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How can Bewusstseinskultur help to deal with the human condition?

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> *"Man is either the victim of his fate or the master of his destiny." - Herbert Spencer*

The concept of Bewusstseinskultur1 (engl.: culture of consciousness) has recently gained a lot of attention. This blog post will focus on how application of some of its key elements may be beneficial for both the individual and society. In order to formulate this practical approach as clearly and understandably as possible, I will not linger over the theoretical background. Instead, I will focus on where Bewusstseinskultur is directly relevant to the average individual confronted with existential conditions. As I have studied philosophy myself and consider the existential perspective very valuable, I will stick to this approach. I will show that Bewusstseinskultur is effectively applicable by everyone who seeks to determine the quality of their own states of consciousness and act in accordance with this evaluation.

Bewusstseinskultur can be defined by a three-step framework which is the heart of this blogpost:

I) assessing the quality of (one´s own) states of consciousness,
II) determining which states are valuable, and
III) cultivating these valuable states.

After clarifying the existential perspective, I will explain these three steps in greater detail. Lastly I will discuss the challenges in the process of furthering Bewusstseinskultur in society and give an outlook on the potential societal impact of Bewusstseinskultur.

Bewusstseinskultur from an existential perspective

The existential perspective is concerned with the *human condition,* the condition in which all human beings live. This perspective does not so much refer to the culture or the political system in which individuals exist. Instead, it stresses the existential fundamentals that characterize everyone's life, independent of state, religion, culture and other factors that vary across the globe. Existentialists ask: what is left when you put aside these factors? What are the constants of human life?

Everyone is confronted with their mortality. The inevitability of death does not change in different regions of the earth. Also, everyone is searching for meaning in life. Everyone seeks things that make life meaningful and worth living. In doing so, every human being may recognize that it is necessary to take responsibility for one's own life. Without an effort to determine one's own life, one to be controlled by external factors or even play the role of victim.

These are some of the key elements of the human condition: *mortality*, *meaning*, *responsibility*. But what is the connection between Bewusstseinskultur and the human condition? The short answer is: consciousness. As we live our lives, our mortality, search for meaning, and take responsibility, we are also conscious of ourselves. Human beings do not only have a subjective experience as such, they also have the ability to reflect upon their experience. This reflection enables us to make judgements. Simply put: We can decide which experiences we want to have more of and which experiences we want to avoid in the future.

Using a more technical vocabulary, experiences can be divided into a number of states of consciousness. At every point in time a certain state of consciousness is present. These states constitute what we experience as our lives. It is fair to say that there are states of consciousness that we favour over others. In the course of life, every individual experiences states of consciousness that he considers beneficial and valuable, as well as states that may be considered less valuable or even destructive.

Very simplistically, one may say there are at least three constituents of a state of consciousness, namely thoughts, emotions, and behaviour. States may entail stronger or subtler, positive or negative emotions, more or less thoughts, and behaviour that is more active or passive (the most passive behaviour might be deep sleep). However, it is important to acknowledge this in order to understand how Bewusstseinskultur can help to deal with the human condition. By changing one's thoughts, emotions and actions, the quality of a state of consciousness can be manipulated and in the best case, improved.

But what actually is a valuable state of consciousness?

The totality of states of consciousness is assessed differently by different individuals. But I do believe, like Metzinger,2 that there might be states that can be valuable to the majority of human beings. While examining what characterizes these states and how they can be willingly evoked, the freedom of choice shall not be denied. In fact, everyone may come up with his or her own criteria for what a valuable state is. I suggest that every individual should have the freedom to experience the states they want to experience, unless they harm other individuals in that process (with the exception of self-defense to prevent harm that is done unto oneself). This may sound familiar and is of course an application of the Golden Rule.3

Metzinger suggested three criteria to determine what a good state of consciousness is4,5:

- It should minimize suffering,
- have epistemic value, and
- increase the probability for the occurrence of more valuable states.

