Applying Digital Reality Theory

As an abstract explanation of everything, Digital Reality Theory is fairly simple. Existence comprises everything there is but it can be known only in analog terms. Living things, including us humans, digitize local areas of analog existence and thereby construct digital realities. These digital realities are what we know when we think we know the world.

Any computer engineer will tell you that analog-to-digital conversion is never fully complete nor absolutely accurate. It can also follow many different algorithms, producing different and incompatible digital outputs. When computers communicate with one another, they are careful to specify their digitizing methods—that’s where file tags such as .pdf and .aiff come from. When people communicate, they are more often unaware of how they constructed their digital realities. They literally understand the same existence differently.

My book, Digital Reality, contains several descriptions of how people digitize the same existence into incompatible realities. One example, which is both basic and is of current concern, analyzes how people understand the societies they live in. The following illustration appears on page 87 of Digital Reality.
This diagram shows how people like you and I build the societies we live in. The circles represent the materials we start with. Starting at the bottom left is the physical world, which includes the cosmos, our bodies, and the tools we make. Bottom right is our behavior—our private inner perceptions, thoughts and emotions, plus the patterns of motivation that lead to our outer conduct. The top circle represents the universal values and abstract principles which usually guide our behavior and which we use to communicate and argue with one another. In a nod to traditional philosophy, I call these ideals.

These three—physical reality, living behavior, and abstract ideals—are the building blocks of our world. Notice that they are completely different kinds of things: for example, a rock is physical, the decision to pick up a rock is behavioral, and the reasons for that decision are definable in terms of abstract goals and values.

We spend much of our lives using these building blocks to categorize things. Some people think our categories are always abstract, but that is not the case. Any of our three world-building blocks may categorize any of the others. This means there are six possible kinds of categorization, as shown by the six arrows in the diagram. The head of each arrow points to the kind of things that are categorized and its tail rests in the area where the categories that explain those things originate.

For example, when we use physical categories to explain our behavior we are engaged in the kind of social interaction I call Communalism. Communalism is a social reality where behavior deals with physical issues affecting a group; it encourages or sanctions individual behavior depending on how that behavior affects the physical success or health of the group. A simple example is taking care of a baby. The baby has physical needs that parents and caregivers want to satisfy. The result is a group interaction in which the physical reality of one member of the group—the baby—categorizes the behavior of everybody in the group. In general, Communalism happens any time a group of people cooperates to achieve a physical result, whether its raising a baby or building a house.

Turn the Communalism arrow around and you have Authoritarianism,
where behavior categorizes physical actions. This is a familiar concept in sociology; it is applied to groups where the will of a leader categorizes physical acts by individual members. The physical effects of Authoritarianism are as diverse as the interests of any group: who does which jobs, how goods are to be allocated, what individual actions are demanded or permitted or proscribed, even how individuals are to be punished when the authority is transgressed. The people whose behavior sets the rules may include not only specific individuals (such as dictators) but also the tradition-makers of the past and the diffuse but powerful behavioral consensus of the present. “The way our fathers did it” and “the way it is usually done” express Authoritarianism, even though they may not cite a personal authority.

Many people live their lives in a mixture of Communalism and Authoritarianism, without paying much attention to ideals. But inevitably their consciousness will be raised by a book or speech in the kind of social interaction I call Intellection. As shown in the diagram, Intellection defines ideals by categorizing them behaviorally. Words and inspiring actions call ideals to mind and implant them in our lives. We learn basic abstractions—truth, honesty, responsibility—by talking and watching. From there, our imagination multiplies these concepts in the theater of the mind. School is a resource in this process, but it helps to be a dreamer too.

The flip side of Intellection is Orthodoxy, where ideals are used to categorize behavior. Our inner plans and urges, even our casual thoughts, become good or bad, honest or irresponsible. This is where codes of morals and ethics come from. Closely related is Legalism, the kind of social interaction where we use ideals to categorize our physical actions instead of our inner behavior. Orthodoxy regulates our urges and emotions; Legalism regulates our physical acts. Both use ideal categories, which means they sometimes get confused.

The sixth kind of social interaction is Collectivism, where physical reality categorizes ideals. Social values and goals become practical—no poverty, better housing, steady work, etc. Socialism is the form of Collectivism in which these goals are supposed to be achieved by government planning and control.
In practice, most people use all six of these kinds of categorization at one time or another in their daily lives. But to hold our lives together, each one of us also needs to build a complete worldview. In such a view, all three of the building blocks of our world must be categorized and also used as categories, without duplications or loose ends. There are only two workable ways to do this:

The worldview I call Individualism starts with people cooperating to establish a group physical environment. This leads some to make an intellectual search for ideals that might govern that environment. The ideals that are found are applied legalistically, closing the ring. The worldview I call Statism starts with an existing physical environment that suggests ideals for its collectivistic maintenance. Those ideals become an orthodoxy that regulates people’s behavior and justifies authoritarian control over people’s actions.

The ring structure of each worldview insulates it from being questioned by the other worldview. All categorizations in each ring are satisfied internally, and none overlap between the two. Every question that may arise in an individualist or statist world is answered by categorizations in that same world. Thus, each worldview delivers the snug feeling of being complete and certain. It boosts three of the six modes of social interaction and devalues the other three.

Neither of these two worldviews offers a free lunch. Individualism is rife with
hazards and inequities, but it supports the warmth of free communalism and the stimulus of intellection. Statism offers physical security, but at the cost of conformity and restraints. Trying to find a magic blend of the two seems to produce only conflict and wasted lives.

Until the nineteenth century Statism was dominant, but Individualism became popular with the rise of capitalism and democracy. Both worldviews have been held extensively during human history. Their failures and successes are well documented. Yet today they cause conflicts throughout our world. I believe the most hopeful conclusion one can reach is that in much of the planet there is still a choice between them.

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