for the continuing Individual-Society conflict that generates the dynamic nature of human consciousness.

Fifth, the development of human consciousness has a structured and hierarchical nature, which is highly constraining for all except those at the pinnacle of the pyramid.

Finally, as the sixth feature, the continuing Individual-Society battle produces a *learning curve* along which the shared human consciousness evolves. This learning is directional but not linear, and proceeds at a painstakingly slow pace. Despite its non-linearity and slowness, its trend is unmistakable: human consciousness is always aiming to develop more harmonious Individual-Collective arrangements, which aim to provide progressive levels of equity of opportunities for the Individual, who is valued in its own rights, and this value is unfettered to membership in any groups in society.

Essence of Life: Difference between human and other life forms

The above description of the “Essence” of human life provides a means of highlighting the similarities and differences between this “Essence” and that of other forms of life.

The main driving force of the Essence of Human Life, the assertion of the Individual “I”, is *common* to All Life forms, inanimate and animate. The urge to express the “I” pervades all that is in the Cosmos - it is no one’s property. As Iqbal says in his Saaqi Naama (Baal-e-Jibra’il):

Fareib-e-nazar hai sokoun-o-sabaat

TaRapta hai her zarra’ei ka’enaat

The Eternal Consciousness is alive all the time, continuing on and on, thriving from element to element, from milky way to milky way, from ever to ever. As we know it, this Cosmos is expanding; the black holes forming all the time and spewing forth fresh new constellations, are shaping forever the trillions of milky ways. I have attempted to capture this in a couplet:

Sar-e kahkashaN koiee naghma-khaN chala mehr-o-mah ko uchaalta
Koiee geet aisa suna gaya ke hayaat raqs-e-dawam hai!

What then are the differences between human experience of consciousness and that of other inanimate and animate life forms?

In regard to the inanimate forms, we have no clue as to the nature of their consciousness. Except, that is, that they follow certain pre-determined principles, or rhythms. Every particle of the Cosmos moves according to some laws, including

the continuing circular movement of heavenly¹ bodies, and the fact that the Cosmos is itself expanding.

As to other non-human life forms, whether plant or animal life, they appear to share some of the other essence of life characteristics with the humans. For example, they have some, albeit varied, degrees of consciousness of the Individual-Collective duality. There is also some, though limited signs of dynamics in this relationship, as well as some indication of continuing conflicts within and across species. We are well aware that over time, some species have become extinct and others have arrived on the scene and mutated.

The main difference between human and non-human forms of life, then, is in the comparatively different *degree* of control humans have in shaping their conscious experiences, as well as in the degree of involuntariness in their genetic make-up to which they are subjected. Humans have much greater control not only in fashioning their habitat, they also have greater potential say in forming and shaping their own selves. Humans are subject to involuntary constraints, such as they are bound by the imperative of needing to express the “I”, but they have greater say in how they can do this. In this regard, humans can justly claim to be the *Ashraf-ul-Makhlūqat*² given that no other *presently known* species has as fewer involuntary constraints on it than the humans.

For example, as noted above, in the very long-term, humans exhibit the tendency for developing progressively more harmonious society, with progressively lower-level Individual-Society conflicts, at the same time as the shared collective awareness continues to expand. This has similarity with the continuing expansion of the Cosmos. As another example, humans are developing the ability to move their abode before this earth blows out supposedly in three to four billion years. They have been on this earth for somewhere between 100 to 200 thousand years, which is a blip in the 4 billion years thought to be the Earth’s survival time.

¹ For the fundamentalist atheists, sorry for using this blasphemous, religious, term. Don’t now of an equivalent.

² Sorry, again! Same reason.