

Chaos and Reconstruction of the Three Desires in Education: A Dialogue with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

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THE CONSTRUCTION OF THREE DESIRES IN EDUCATION REFLECTION AND EXTENSION OF MASLOW'S MOTIVATION THEORY

In the realm of humanistic psychology, Abraham Maslow has established the hierarchy of needs, which provides a way for educators to understand the needs of human beings and to motivate learners to pursue a state of “self-actualization.” Nevertheless, I harbor multiple reservations regarding this theory and its practical implications in the field of education, which further fuels my inclination to devise a novel approach for comprehending human nature.

First and foremost, the fundamental essence of “self-actualization” is to facilitate learners in exploring their utmost potential. However, in the current educational landscape, it is frequently misconstrued as pushing learners to distinguish themselves. This perpetual vortex of competition with others often leaves individuals feeling adrift. When we reduce basic living values like living, love and belonging only as the prerequisite for self-actualization, we risk losing sight of foundational values. Rather than attempting to craft an idealized human model, the objective of education should be to spotlight the inherent strengths of human beings, thereby nurturing the potential of each individual to lead a balanced and contented life.

Furthermore, Maslow tended to believe that once the lower-level needs, such as basic survival requirements, are met higher-level needs would emerge. He did acknowledge the existence of numerous exceptions, such as individuals who possess an elevated thirst for truth and are willing to make life-altering sacrifices for it. However, when employed as a fundamental theory for comprehending human nature, the prevalence of such exceptions can impede its practical application. This may be attributed to the fact that the examination of

“needs” falls short of replacing the exploration of “desires,” and the analysis of human “needs” appears to fall short in directly probing the profoundest aspects of human nature, delving into the core essence of humanity. Maslow also explicitly pointed out the difference between “needs” and “desires,” describing the basic needs he defined as “instinctoid,” and stating that although their nature is obviously instinct-like, in many respects, they are not like the instincts of lower animals that we are very familiar with. Animal instincts are powerful, unwelcome, and unchangeable; while our basic needs, though instinct-like, are relatively weak.¹ He disapproves of behaviorism’s approach to treating human instincts as if they were mere animal behaviors. Instead, he directs his attention towards comprehending “instinctoid” aspects to gain insight into human nature. This paper posits that, nestled between what Maslow pejoratively labels “animal instincts” and what he explores as “instinctoid,” there exists a layer of human instincts. These human instincts are neither as unwelcome and unchangeable as animal instincts nor as “relatively weak” as “instinctoid.” Commencing from this intermediate stratum, education is not obliged to rigidly adhere to the path of behaviorism, nor should it exclusively center its attention on the cultivation of needs. Rather, it should delve into the core of human existence, aiming to achieve a harmonious equilibrium of human desires.

CLASSIFICATION OF HUMAN DESIRES: THE CONSTRUCTION OF “THREE DESIRES” IN EDUCATION

Building upon Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, this paper aims to restructure the types of human desires, categorizing them into “Survival Desires,” “Enjoyment Desires,” and “Love and Wisdom Desires.”

Survival Desires

Survival desires encompass the fundamental cravings required for the preservation of human life. These desires give rise to needs such as water, shelter, and reproduction. Survival desires are innate desires with natural boundaries.

Enjoyment Desires

Enjoyment desires extend beyond basic living needs. They encompass desires for pleasures and luxuries, such as delicious food and fashionable cloth-

ing. Unlike survival desires, the boundaries of enjoyment desires are defined by individuals. Enjoyment desires can continuously be generated, elevated, and compared by external influences, often leading to a perpetual sense of scarcity. In many contexts, enjoyment desires are equated with desires themselves, as they vividly reflect the fundamental characteristic of insatiable desires. However, when enjoyment desires are conflated with desires as a whole, the inherent depth of desires is often narrowed.

Love and Wisdom Desires

Love and wisdom desires encompass the desires for emotional connection, love, and intellectual curiosity. These desires give rise to affection for family, friends, and partners, as well as a curiosity about the world and a thirst for knowledge. Love and wisdom desires are transcendent desires that go beyond material and sensory needs.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THREE DESIRES

