From Caterpillar to Butterfly: Shifting Gears from Selfish Gain to Shared Growth

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the dominant contemporary mindset of "Selfish Gain", and presents three externally enforced perception-driven tendencies therein: 1. Social contradiction, 2. Mental discrepancies, and 3. The high cost of moral performance. Each of these three tendencies is briefly explained, after which a threefold counter model is suggested, clustered as "Shared Growth" and consisting of 1. Interbeing, 2. Impermanence, and 3. Immaterial happiness. These three tendencies are presented as an interdependent, internal-focused cluster that can help us attain a shift of paradigm, leading us from the caterpillar stage of selfishly gaining without giving back to the butterfly stage of reciprocity.

The Challenge

It is not easy to convince performers and students of business that there could be life after a single profit focus. The calls for more triple bottom line practices (Merriman & Sen, 2012; Hollos, Blome, & Foerstl, 2012; Sherman, 2012), multi-level sustainability (Gimenez, Sierra, & Rodon, 2012; Batra, 2012; Perego & Kolk, 2012), and compassionate creativity (Marques, 2012; Zabelina, & Robinson, 2010) may plant some positive seeds here and there, but still leave us too far away from a massive shift. This may be due to the fact that the community of believers in a constructive change, while growing, has not yet reached the magnitude of a tipping point. Goldberg (2006) explains, "[…] a tipping point suggests that a once-natural norm has begun to lose its dominance among the general public" (p. 1977). Hence, the notion of a world where performance can happen in a compassionate, responsible, sustainable, and multi-beneficial way has not yet reached the support level where it can weaken the dominance of the "Selfish Gain" mentality of the past centuries, and actually become a movement toward "Shared Growth".

The Lingering Promotion of Selfish Gain

The single most powerful obstruction toward a massive change from selfish gain to shared growth is perception. Perception may sound like an internal thing, but it is oftentimes instilled *externally*, by surrounding factors such as our culture, education, religion, generation, and the environments in which we dwell and perform daily. In other words, our perception is shaped by the factors that influence us throughout our life. Some people have realized this, and decided to be cautious on letting in too many external, troublesome influences. However, the majority is very receptive to perceptional influences. Thich (1991) describes our senses as windows to the world. He states, "Some of us leave our windows open all the time, allowing the sights and sounds of the world to invade us, penetrate us, and expose our sad, troubled selves" (p. 13).

The power of perception is so immense and unwavering because it is multi-layered. To illustrate this, we will focus on three manifestations of perception below. However, it should be understood that there are many additional angles. The three perception-based areas on which we will focus here are, 1) social contradiction, 2) mental discrepancies, and 3) the high cost of moral performance.

Social Contradiction

Most human communities are full of contradictory compulsions. Older generations instill a number of mixed messages in upcoming ones, thereby not only confusing them, but also forcing them to take a stance in favor of what is most rewarded. Till today, we practice the confusing way

of formally promoting one behavior while actually rewarding its opposite. In a landmark article, Kerr (1975) presents a number of eye opening examples about this contradictory trend as it is manifested in many branches of human interaction. He refers to it as "rewarding A while hoping for B" (p. 769). Illustrating this contradiction in politics, Kerr discusses the reasons why political candidates remain vague about their goals in campaigns, even though the public demands specific ones. It is historically proven that, when politicians actually adhere to public demand and present specific goals, they promptly get punished with a loss of votes. As an example of this contradiction in military service, Kerr (1975) reviews the Vietnam War, where soldiers would receive their reward of going back home as soon as their duty was over, regardless of the war's outcomes. Since the most assured way to get home was to stay out of danger, many soldiers did just that, and did not care about the governments' goal of winning the war.

Social contradictions are widespread and can be very costly, even to the extent of life-endangering. Shifting the example of contradictions to human health, Kerr (1975) reveals why medical doctors prefer making the error of diagnosing healthy patients as seriously ill, instead of declaring them healthy and later finding that they were ill. The reason is that the punishment for declaring a sick person healthy far outstrips the one for declaring a healthy person sick, even though the latter often leads to great stress, devastation, and actual illness from side-effects to superfluous medicines.

Kerr continues his review of social contradictions with orphanages claiming to strive for placement of as many orphans as possible in good homes, but actually making the adoption process so strenuous that many decent potential parents get disheartened to even start such a process. This contradictory practice is further supported by the fact that orphanages get their budgets on basis of the numbers of orphans in their homes, so there is an actual reward in keeping as many orphans in the orphanage as possible. In universities, asserts Kerr,

professors find that, contradictory to what society claims, their actual rewards are not based on being good teachers, but on their research and publication performance.

