



How do they think?  
The likely psychology of extraterrestrial intelligence

Part 1: A test of civilisation

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in astrobiology. Large numbers of planets beyond our own solar system are being discovered, some existing within a habitable zone. Within our own solar system, there's a possibility that microbial life will be found below the surface of Mars and/or in the clouds of Venus. The moons of Enceladus and Titan around Saturn are other options. And, around Jupiter, the exploration of Europa's ocean below its icy crust is an exciting prospect. If or when such a step forward in the discovery of life elsewhere happens, it will be a good start.

As more and smaller exoplanets are identified, the mathematical chance of intelligent life existing elsewhere will become more likely. Based on Kepler mission data, astronomers have estimated there could be 40 billion Earth-sized planets within the habitable zones of Sun-like stars and red dwarfs in the Milky Way galaxy alone. Indeed, it isn't foolish speculation to suggest that life might possibly exist on numerous planets. As the scientific base of data increases, our view of reality will most definitely broaden as ignorance and belief increasingly give way to knowledge.

On the working assumption that there is intelligent life beyond our own solar system, what can we deduce about the possible psychology of extraterrestrial intelligence (ETI)? It is psychology, rather than biology or "survival of the fittest", which predominantly drives the behaviour of *Homo sapiens* nowadays, so anything we can understand about ETI psychology in advance of any possible future contact must be preferable - both in terms of caution but also broader expectation.

Humans are often blinded by their own self-obsession. And psychological avoidance doesn't help. But a first step in considering this topic of extraterrestrial psychology is to fundamentally challenge just how intelligent or advanced we, ourselves, are as a race of beings. We are, unquestionably, intelligent. But we also demonstrate a range of behaviour at both individual and group levels that is psychologically unhealthy, criminal, and blatantly destructive. Perhaps in the future, aided by a broader perspective, we will come to realise that *Homo sapiens* are only semi-civilised at this present point in history? We are, very likely, just at an early stage of intelligent evolution. Equally possible, there will likely be beings elsewhere who have progressed to a level of intelligence and an advanced psychological state that is way beyond what we know or can imagine. Within such a wider scale of intelligence and psychology, we would still be semi-primitive.

Humans are dominated by a self-orientated psychology. This is characterised by the "me, me, me" or "me, first" mentality, covering a wide range of so-called "good" behaviour (including acts of selflessness) to so-called "bad" behaviour. It is effectively a selfish psychology when viewed objectively, as the dictionary definition of selfishness is "a lack of consideration for others". (The word "selfish" is almost always conveniently misused to merely - and hypocritically - denote a particular or extreme version of this psychological state. However, the reality is that normal behaviour is self-centred, restricting primary concern to "me and mine", and therefore selfish.)

An alternative psychology exists, almost always occurring in humans (albeit rarely) as brief glimpses of a state of unity or oneness. There is access to a much greater understanding, underpinned by a love for and connectedness to everything. The first scientific study of this was *Cosmic Consciousness* by the then eminent Dr Richard Maurice Bucke M.D., published in 1900. Bucke himself experienced such a "mystical" glimpse in his 36th year. Bucke's pioneering study was closely followed by *The Variety of Religious Experience* by William James. Other notable academics have followed these early attempts to work out what is happening, including Sir Alister Hardy and Abraham Maslow (specifically his work on peak experiences). If/when these glimpses become constant - and there needs to be considerable scepticism or caution about claims regarding such an

accomplishment - the resulting state has been traditionally known as enlightenment or by various other names. We prefer to call this alternative psychology or paradigm shift by the term non-selfishness. It can be simply characterised as the absence of psychological avoidance - which is a huge and profound statement. There are no excuses, blame, deflection, minimisation (which includes intellectualisation and trivialisation), denial, or any other form of turning away. Instead, there is a fullness of relationship with reality.

The two psychological approaches to life are basic in terms of their fundamentally different starting points. There is no continuum between the two (which, incidentally, goes a long way in explaining why countless attempts to shift from one to the other have failed). They are like oil and water, to use a well-known analogy. The self-orientated psychology has the starting point of "me, first". The non-selfish psychology, by contrast, is "one for all, all for one". Whereas there is a considerable range of behaviour within the self-orientated psychology, it is nevertheless overall characterised as a state of dysfunction or "ups" and "downs". Almost all suffering - all individual/societal/global problems - are directly or indirectly caused by this normalised selfishness. The non-selfish psychology is a much better alternative and a mature way of being, free of dysfunction.

We postulate that the evolution of intelligent beings anywhere and everywhere will always start with the emergence and subsequent development of the self-orientated or selfish psychology. This is because it will be inevitably triggered by environmental threats or dangers to the physical body, prompting psychological focus on "me", later compounded by emotional pain or disappointment. Social conditioning adds levels of complexity - albeit still with inherent dysfunction. But this psychology is still primitive, or semi-primitive at best, even when it develops and diversifies, and appears "sophisticated".

Glimpses of the alternative non-selfish psychology will initially be poorly understood, perhaps dismissed by those who haven't experienced it, mistakenly interpreted into a belief system, and incorrectly referred to as being "ineffable". This has been the case on Earth for the past three and a half thousand years at least.

Differing versions of how to attain this fundamental paradigm shift of consciousness or psychology have been developed throughout our cultures, more recently collectively referred to as "the perennial philosophy" because of obvious similarities within the varying approaches. However, based on evidence, it has overall been a history of failure. Selfishness has remained entrenched. An educational approach with a successful outcome of genuine change only becomes a real possibility once a detailed framework of relevant knowledge is identified and understood - and this must be offset by equal clarity that avoidance doesn't work and will frustrate efforts to progress. Achieving an actual shift in psychology has proved to be much harder than anyone realised, but it can nevertheless be done.

The shift in psychology from selfishness to non-selfishness will be the major pivotal turning point for any population of intelligent beings regardless of their planet, solar system, or galaxy. Whereas culture and technology will develop beforehand - and these breakthroughs will undeniably be significant steps forward - the emotional and practical dysfunction that inevitably arises from the self-orientated psychology will limit "civilisation". Indeed, we suggest that a future test or mark of "civilisation" being reached is when all of the population of intelligent beings has shifted from selfishness to non-selfishness.

This essay has deliberately been kept brief and concise. My colleagues and I appreciate that anyone not familiar with the concept or reality of a fundamentally different consciousness or psychology might initially struggle to grasp the clarity and blatant likelihood of the above words. We unfortunately can't change the fact that the work of The Human Potential Trust is pioneering. In addition to the aforementioned work of Bucke, James, Hardy, and Maslow, there's a lot of relevant, detailed, up-to-date information - including books, YouTube films, and 54 modules of an e-learning course - on our website <https://www.thehumanpotentialtrust.org> which will help anyone significantly increase their understanding of the psychology issues. Plus, collectively, these five essays, combined with a further seven essays in the second short series, will help.

In the second of these essays, we'll look at the Fermi Paradox and explain that we need to focus on overcoming the Great Hurdle rather than worrying about the so-called Great Filter.

Iain Scott, November 2020

Essays in this first short series:

*How do they think? The likely psychology of extraterrestrial intelligence Part 1: A test of civilisation*  
*How do they think? The likely psychology of extraterrestrial intelligence Part 2: It's the Great Hurdle, not the Great Filter*  
*How do they think? The likely psychology of extraterrestrial intelligence Part 3: A rare window of opportunity*  
*Oneness experiences: a knowledgeable overview*  
*Failure and the Great Hurdle*