The reason for advocating a reevaluation of learners from the perspective of the three desires, despite the insights provided by Maslow, lies in several key considerations. Firstly, unlike Maslow's hierarchical approach to categorizing needs, the desire framework proposed here does not differentiate between high and low levels. Every individual possesses all three desires, and there are no strict hierarchies or sequences among them. For instance, when Socrates dedicated himself to truth, it might seem like he was forsaking basic needs for self-actualization, seemingly acting as an exception to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. However, from the perspective of human desires as a whole, his is merely a demonstration of a stronger inclination towards Love and Wisdom Desires compared to other desires. As Bloom stated, the philosopher is temperate because he loves the truth immoderately, not because he restrains his desires.² This highlights that all three desires can be guided and should be guided. Education aims for the balanced development of three desires. Placing Love and Wisdom Desires above all else, avoiding discussions on Survival Desires and Enjoyment Desires can reduce character education to shallow moralization. Allowing Enjoyment Desires to flourish without control can lead to an endless

pursuit of pleasure. In practical life, there are intricate interactions among these three desires, and there isn't a one-to-one correspondence between the three desires and Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The comparison between Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the desire framework proposed is illustrated in the two figures below.



Fig. 1 Maslow's Motivation Theory



Fig. 2 Three Desires in Human Nature

Secondly, Maslow's concept of self-actualization as the ultimate goal is rarely attained by individuals. In Maslow's research on young people, he selected three thousand college students but found only one suitable subject, with one or two dozen others who could be potential future subjects. In Maslow's time, people who reached the state of self-actualization or those inclined towards self-actualization were still a minority. In contrast, the objective underscored in this article, which is the harmonious alignment of the three desires, represents an achievable state that the average person can steadily progress toward. It places a premium on the pursuit of equilibrium, demonstrating a deep concern for the well-being of numerous ordinary individuals.

Perhaps some readers may raise the question of whether there are no negative desires inherent to human nature. The three desires seem to presuppose the inherent human goodness and the conviction that Love and Wisdom Desires will invariably steer individuals towards benevolence. Regarding this, my argument is that education should recognize the capacity for goodness within human nature. There exist rational and compassionate facets of human nature that serve as the foundation for educational endeavors. Furthermore, the ongoing

debate concerning whether human nature is inherently good, inherently evil, or a blend of both has been a question that has proved elusive to definitively address throughout human history. I do not purport to offer a conclusive resolution to this complex issue. To interpret from Aristotle's viewpoint, moral character and evil actions are both choices made by the will. Therefore, from an educational standpoint, irrespective of whether human nature is believed to be inherently good, inherently evil, or a combination of both, it is the responsibility of education to lead individuals in navigating the realm of the three desires to make ethical choices.

THE IDEAL STATE OF THREE DESIRES: CONTINUALLY STRIVING FOR ARISTOTLE'S IDEAL OF THE "GOLDEN MEAN"

Many people misunderstand Aristotle's "golden mean," viewing it as a compromise. However, the middle way is actually an ideal or a goal, representing a state of balance and harmony in which people have the leisure for "contemplative life," and "contemplative life" is the highest form of happiness.

To make this more concrete, the essence of the "middle way" is "eudaimonia," which translates to "flourishing or well-being." Aristotle believed that eudaimonia is the highest good and ultimate purpose because we choose it always for its own sake and never for the sake of something else. It represents the highest human good, the ultimate goal of life, and the state of living in accordance with one's true nature. It is more than just happiness or pleasure; it refers to living a life of virtue and fulfilling one's potential. People in the state of eudaimonia use reason to restrain themselves from pursuing any desire to extremes, finding balance in fulfilling three types of goods: bodily goods, external goods, and goods of the soul. Bodily goods are fulfilled through the basic satisfaction of survival desires, ensuring bodily health and well-being. External goods are fulfilled through the moderate pursuit of wealth and status, complemented by a degree of luck. Goods of the soul are met by heeding the call of Love and Wisdom Desires, striving for virtues like wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance. While Aristotle's philosophy underscores that eudaimonia is a series of activities in accordance with virtue, it recognizes the value of fulfilling survival desires and enjoyment desires as essential elements in achieving

well-being.³ The ideal state of the three desires framework proposed in this paper, along with its relationship to Aristotle's concept of the golden mean, is illustrated in the following figures.

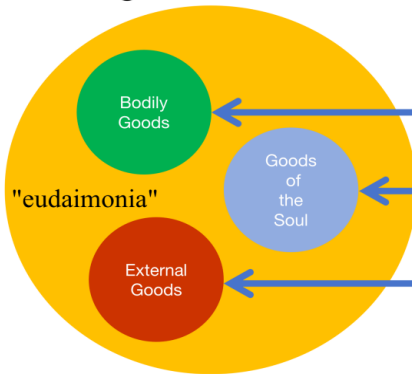


Fig. 3 Aristotle's "golden mean"