We can detect the contradiction in social behavior on a daily basis and in numerous realms. For instance, we teach people to be team players, but the recognition for individual achievement is far more attractive. We ask employees, departments, and services to be thrifty with their expenses, but reward those who exceed their budgets with larger sums of money next year, and punish those who were thrifty by shrinking their funds.

It is not difficult for workforce members to detect this tendency, and make up their minds about future moves: being irresponsible and uncaring about the common good seems to pay off more than the other way around. It takes a strong, morally mature mind, to do the right thing in spite of all the contradictory pressure.

Mental Discrepancies

We have all been young and can therefore all relate to the mindset we had when we were in our twenties, and perhaps even in our thirties: we were on the fast track to "making it" at any cost, and did not care too much about those who would suffer along the way, as long as our desires were met. Some people have maintained this self-centered mindset at later stages in their lives, but there are others who have been painfully confronted with the fleetingness of everything. Many people who have lost dear ones, went through a divorce, suffered a major financial setback, endured a devastating layoff, or another crucible have come to the realization that continuous and selfish gathering only brings us so much gratification, but cannot replace the most precious things in life.

In their book "*True North*" Bill George and Peter Sims (2007) mention numerous examples of leaders who found their true north after encountering crucibles. Among the leaders described is Howard Schulz, the Starbucks CEO and President,

who learned through his father's misfortune of being laid off with a broken leg and without any insurance or other incentive, that he would never do this to his employees if ever he would run his own corporation.

Yet, when we are still untouched by crucibles, we have a tendency to think we are invincible. Holt and Marques (2011) did a longitudinal study with 87 undergraduate business students and 35 MBA students, and found that empathy consistently ranked lowest among the undergraduate group, which comprised mostly younger students. This finding has been validated by several sources, among which a 2006 study from the UCL Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience. The UCL study confirmed that younger people generally seem to have a lower capacity to feel empathy than older ones. The research team in the UCL study found that young people rarely use the medial prefrontal cortex, which is the part of the brain that enables us to engage in higher-level thinking, empathy, guilt and understanding other people's motivations. Other studies (e.g. Koenigs, Young, Adolphs, Tranel, Cushman, Hauser, & Damasio, 2007; Thomas, Croft, & Tranel, 2011) have also confirmed that damage to the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (VMPC) causes a decrease in social emotions, and affects moral decision making processes.

The High Cost of Moral Performance

It is no secret that many major corporations have long made up their mind on the aspect of immoral behavior, particularly in the case of harm to the environment. Watson (2010) asserts, "[…] while corporations were often quick to poison the environment, they tend to be very slow when it comes to fixing their mistakes" (par. 5). In his subsequent review of the top ten corporate pay outs for environmental damage Watson (2010) lists the huge amount British Petroleum had to pay for the 2010 spill in the Gulf of Mexico: $20 billion. However, the second largest amount, which was by Exxon, is a mere $3.5 billion, to which Watson concludes, "In most cases, the companies involved managed to reduce -- or even erase -- settlements

through years of legal stalling and courtroom chicanery" (par. 7). Number three on Watson's list is Union Carbide, who ended up paying a scanty $470 million for the horrific Bhopal accident instead of the initially claimed $3 billion, with no option to prosecute the responsible management team due to the US' refusal for extraditing the guilty parties to India, where the accident happened.

Indeed, recent history has shown us time and again that the fines companies have to pay when they have been caught in unethical behavior is far less than what they would pay if they would proactively apply morally sound and environmental safety measures in their operations. Kerr (1975) also focused on this phenomenon in his earlier cited article. He stated that if a company is placed before the choice of spending $11 million to purchase and install antipollution equipment and paying $1 million if caught in polluting the environment, most companies will go for the latter. This entails that a corporation will only do the right thing beforehand if its leaders and stockholders would be so morally driven that they would prefer to forego major profits and put themselves in an unfortunate position compared to their competitors. Since money is still the main driver of business ventures, this is not likely to happen.

Selfish Gains Summarized

As asserted in the introductory statement of this section, the common factor of all the points made above is perception: perceptions in society, perceptions of upcoming generations, and perceptions of corporations and regulators. These are oftentimes externally imposed factors that numb the moral senses of those who fail to engage in thorough self-examination. There are undoubtedly more cases of perception maintaining the status quo, but the three angles presented above demonstrate that we are dealing with a powerful and solid cluster of mental obstacles, which will not make it any easier to increase the support for an interconnected mindset.

The current state of performing and its supporting mechanisms, as described above, are all elements of "modern" civilization, based on beliefs and behavioral patterns that have been developed and nurtured over the past centuries, and that will be hard to change. Hard, indeed, but not impossible. Why not impossible? Because human beings, while receptive to their environment, can also think and feel, and do so at a very personal, very *internal* level. We can reason, and interpret the impressions our eyes convey to our brains. It requires willpower and a conscious mindset to understand that we have been treading down a path that has taken too high a toll thus far, and that we are gradually reaching the point where continuing on this path will only lead to our demise.

