The Values, Beliefs, and Ideas of the Ideal Individual:

According to Roger W. Sperry

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Roger Wolcott Sperry (1913-1994) spent his life on a quest for knowledge and understanding about the world and all who inhabit it. He would pose problems and questions to which, he would then develop ingenious experiments that would find solutions to those problems and answers to those questions. The latter part of Sperry’s career was devoted to understanding how the world could progress to become a better place and how we, as humans, could come to aid in this progression. He was the painter of a picture of a better world; a world filled with better ideas, beliefs, and values.

Roger Sperry was born on August 20, 1913 in Hartford, Connecticut where he spent the early years of his life. Sperry earned his bachelor’s degree in English literature from Oberlin College in 1935, and a master’s degree in Psychology from Oberlin in 1937. His doctorate degree in zoology was achieved in 1941 from the University of Chicago. Sperry’s primary employment came by way of the University of Chicago, Harvard University (The Yerkes Laboratory of Primate Biology), and the California Institute of Technology where he ended up staying for forty years of his career. During his diverse career, Sperry was the recipient of several prestigious awards and appointments. Among these, Sperry was appointed the Hixon Chair at Caltech which he held from 1954 to 1984. Besides sharing the Nobel Prize in 1981 with David H. Hubel and Torsten N. Wiesel, Sperry also was awarded the National Medal of Science in 1989 from former President of the United States of America, George Bush, the Wolf Prize in Medicine and the Albert Lasker Medical Research Award in 1979, and the California Scientist of the Year in 1972.
Roger Sperry's major research centered on three major areas: the embryogenesis of complex neural networks that underlie behavior, the organization of cortical mechanisms for higher cognitive functions, and the relationship and brain to mind and of science to values. Sperry's “split-brain” experiment is the research that he is most known for. This experiment consisted of severing the corpus callosum, the connection between the left and right side of the brain, in order to observe the communication occurring between the two hemispheres. The last twenty years of his life, Sperry’s work went through a transition; instead of performing experiments and an abundance of research, he began to turn more and more to philosophy to express his humanist views. Sperry’s work had transformed to writing about all aspects of life and finding the answers to the questions that puzzled many in this world. With his new philosophical ideas, Sperry began painting his picture, creating his new world. He began to write on such topics as Government, Environment, Religion/Science, Human Values, and World Existence to name a few. The picture has begun to create Sperry’s perfect human beings, perfect in their beliefs, ideas, and goals.

For Roger Sperry to paint the picture of a better world, a topic he would need to address is the topic of government in the world today. The ideal individual, according to Sperry, would have to be very realistic, not searching for perfection in an overnight fashion. The main goal for the world’s higher systems of law is for them to work for a common good. This ideal individual would believe that the time for the nations of the world to stop acting individually and for individual goals as pertaining to global matters, because the more powerful of these nations are now able to destroy all of humanity at a touch of a button. “For a common good, we need to frame and abide by a higher system of law and justice, designed with less national, more god-like,
perspectives for the preservation and welfare of the biosphere as a whole. The intellectual, scientific and moral foundations are already in sight” (Sperry, 1986 c). In order for one to better the government systems of the world, there is one aspect that needs to be dealt with first, the nuclear threat. The ideal individual views the nuclear threat with optimism. The nuclear arms problem today could be helped with the common goals spoken about earlier. However, “One sees little hope for a permanent, true satisfactory control of nuclear armaments in the absence of some kind of international World Security Force, with both the power and know-how to keep nuclear developments under strict surveillance and control, and which presumably would proceed to systematically dismantle existing nuclear weaponry” (Sperry, 1986 a). The ideal individual also is realistic in knowing that the setting up of this type of security force would not be without it’s share of problems. However, these problems are looked at by the individual as very menial when compared to the problems that mankind is sure to encounter with any alternative courses that could be chosen or the lack thereof.