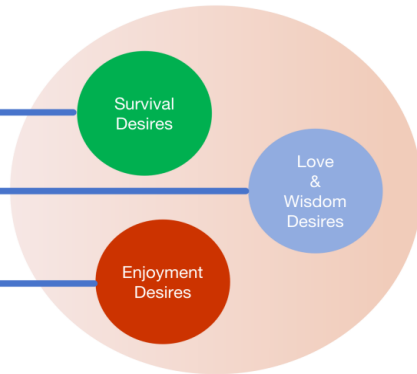


Fig. 4 Ideal state of the Three Desires in Human Nature

Revisiting Aristotle in the contemporary context is imperative because the idealism rooted in Socratic "knowledge as virtue" seems to have transformed into vacuous moralizing. Aristotle's viewpoint on eudaimonia is more down-to-earth, resonating with the current social landscape. His approach recognizes the validity of individuals' pursuit of happiness, employs virtue as the benchmark and contemplation as the means to achieve it. This approach holds greater practicality and relevance in today's society.

The reason the three desires can achieve a state of balance lies in the concept of "intentionality," a fundamental human characteristic that distinguishes us from animals. Animals primarily exist within the confines of their sensory perceptions. In contrast, human existence is characterized by "intentional existence," guided by consciousness rather exclusively sensory experiences. Intentionality serves as the foundation for human existence to progress from potential to actuality and to shape a meaningful future. Without intentionality, individuals not only lose their history but also forego the prospect of a purposeful future, disrupting the continuity of life and leading to a series of senseless and

incomprehensible moments. While Survival Desires and Enjoyment Desires operate within the realm of sensory perception, if Love and Wisdom Desires are reduced to serving mere survival or pleasure, they forfeit their inherent power of “intentionality,” causing individuals to gradually resemble entities devoid of human qualities.

“Love” and “Wisdom” are closely connected and inseparable, and they provide the driving force for continuous transcendence. In the *Symposium*, Socrates attempts to redefine Eros (Love) as not only the source of physical love but also the source of wisdom. He connects the desire for knowledge with the desire for love. Eros is the child of Plenty and Poverty, making him always in pursuit of the beautiful and the good, just like a philosopher longing for knowledge.⁴ This ancient Greek perspective explains the intrinsic connection between love and wisdom, suggesting that the desire for love is also a desire for wisdom. Love and wisdom are inseparable, which reflects the essential spirit of pursuit in education.

THE CHAOS OF THREE DESIRES IN EDUCATION

In the ideal state, the three desires exist in harmony, reaching a balanced “middle way” that enables individuals to understand themselves and integrate into the world. However, the current needs-based educational model often fails to address the roots of human desires. Education’s neglect of desires leads to the chaos of the three desires, causing learners to frequently experience feelings of emptiness, anxiety, and helplessness.

THE CONCEALMENT OF SURVIVAL DESIRES IN EDUCATION

Survival Desires in the realm of education becomes inconspicuous due to two significant manifestations: the hesitance to engage learners in essential life skills and the absence of comprehensive sexual education. First, when considering the hierarchy of needs, education is often seen as a means to encourage individuals to pursue higher-level needs once their basic survival requirements have been met. As living standards improve, most families have already addressed their fundamental survival needs. Consequently, some parents choose to save children’s time spent on activities necessary for basic survival, such as shopping

for groceries, cooking, or boiling water, to focus on their academic performance. This results in a lack of basic survival skills among learners. Because they lack practical survival experience from a young age, many learners struggle to find meaning and enjoyment in everyday life activities and consider necessary survival routines boring and mundane.

Secondly, while sex is fundamentally a basic human impulse related to reproduction, cultural taboos and societal norms have often made it a difficult topic to address in education. Sex education has a crucial yet often neglected function: helping children understand where they come from. Children's curiosity about the origins of their existence stems from the Survival Desires and reflects their inquisitiveness about the reasons human communities thrive and the curiosity about human nature itself. However, when educators choose to dismiss or deceive children by avoiding the question, they deprive them of a valuable opportunity to understand the preciousness of life and the essential meaning behind the question of their own existence.

THE AMPLIFICATION OF ENJOYMENT DESIRES BY THE EXTERNAL WORLD AND EDUCATION

The amplification of Enjoyment Desires by the external world has given birth to the modern "narcissism" culture, which is characterized not by self-satisfaction but by an over-heightened focus on the self.⁵ In this heightened self-focus, confidence and self-doubt alternate, continuously intermingling. Some individuals, immersed in a cycle of competition, fulfilling enjoyment desires, showing off enjoyment on social media, pursuing enjoyment, and competition, become increasingly detached from their surrounding environment.