The Envisioned Path to Shared Growth

Whether major corporation or small venture, we cannot infinitely harvest without giving back. Resources are becoming depleted if we continue to gather at the current pace, environmental equilibriums get disrupted if we continue to pollute as we have been doing, and the antagonism of deprived groups will keep surging if we continue to brutally subjugate and take advantage of them. There have been writings on the wall in the past decade that should have warned us that it is time for something else: from the melting polar ice and the emergence of "terrorism" to repeated corporate scandals and downfalls.

We have been performing as caterpillars: consuming and gathering our way to growth, and expanding our sense of power, influence, and wealth, to a degree our forefathers never dreamed of. But caterpillars cease their acquisitive trend at a certain point, build a cocoon, and develop into butterflies for the next stage of their existence.

Humanity has reached that stage a while ago. While some of us may still want to behave as caterpillars, our time to develop into beautiful butterflies has come. We have to become more compassionate in our practices and give while we take, just like butterflies that flutter from flower to flower and use the nectar but also instigate cross-pollination at the same time.

We don't have to wait for society to change its contradictory signals, or for youngsters to start using their medial prefrontal cortex and obtain more social sensitivity, or for governments to increase fines for unethical corporate practices. We can simply relate to a number of simple notions, of which three will be reviewed below.

The Realization of Interbeing

With a mindful approach to all we do on a moment-to-moment basis, we can quickly detect the interbeing of everything, hence, attain greater respect for all we are connected to. Thich (1991) explains interbeing in an easily understandable way. He uses the example of a piece of paper, which came from a tree, so the tree is in the paper. The tree needed the rain and the sun to grow, so the rain and sun are also in the paper. The rain came from a cloud, so the cloud is also in the paper. They all inter-are.

We can eat our breakfast and start contemplating on all the places where the various items we have in front of us come from and how many people and institutions, services, and organizations must have worked together to get it all here for our pleasure. We can review our clothes, our car, our appliances, and everything we use, and land at the same conclusion. A very effective way to increasingly understand and experience interbeing is through meditation. Referring to this path as "turning inward", Marques (2011) affirms that meditation can help reveal the following critical insights:
"1) General awareness: the impermanence of everything; 2) Specific awareness: the fickleness of positions; 3) Holistic view: the ability to focus on the whole, and see past small irritations while recognizing the blessing of being where one is; 4) Learning Stance: the skill to understand that every seemingly negative occurrence serves a useful future purpose; 5) Interconnectedness: the connection with others,

even if they refuse to see it; 6) Void: the awareness of one's non-self" (p. 25).

The Realization of Impermanence

In Marques' (2011) list of meditative revelations mentioned above, impermanence was already mentioned. Reviewing this phenomenon from a Buddhist perspective, Khong, B. (2009) alludes, "The Buddha teaches that at the ontological level, everything, including human existence, is subject to change. Similarly, at the ontic (individual) level, the mind and body are also in a constant state of flux" (p. 120). Indeed, by adopting a mindful approach we can start to understand and internalize what is visible all around us: nothing lasts. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary provides the following example of the meaning of impermanence:

"[T]he ancient Roman ruins are a telling reminder of the impermanence of even the grandest man-made constructions" ("*Impermanence*", 2013).

People, animals, plants, constructions, everything comes and goes. Nothing is permanent. We are all fleeting, and so are the systems we build, the wealth we gather, the powerful positions we acquire, and all the honors we accumulate. Nothing lasts eternally. This should not serve as a cue to stop performing and producing, but one that should help us temper our extreme orientations, expressed through insatiable tendencies.

What is more admirable than transcending the short-sighted "hit-and-run" mentality that so many business corporations adhere to, and exchanging it for a "give and take" pattern that ensures restoring as much as possible wherever our path leads us? Forests can be sustained by planting new trees when we harvest wood, local workers can be educated, so that they have a chance to develop themselves and their community at a higher level than before, and the abundant mentality in mining valuable gems can be tempered in order to decrease our carbon footprint. Nothing is everlasting. Not even our competitors. Many businesses do what they do because they fear that, if they don't, their competitors will surpass them. This is an assumption that is not void from truth. But why should we always compare ourselves to others? If history has taught us anything, it is that pioneers of laudable trends leave a lasting legacy. Is that not worth considering?