This World Security Force that the ideal individual would be striving for would need to be a system in which the largest and most powerful nations do not receive all the representation and the smaller, less powerful receive very little. This system would have to assure that participating nations would not suffer losses in aspects such as power, prestige, or social status because of their participation. In order to do this there would have to be other factors taken in to account for representation. There would be a need to look past just the population of a nation and look to more productive aspects such as cultural strengths, that all put together could give a relative representation to each nation. (Sperry, 1986 a) “The countries of the world today are sufficiently interrelated and interdependent that, working together
through a properly constituted, World governing body, they could bring any recalcitrant nation—even the U.S. or U.S.S.R.—in to compliance, through united economic and other nonmilitary pressures” (Sperry, 1986 a). The ideal individual believes that there was a time when the world could have built on to existing organizations, such as the United Nations, in order to achieve this goal; but now it looks like a fresh start, with new ideas is the only possible solution. Most importantly, this system needs to be developed as a joint effort, making this public concern in order to compile creative solutions.

When a solution is selected and ready to set in motion there is another prime requisite that has to be taken into account. A set of founding guidelines and principles used to govern this new world order must be developed. “Principles for law and justice will be needed which all countries can respect, support, and agree to be ruled by, regardless of differing ideologies, religious beliefs, cultural values, political biases, and so on”(Sperry, 1986 a). Up to this point, however, there has not been the agreement among nations on any type of guidelines. Again, the ideal individual is realistic though, and knows that it would be difficult to develop a complete set of guidelines for the world at one time. In sight of this, this individual believes that even a limited world security system, one that focuses on basically nuclear control, would be more successful than not trying anything at all. However, this control will be more effective “if founded on principles and ideals that command common allegiance and commitment above and beyond those at the national level, just as allegiance to a nation supersedes that to constitute states or provinces” (Sperry, 1986 c). Nations would still have the right to govern internal affairs on their own just as they always have, not unlike the states in the United States, with the exception of
such things as nuclear weaponry, pollution of oceans, pollution of the atmosphere, etc. which are more worldly problems.

Another problem that has plagued progress on a global level is the religious barriers. Throughout time there have always been resistance by religious groups because of the possibility of being governed by values and beliefs of opposing cultures and ideologies. “Historically these ideological and religious differences have always been a main source of world conflict” (Sperry, 1986 a). Once again, the ideal individual must succumb to reality by realizing that not all of the countries are going to be talked into giving up beliefs that their culture has had for a very long time. So in light of this, it is hoped that if enough countries, with the good of nuclear arms in mind, would be able to agree on a new, bipartisan set of ideas and beliefs, with the backbone of truth and the world view of science. And with this group of participants the ideas and beliefs can be passed on from one nation to the next until the final goal is reached. This is the plan for the governments of the world, and a small portion of the ideal picture being painted by Roger Sperry’s ideal individual. “But again, instead of dwelling on complexities and difficulties, we can get busy ironing out the issues and looking for creative solutions” (Sperry, 1986 c).

In addition to the feelings on the governmental situation of the world, today, the ideal individual would be an avid environmentalist. This individual would believe in a stronger moral code of life and overall strategy and logic, which, when thought about, is agreed with almost unanimously. “All we have to do is replace existing social priorities with others that are more adaptive and more conductive to preserving and improving our world instead of destroying it” (Sperry, 1986 b). This concept seems to be agreed on by most, but as the ideal individual knows, agreement is easier said than
done. The problem comes about when this solution is explained in more
detail. The ideal individual believes that the new outlook should be one that
encourages protection of evolving nature as a whole. Included in this belief
is the understanding that it is not right to use land for the purpose of nuclear
weaponry, to pollute land where it may lead to irreversible damage, destroy
irreplaceable resources, inhumanely harm or destroy other species in the
world or in any other way deplete the world or atmosphere for future
inhibitors. This is where humans in the world today run into problems.
(Sperry, 1986 b)