The emergence of various new products and the advertisements on social media continuously stimulate and magnify the importance of Enjoyment Desires. Modern society encourages individuals to fulfill their desires by comparing, producing, and elevating various wants. The desires that are compared, produced and elevated are essentially facets of the Enjoyment Desires. People initially compete to satisfy the Enjoyment Desires and the fulfillment of them becomes a standard for measuring one's "self-actualization." Possessions like

luxury cars and watches symbolize status, further reinforcing individuals' self-perception. In the pursuit of the twisted "self-actualization" the emphasis on self-ambition often overshadows the cooperative aspect of self-realization. This can lead to a culture of "narcissism" where individuals require constant attention and engage in perpetual comparison, often treating others as objects of competition or tools for achieving applause, overlooking the real value that others can provide.

The amplification of the Enjoyment Desires by the external world profoundly affects the value orientation in education. In the competitive mechanisms of modern society, education often seems compelled to serve competition. When materialism becomes the ultimate goal for education, academic learning often transforms into a means to pursue material satisfaction. Paradoxically, the pursuit of "happiness" through academic achievement often does not lead to true happiness but rather creates more confusion due to the failure to achieve harmony and balance. When the desire for enjoyment takes precedence, it consumes the space for other desires, expanding into an insatiable longing for material satisfaction. This, in turn, leads to a persistent sense of lack.

THE WEAKNESS OF LOVE AND WISDOM DESIRES IN EDUCATION

The weakness of Love and Wisdom Desires in education is mainly manifested in the loss of students' curiosity, and the decline of students' independent thinking abilities. It is closely related to the hidden nature of the Survival Desires and the amplification of the Enjoyment Desires in education.

First, the concealed nature of the Survival Desires leaves learners without any reflection on the issues of their own existence, making the pursuit of rationality and virtue in education sound like hollow moral preaching. In Plato's *The Republic*, Socrates uses a thought experiment to lead Glaucon and Adeimantus to pursue reason and virtue. The process of constructing the ideal city-state serves as a way to guide the two young men to contemplate the essence of human existence. At first, everyone engages in one occupation to fulfill their Survival Desires. The necessity for survival results in the necessity of exchange,

which, in turn, leads to the necessity of the city's existence.⁶ Socrates tries to help the two young men understand the values of human justice, rationality, and virtue by starting with the closest experience to human existence. From *The Republic*, it becomes apparent that the nature of rationality and virtue is closely related to the essence of human existence. If Socrates avoids discussing survival, the state of "rationality" could not be constructed, and the education of "rationality" and "virtue" would lose its power.

Second, the amplification of the Enjoyment Desires makes the pursuit of material satisfaction, rather than the pursuit of wisdom, the ultimate goal of learners. The Enjoyment Desires constantly encroach upon the space of the Love and Wisdom Desires. Pythagoras used the term "games" to describe life. He pointed out that in "games" there are two ways of living: one is servile, focused on winning rewards, such as athletes competing for awards, while the other is philosophical. Philosophers do not seek material rewards through these competitions; they engage in contemplation and seek to understand the truth. When individuals indulge in competition and interest exchange, relentlessly pursuing the fulfillment of the Enjoyment Desires, they lose patience and curiosity for contemplation, causing the weakness of Love and Wisdom Desires in education.

RECONSTRUCTION OF THREE DESIRES IN EDUCATION BRINGING FORTH THE SURVIVAL DESIRES

First and foremost, the manifestation of the Survival Desires requires educators to focus on enhancing survival education. In this context, survival education does not entail guiding learners towards endless competition for the sake of more comfortable living, but rather involves engaging learners in fundamental activities essential for human survival. In the domestic environment, parents can consciously guide their children to participate in household chores. Education can only become genuine when it draws strength from life. Family education serves as the prime setting for invoking this kind of strength. Education should not solely focus on nurturing "ivory tower" fantasies but should instead foster individuals with practical life skills. In the school environment,

the scope of teaching should extend beyond the confines of the classroom. It should encompass guiding learners to explore the natural world, allowing them to perceive the existence of life beyond human life, promoting an understanding of the value and profundity of life.

Furthermore, the manifestation of the Survival Desires necessitates educators to recognize the importance of life education. Educators should not shy away from sexual education, but rather view it as a valuable opportunity to help learners understand the question of “where do I come from?” Education should not evade discussions about death either. Death is not meaningless in life; it signifies not only destruction but also creation. Karl Popper also contended that if life were never to end, it would lack value. To some extent, it is the constant risk of losing life at any moment that instills a deep understanding of life’s worth.⁷ Education should seize this value to help learners grasp the intrinsic meaning and possibilities that life and death bestow upon existence.