I find this suggestion quite appealing, however, there might be states which do not fit these criteria could, nevertheless, be considered valuable by certain individuals. Instead of investigating the criteria for what a good state of consciousness is, I want to focus on the motivation behind this investigation. Why would you ask a question like: *What is a valuable state of consciousness?*

The answer seems quite trivial: The life of every human being consists of a series of states of consciousness. Therefore, the question could also be formulated as: In what states of consciousness do I primarily want to live my life? What kind of states constitute a life worth living? What states of consciousness are desirable for a society? Ultimately, behind these questions lies one of the biggest philosophical question of all times: *What is a good life?*

The focus on states of consciousness may make the question of what is a good life more specific and tangible and therefore, easier to answer. Many people will say that they do not want to suffer in their lives. Yet, it is fair to say that all human beings suffer at times. If more is known about what states of consciousness cause suffering, these states may be better avoided. If more is also known about states that *prevent* suffering, these states may be cultivated by more people. As an illustration showing the practical relevance of this perspective, consider the following example from mental health research.

It goes without saying that states leading to violent behaviour cause suffering. But human beings can also suffer in the absence of (violent) actions by other people. A very simple interpretation of suffering and its relief is given here. Many forms of suffering may stem from the resistance against reality avoidance of negative feelings such as grief, pain, or inadequacy. Once the resistance is subdued and the individual surrenders to unchangeable facts or negative emotions, suffering may be decreased.6

This interpretation does not account for all forms of suffering, yet many researchers in the field of psychiatry and psychotherapy give it credit.7 And, some of those same researchers have proposed that “acceptance” may be a key factor in the treatment of mental illnesses such as depression.8 This may encompass, among others, the acceptance of challenging aspects of life (e.g. mortality), the acceptance of one’s own emotions, or the acceptance of one’s own character .

Hence, the state of “letting go”, “accepting”, or “surrendering to life” may be an example of how the application of Bewusstseinskultur works. Most of all, people do not want to suffer. We can investigate what states of consciousness cause suffering and what states prevent suffering. The evidence suggests that some form of suffering is caused by states of avoidance and resistance. Thus, if you want to live a life with less suffering, you may decide to cultivate states characterized by *acceptance* of unchangeable facts and *surrender* to emotions, instead of choosing states that are comprised of avoidance or resistance.

Decision-Making

Once an individual has what kind of states are valuable, an even more important step is required: acting on that decision . Bewusstseinskultur, i.e. the systematic cultivation of valuable states of consciousness, can only be realized through making decisions and acting on them.9 While deciding which states of consciousness one wants to experience, one simultaneously decides *against* other states.

Through reflection, one can continuously recognize one's current state of consciousness and strive to change it to a state that is as valuable as possible. This is not to be confused with a behavior of compulsively trying to generate positive feelings.

Decisions are, therein, purposeful actions that influence the state of consciousness. Whether this influence is positive or negative depends on the individual. The word *decision* (Greek: *krisis*) was originally used to describe the judge's verdict on right and wrong.10 For one's own states of consciousness the individual has the same responsibility as a judge in court. This requires adopting an ethical and responsible attitude towards one's own states of consciousness. Holding oneself accountable for one's own states of consciousness, the individual may also be prepared to remedy destructive states of consciousness.

Decision-making power and ethical reflection are the human capacities that constitute the second important step of the framework of Bewusstseinskultur. Here, one must recognize the power to guide one's own states of consciousness in a direction that is useful and valuable. Taking responsibility for one's own states of consciousness is the starting point to making more constructive decisions in the future.

It should be noted that in real life the distinction between valuable and destructive states is less categorical, but rather gradual. Hence, a series of smaller changes in the state of consciousness can be sufficient to bring about a positive change. However, there is a prerequisite for this – and his is critical – which is that a certain degree of pre-given awareness and responsibility towards one's states.11 Thomas Metzinger describes this pre-requisite as mental autonomy.12

Cultivation

Decisions are events. These events reflect that a (mental) action was performed which influences the state of consciousness. Conversely, when one thinks of the cultivation of desirable states, the time period is much longer, and the focus is not on changing, but on 'holding' a state of consciousness. Cultivation is a continuous action with the intention to transform a certain state of consciousness into a more permanent state.

However, it is absurd to believe that any particular state of consciousness has permanent duration at all. To put it more correctly, it must be said that cultivation aims towards *a class of similar states.* For example, many states are conceivable in which one is conscious and mindful, but these states can be distinguished by the fact that different feelings and thoughts emerge in one's consciousness. But given that the individual wants to cultivate 'mindful states', all such states would fall into this category.