Although most people in the world today agree that technology can be
the cure for the environmental problem, this ideal individual believes that in
some cases, it makes it worse. “Despite short-term benefits, technological
advances in the absence of population controls tend in the long run to
increase the magnitude of the problem” (Sperry, 1986 b). In other words,
technology alone is not thought of as a bad thing, but coupled with
uncontrolled population, it can bring chaos. The truth begins to form that it
is not the advances in the world today that are going to solve out problem,
again, it is a change in the ideas and beliefs of citizens as a whole that can
bring the answers. As Sperry wrote, “What is needed to break this vicious
spiral is a radical revision worldwide in human life-styles, aims, and
attitudes, with a more long-term redirection of social priorities and policies
that preserve the rights of future generations. A global mind change is called
for with a major reconception of human values, goals, and life meaning”
(Sperry, 1993). Therefore, it is known that what we as humans believe
determines what we do, how we act, and what we value. This, in turn
produces the global crises that are experienced today. Not only does the fate of
today’s society rely directly on the beliefs and values which we hold, but the
fate of future generations rely on the ideas and values which we pass on to them. This ideal individual believes that the problem of values is much more important than the problem such as poverty, pollution, and overpopulation. The reason for this is that even though these problems are tangible and can be seen every day; they are all man-made. That is, they would not exist if it wasn’t for the values in people’s heads. In fact, this gives some backing, to the saying “mind over matter”.

Now that it is known that what society believes, what their values are, determines the fate of the biosphere as a whole, the next logical question would be: What kind of beliefs and values are or can be held by society and these diverse values are changing all the time? These changing values lead to changing morals and beliefs, which means that the direction people take and the actions people make are all changing along with them. This shows more evidence of the need for a set of global ethics.

The major reason that there are conflicts among values in today’s society is the existence of science and religion. The belief systems of the world today come in contact and clash, either with one another or with reality. This historical conflict has existed throughout time and has resisted any attempts to reconcile it. “On the one side we have various spiritual schemes of religion, offering a supreme plan, purpose, higher meaning, etc.. On the other hand, in contrast, we have the value-free, spiritually devoid, physically driven cosmos of science, run by chance and quantum mechanics, and apparently lacking any ultimate purpose, value or higher meaning” (Sperry, 1985). These two entities are to be kept separate, that is what many of the citizens of the world have been raised believing. They have been taught that religion and science belong in separate realms and that the one must not be applied to the other. “Science can tell us how to achieve a given goal but
cannot tell us for which goals to aim” (Sperry, 1974). Not only have these two entities been kept separate throughout history but they have been thought of as exact opposites; any beliefs that are upheld in the world of science destroy the beliefs that are held by religion and vice versa. (Sperry, 1985) Society has been faced with two separate choices and only two choices up until this point, this is where the ideal individual comes in.

The ideal individual according the Roger Sperry believes there should not just be two choices to choose from when deciding the nature and origin of human life, a third choice should exist. This third choice is one that can be looked to for less conflict between science and religion and hence, less conflict in society as a whole. “As a framework for belief, the new view of reality retains and integrates what seems most valid from each of the earlier views. It accepts mental and spiritual qualities as causal realities, but at the same time denies that they can exist separately in an unembodied state apart from the functioning brain. The new science manages to integrate the physical with the mental, the objective with the subjective, fact with value, free will with determinism, and positivistic thought with phenomenology” (Sperry, 1988). The question now comes about: How does the ideal individual integrate these things in to a single explanation of human existence? In order to explain this, Sperry’s individual beliefs that religion and science can be related to functions of the body. A more scientific view would mean that the body is controlled by physics, chemistry, and quantum mechanics, referred to as the lower level properties of a system. For the religious aspect, the mental body along with the presence of a supernatural force (the mind and spirit) control everything we do. The mental level of this belief can be called the higher level properties of the system. The way in which these properties exert control of the body and it’s behaviors gives them a directional causation.
In other words, the traditional way of thinking in almost all of the scientific world is that everything is determined from the lower level to the higher level, following the course of evolution, sometimes known as microdeterminism. The conflict that has occurred for microdeterminism is the belief or some people in the world have that everything is determined from the higher level downward, the mental states exert downward control over their constituent neuronal events, known as macrodeterminism. The ideal individual believes these ways of thinking alone are highly outdated.