CORRECTLY GUIDING ENJOYMENT DESIRES

While there is a risk of exaggerating Enjoyment Desires in modern education, the desire itself is not at fault. In fact, it is the motivational force behind humanity’s continuous intentional actions, contributing to the creation of a more comfortable living environment. Therefore, education should focus on appropriately guiding the Enjoyment Desires to reaffirm the importance of human practices. Socrates once remarked, the gods gave feet to those creatures that crawl but hands to humans, and because of having hands, humans have greater happiness.⁸ Hands endow humans with the potential for practice and creativity, and the pursuit of comfort motivates such creativity. In daily educational practices, when the Enjoyment Desires are at play, educators should not instantly satisfy it but rather encourage learners to engage in self-designed creativity within their practices.

Moreover, although the Enjoyment Desires hold their own significance and value, it is crucial in contemporary times to reestablish the qualities of diligence. This is essential in enabling learners to break free from the infinite loop—competition, fulfilling enjoyment desires, showing off enjoyment on

social media, pursuing enjoyment, and competition—and assume the observer role described by Pythagoras. Xenophon portrayed Socrates as a highly frugal individual, suggesting that no matter how little a person’s income might be, it would suffice to meet Socrates’s needs. Socrates always advised people not to eat when they were not hungry and not to drink when they were not thirsty, as he believed that such actions would disturb a person’s appetite, intellect, and soul.⁹ In his pursuit of wisdom, Socrates sought the minimal satisfaction of bodily desires in exchange for a clear mind, thereby maximizing his Love and Wisdom Desires. While contemporary education does not advocate ascetic lifestyles, it should be mindful that excessive gratification of the Enjoyment Desires can encroach upon the space needed for the Love and Wisdom Desires. Education should thus maintain a relative balance by promoting a more frugal approach.

RESTORING THE STRENGTH OF LOVE AND WISDOM DESIRES

The weakness of Love and Wisdom Desires is closely intertwined with the concealment of Survival Desires and the amplification of Enjoyment Desires. The hidden nature of the Survival Desires causes learners to lose touch with fundamental contemplation about what it means to be human, while the amplification of the Enjoyment Desires magnifies the value of bodily pleasures, usurping the mental space for contemplation. Education, therefore, should employ the aforementioned methods to bring forth the Survival Desires in educational settings, guide the Enjoyment Desires correctly, and, in doing so, restore the dynamic tension among the three desires.

Moreover, the reinvigoration of the Love and Wisdom Desires requires the cultivation of a modest intellectual character. Here, “modesty” does not refer to self-denial or pretentious acts but rather to the courage to ask questions and demonstrate curiosity. In his dialogue *The Symposium*, Plato’s Socrates discusses the concept of Eros, binding love and wisdom together and linking “lack” to the Love and Wisdom Desires. Like Eros, a child born out of “lack,” humans are naturally endowed with an insatiable curiosity for abundant knowledge. Socrates, much like Eros, recognized his ignorance and, therefore, thirsted for wisdom. In education, educators should encourage learners to ask questions courageously and approach every query with diligence. In an educational

context, there are no “wrong questions,” and there certainly are no “foolish questions.” Each attempt at “acknowledging one’s ignorance” is deserving of encouragement and recognition.

FOSTERING MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN EDUCATORS AND LEARNERS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THREE DESIRES

It is in moments of chaos that reconstruction becomes possible. This demands that both educators and learners pay close attention to negative experiences, as these experiences manifest themselves as moments of chaos. These are moments when we doubt ourselves, moments when we don’t know what to do, moments when we feel confused and at a loss, moments that call for re-embodiment.¹⁰ As human beings, we constantly encounter these moments, for our position, as Max Scheler states, lies between the perfection of divinity and the unconsciousness of animals.¹¹ The process of learning, the transformation of the soul, is not linear or continuous. Instead, it occurs through interruptions. It is during these moments of interruption, when our desires are in chaos, that, as Dewey stated, the “live creature” possesses the most vitality to re-engage with the environment and, as a result, attain a new harmony among the three desires.

The aforementioned points represent several recommendations conceived from the standpoint of the three desires. More importantly, both educators and learners can mutually engage in understanding each other’s desires as humans, and in caring for each other in a way that respects human nature. While needs may differ in terms of hierarchy, desires rooted in human nature as ‘instinct’ are universal. “Self-actualization” is not the only or ultimate goal of education, nor is a life solely dedicated to “self-actualization” deemed worthwhile. Education should aid both learners and educators in comprehending the three desires and striving for a state of mental equilibrium and stability within these desires, in order to nurture souls marked by serenity, self-adjustment, self-compassion, love for humanity, and an appreciation for the world.

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