One valid objection to this notion of cultivation could be that, actually, cultivation essentially consists of many serial decisions. For example, it is unrealistic to assume that a person will only once decide to take responsibility for his life, and then cultivate this state after this one-time decision. Rather, there is a need for constant decisions that pursue the goal of returning to a state of self-responsibility once it has dissipated. Arguably though, major decisions made with a strong commitment make it easier to cultivate states that are aligned with this decision.

But why does it make sense to put so much emphasis on cultivation? Why bother trying to transform a certain state of consciousness into a more permanent state'? The mechanism described in the next section will hopefully give an answer to that question.

Neuroplasticity

The term neuroplasticity usually refers to several characteristics of the brain. One of these is that the connections between nerve cells in the brain are constantly adapting to activity – also in adult brains.13 The

brain is continuously re-structuring itself according to experience, as well as its own activity.
At the level of individual neurons, neuroplasticity goes like this: “If the axon of cell A is sufficiently close to exciting cell B and fires this cell repeatedly and consistently, a growth process or metabolic change takes place in one or both cells so that the efficiency with which cell A excites cell B is increased”.14 From this rather complex postulate, the Hebbian learning rule was formed: Neurons that fire together, wire together’.

Neurons that are activated together increasingly connect. The reverse also applies: Neurons, which are decreasingly activated together eliminate their connections. This is called *activity-dependent adaptation*. Neuronal activity is partly determined by human actions: Different actions and states of consciousness cause different activity patterns. Thus, the human being has partial influence over his neuronal activity, and therefore also on how the connections in the brain adapt.

Furthermore, the more often a certain activity pattern is evoked, the stronger the neuronal connections characterizing that state become. Put simply: A certain state of consciousness, if it occurs repeatedly, is increasingly anchored in the brain. Does this learning effect perhaps have benefits for dealing with the human condition?

Reflections

There is indeed preliminary evidence suggesting that certain meditation practices have a long-term impact on brain structure and can change the way an individual perceives the world.15 But does long-term impact also account for other practices like acceptance and responsibility.

What we know about neuroplasticity suggests just that, although very little is known about how a state of acceptance or responsibility can be cultivated with similar effects to meditative states. Moreover, it is easy to say that an accepting attitude towards one’s states should be cultivated, but what does that actually mean? How can people be taught to actually choose and cultivate certain states of consciousness?

At least as much as for philosophers, this is probably a question for psychotherapists and psychiatrists. In fact, well-known concepts from mindfulness-based behavioural therapy16 can also be described as ‘methods for attaining and preserving valuable states of consciousness’: “The entire treatment is designed to get out of depressive loops of brooding or not to get involved in them in the first place”.17

This is where the individual perspective of Bewusstseinskultur connects to the collective perspective. Every individual may decide which states are valuable to him or her, and may cultivate those states privately and responsibly. But at the same time, we are living in a world that can be described as a co-created reality: People can impede or support each other in cultivating valuable states of consciousness. Furthermore, every individual contributes to some degree to the quality of *society’s* Bewusstseinskultur.

Collective Bewusstseinskultur

Next to the work of therapists and psychiatrists, there are also other sources of guidance and support. But why should the individual accept helping hands?

It is now obvious that decisions for valuable states of consciousness are themselves valuable states. This is because a certain degree of reflection and mindfulness may be required to choose valuable states over destructive states. But it is fair to say that some individuals may not have these capacities.

This is where methods like mentoring can come into play. In the terminology of this work, mentoring may be described as follows: People who already successfully practice Bewusstseinskultur, i.e. have the experience and abilities to systematically cultivate valuable states, support people who do not yet possess the

necessary abilities and experience. Mentors help people help themselves and represent role models on which others can orient themselves. This may empower their mentees to cultivate valuable states with increasing responsibility.18

Besides mutual support systems, other forms of interactive and practical learning may be helpful for cultivating valuable states. This would also be in alignment with the second criteria from Thomas Metzinger (valuable states should have epistemic value). Among other things, this network may consist of journal clubs and discussion groups that focus on expanding or deepening knowledge, especially in the field of brain science and consciousness research.

In fact, this educational blog, as well as the uniMIND Project, have grown from exactly this motivation. We – as MIND – want to create the social spaces and the supportive network to explore and cultivate potentially valuable states of consciousness together.
Good to have you with us!

This blog post was submitted to the uniMIND blog post award, in which members of uniMIND groups from all over Europe submit essays to the MIND Blog. Patrick is a member and coordinator of the uniMIND group in Berlin.

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