The solution according to the ideal individual is to merge the two ways of thinking, because they both have a legitimate purpose on how things are determined. “Instead of excluding mind and spirit, the new outlook puts subjective mental forces near the top of the brain’s causal control hierarchy and gives them primacy in determining what a person is and does” (Sperry, 1988). This solution suggests that not only does the mental states of a human, which emerge from brain activity, control the way in which certain functions in the body operate, but also receive information from those functions that determines what the mental activity does next. “Successful merging of mainstream scientific and religious belief will logically require that science, in general, follow the lead of psychology and give up it’s traditional microdeterministic view of reality to accept the progressive emergence of higher, more evolved forms of causal control” (Sperry, 1988). Religion, on the other hand, would need to get rid of it’s reliance on dualistic explanations for determining factors of the world today. This new outlook does not require a 180 degree turn for either religion or science but it does require an open mindedness of sorts by both parties in order for one to see what the other has to offer.
The ideal individual believes and understands this new idea of mental states controlling what we do but the task now becomes what values are developed from this line of thinking? The ideal individual also believes that an improved understanding of how value systems are derived and organized, and how they operate in the decision process should help to improve our general sense of value and also help society to make better value decisions and wiser moral judgments. Since the human existence explanations have been merged to form the new outlook, the values developed under this outlook should also be a combination of these two schools of thought. Any answers to questions of the value or meaning of life can be taken from the religious explanation, and on the other side of the coin, the scientific explanation can be used as a basis of ethics such as knowledge, perspective, insight, and understanding. The ideal individual understands that there are going to be many diverse values and combinations of values developed under this new outlook, however, there needs to be a general consensus on the overall idea of these values. In other words, these values must all be headed in the same general direction in order for the world to make a turn for the better. For this to happen, all that is in the best interest of promoting the progression of the universe as a whole needs to be defined as good, right, ethical, or in the right direction. On the other hand, that which is discordant, degrades or destroys nature’s overall plan is bad and wrong. According to the ideal individual, if this new outlook is followed and understood, it can lead to a better world for today and tomorrow.

The final, most difficult, and probably most important task for the ideal individual is to tie all of these components of the new outlook together, and to finish Roger Sperry’s painting of a better world. First of all, society must develop a new explanation for human existence. This is done by combining
the religious and science explanations in such a way to understand that: “Mental states, as emergent properties of brain activity, thus exert downward control over their constituent neuronal events- at the same time that they are being determined by them” (Sperry, 1988). This ideal explanation, once developed, must be thoroughly believed and understood. The next step in this process is for values to be developed as a result of the developed explanation of human existence. One can develop these values using both the religion and science schools of thought. The science school of thought can be used to develop ethical values. “Current concepts of cognitive processing make it possible to go from fact to value and from perception of what ‘is’ to what ‘should’ be” (Sperry, 1988). The progression is not achieved directly but via cognitive intermediaries such as belief, understanding, perspectives, and the like. The religious school of thought can be used to develop values on a much higher scale, about the meaning of life. The next step is to use these values in a productive way, to better the environment, government, etc.. The only way for the environment to better itself is for today’s society to change their values and beliefs toward this issue. If the world uses other means to correct the problems of the environment and do not manage to change society’s views, the problem will relapse and occur again. With these new values and new ideas, a way of organizing a World Security Force, a government to the world, would need to be developed. This government would include all nations, having them all striving for the same goal, and having them all nuclear-free. If followed correctly, this formula for a better world can lead us out of this hole we are in, in to a brighter future.

The future of our world as seen by the ideal individual is very dark and dismal. At the rate we are going now, we will destroy all that we have taken for granted. With the lack of governmental cohesion, the presence of nuclear
warfare, conflict between religion and science, diversity of values and beliefs, depletion of the environment, and lack of a common goal; there seems to be a shortage of possible solutions. However, there seems to be a faint light at the end of the tunnel if and only if we choose the right path. “Even a failure to correct past errors could easily mean our demise. If we do not succeed soon in adopting a theology that will protect the biosphere and if we do not find a common neutral belief system and global ethic on which most nations and most cultures and faiths can agree, then shortly there may not be any nations or theologies or sciences to worry about-- or even a biosphere” (Sperry, 1988).
References