The Realization of Immaterial Happiness

Krishnamurti once stated that he gained his inner balance and peace when he stopped comparing himself to others. In an interview posted on the official repository of the authentic teachings of J. Krishnamurti, he affirms,

"Do you know what it means to live without psychological comparison when all your life you have been conditioned to compare - at school, at games, at the university and in the office? Everything is comparison. To live without comparison! Do you know what it means? It means no dependence, no self-sufficiency, no seeking, no asking; therefore it means to love. Love has no comparison, and so love has no fear. Love is not aware of itself as love, for the word is not the thing" (par. 65).

Society encourages us continuously to compare ourselves to others, and oftentimes in an unfair way, which causes us to perceive ourselves as losers. Advertising is the best known way in which this happens, and it is therefore also one of the swiftest ways to destroy our inner peace and dignity. You look at the models in magazines, and you instantly feel fat. You look at the brand-new car that can be leased for "only $495.00" a month, and yours instantly seems so out of date. You look at the clothes, work out machines, shoes, beds, food, jewelry, or new cellphones that just came out, and you instantly feel as if yours are ready for the dump. The sad reality is, that we may experience instant gratification when we purchase all those advertised goods, or achieve those goals we formulated through comparison, but the happiness we gain from this is short-lived, because it is not really happiness. It is a superficial pacifier that temporari-

ly numbs our dissatisfaction, until the next challenge appears in this eternal comparison process.

Realizing that happiness is not acquired externally, but that it is a mental state that we can achieve through mindfulness is an important step toward lasting progress. Happiness is not encapsulated in a mansion on the hill or the newest make of a classy car: that's luxury. Happiness is not represented by inheriting a large sum of money or winning the lottery: that's luck, and within six months you are usually back to the state of mind that you had before. Happiness is not represented by a prestigious job, wealthy friends, and an impressive network: that's influence at the highest, and while it can be useful in climbing the corporate ladder or staying on top, it is not a substitute for happiness. Happiness is a byproduct of mindfulness, when you realize that things could be so much worse; when you are aware of the blessings that are represented in the smallest things you encounter every day, when you think on the things that are so easily overlooked: your health, your family, and your accomplishments today.

Shared Growth Summarized

The concepts of interbeing, impermanence and immaterial happiness are very internal-based. Once we have reached the point where we dare to turn inward and face our interconnectedness with everything, they emerge as an interdependent cycle. Not everyone will care to turn inward and contemplate on these concepts, because it's easier to be ignorant. Ignorance numbs you when you engage in painful, wrong actions. Many people, some engaging in big business, are afraid to face their core because it may require them to make changes they dread making. Nonetheless, attaining a deeper understanding of these three interrelated phenomena will lead to greater inner-peace. Attaining and maintaining inner-peace may lead to giving up established behaviors, but why would we want to hold on to those if they were destructive anyway? At the end of every day, we have to face ourselves. Are we happy with our achievements of the day, or do we want to forget them as quickly as possible? If

we are blessed, we will grow older. When looking back, will we be proud or embarrassed about our actions? We cannot take anything with us when our day of transition arrives. Why, then, should we gain at the expense and suffering of others with whom we inter-are?

Shifting Gears: From Caterpillar to Butterfly

In this article, two key situational depictions were discussed. The dominating status quo was clustered under the common denominator of "Selfish Gain", encompassing (at least) three externally enforced, perception driven phenomena: 1. Social contradictions, 2. Mental discrepancies, and 3. The high cost of moral performance. The envisioned state was clustered as "Shared Growth" and involved three internally emerging, interdependent phenomena, 1. Interbeing, 2. Impermanence, and 3. Immaterial happiness.

The driving motive for presenting the "Shared Growth" cluster can be found in an increasingly disturbing exhibition of the "Selfish Gain" tendency, expressed through unrestrained shortsightedness and a singular profit focus from large groups of business performers and students. While some of these folks may still dispute global warming and other concerning contemporary developments, there is no doubt that the way humanity has carried itself thus far with Mother Earth as well as toward other living species has maneuvered us in a position where a shift has become urgent.

Using the analogy of a caterpillar and a butterfly, it is advisable that we shift from the demanding, self-centered caterpillar stage to the reciprocal butterfly stage, thus ensuring longer and more rewarding existence of our species on this planet, and a positive deposit on our collective emotional, ecological, and existential bank account. Figure 1 below depicts the two performance guides, and the direction in which each of them will take us.
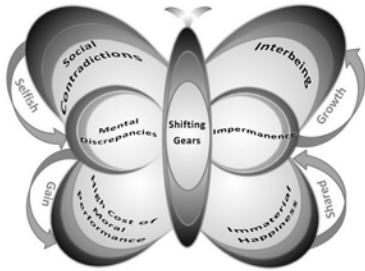
Figure 1: Shifting gears from selfish gain to shared growth

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