

Sensory-Motor Amnesia is Not a Disease

In his book, *Somatics – reAwakening the Mind's Control of Movement, Flexibility, and Health*, Thomas Hanna introduced the term, Sensory-Motor Amnesia (SMA) to describe a kind of deficiency of sensory awareness and an impairment of mobility, generally characterized by muscular contractions, pain, and a distorted sense of bodily shape, position, and movement. He describes SMA as a state of *habituation* formed by repetitive triggering of three reflexes of stress. He never explained the mechanism of this habituation, although he did indicate that it went beyond sensory-awareness and movement to include expectations and behavior.

Because people are familiar with the medical model and tend to view pathology in terms of disease and cure, they have a tendency to regard Sensory-Motor Amnesia as a disease and somatic education as the cure.

To do so is inadvertently to operate within a paradigm – a disease model in which pathology comes from outside the organism -- which is untrue of somatic education. It generates an incorrect understanding of somatic education that puts it in the domain of medicine, whereas as the term says, it is an educational process.

Sensory-Motor Amnesia is not a disease. In fact, it is the means by which human civilization has built upon itself – for good or for ill. In other words, SMA is neutral, a product of the neutral function of memory (or learning) and a neutral principle – that somas (sentient beings) perceive only *processes of change*.

In this paper, I will explain the preceding statement in a way that I hope will put SMA into a more comprehensive perspective – one that is familiar to all of us by experience.

A Concise Overview of Somatic Life

The sage of China, Lao Tzu, wrote, “There is no difference between the ‘quick’ and the ‘dead’; they are one channel of vitality.” In this quote, the word, “quick” doesn’t mean ‘able to get out of the way in time’ (although, in an amusing sort of way, it fits); it means “living.” It is an archaic use of the term, but one that points to the key distinction between that which is alive and that which is not: what is alive moves, and in particular, moves by its own initiative (rather than moving by mere inertia, momentum, or by outside force).

Just so, in his book, *The Body of Life*, Hanna made reference to the characteristics that define life as having to do with movement. Those characteristics of living things are the actions of standing, facing, turning (or gyrating, as he liked to call it), handling (or manipulating), and coordination (or timing in synchronization).

Standing means arising from rest – rather a distinguishing feature of living things.

Facing implies having a front and back, a front which greets experience and a back which departs from it.

Turning (or gyrating) is the act of selecting experience by directing ones face.

Handling is the act of interacting with ones environment, whether by hand, by mouth, by tail, or by pachydermal proboscis (i.e., nasal trunk).

Coordination is the timely gathering of ones faculties for the sake of standing, facing, turning and handling.

The living process that possesses these characteristics, Hanna called the archesoma, the archetype of all somas (living beings). All somas do those actions, which mean those actions are characteristic of the archesoma.

Though it has been said that “a soma is meant to go forward,” strictly speaking, a soma is meant to go forward (toward), backward (away), sideways (evasion), and around. Somas do that.

In his book, *Bodies in Revolt*, Thomas Hanna described two basic orientations of human somas to life: assimilation and accommodation.

Assimilation (or what Ken Wilber calls “agency”) is the action, of a soma, of exercising control, whether of self, of others, or of environment (“I,” “you,” and “It” – 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person).

Accommodation (or what Ken Wilber calls “communion”) is the submission of a soma to experience, generally via the senses – both internal and external.

So, for example, to till the earth to grow crops is an act of assimilation. Humans are the agents of that change imposed upon the earth.

To plan ones planting according to the seasons is accommodation. In ancient culture, fertility rituals enacted humans’ communion with the earth and its seasons.

Finally, Hanna went to lengths to portray the peculiarly human form of the archesoma as a species of learning, rather than as one that acts strictly by means of inherited, fixed behavior patterns (habits of perception and reaction determined by genetics). The transferal of behavior via genetics, which is so characteristic of non-human somas, which we have to some extent, may be called our phylogenetic inheritance. Hanna distinguished another form of inherited perception and behavior, one derived from human culture and transmitted by the family (nuclear and extended), which may be called ontogenetic inheritance, the inheritance of an individual from family and culture (which includes the mass-communications media, religious institutions and schools).

So the basic forms of somatic movement are purposed toward assimilation and accommodation, all of which are characterized by arising from rest (standing), facing experience, and handling it by means of relatively coordinated action.

Human Nature

Somewhere in all that, human nature may be found.

Unfortunately, the common assumption about human nature is that it consists of a range of behavior defined and consistent throughout the generations. “That’s just human nature,” people say. That assumption forgets completely about changes of behavior that define maturation and about our cultural inheritance, which has evolved considerably since the day when Real Estate meant a cave, some territory, a spear or club, a skin to wear, a tribe, and somewhere in there, a mate and animals, lots of animals; popular use of the term, “human nature,” relegates the definition of human nature to the lowest common survival denominator, and so seeks to explain human failings to live up to cultural expectations (morality and mores) that emerged in the evolution of human civilization. Thus, it overlooks the fact that, although we may be the ontogeny (progeny) of our ancestors up to the generation of our parents, later generations tend to exceed the earlier generations in learned development. More than that, it overlooks the function of maturation, learning, and personal evolution in the processes of assimilation and accommodation (in other words, adaptation).

What does all this have to do with Sensory-Motor Amnesia? Just this: the vast bulk of our cultural inheritance (never mind our phylogenetic inheritance), is hidden under the cloak of a kind of amnesia that causes us to carry our inheritance forward automatically. All of our automatic assumptions, attitudes, and the emotions that spring therefrom ride upon hidden underpinnings transmitted from generation to generation, much without any awareness on our part. I am not referring to schooling, which primarily passes on the knowledge of how to assimilate our environment into our lives. I am also not referring to indoctrination by example and coercive interaction, which forces us to accommodate to family, tribe, and society. I’m talking about another means of transmission, one that bypasses the conscious mind.

Somatic Contagion

Those who know me know that I have a “novel” sense of humor. If I am saying that SMA is not a disease, why am I using the word, “contagion”?

Ever seen someone yawn and felt the urge to yawn, yourself? Maybe right now? How about laughter – ever noticed that laughter is contagious? How about fear? How about hearing someone clear their throat and feeling the need to clear yours? Have you ever sat in church as the collection plate went by and felt

compelled to contribute? Attitudes are transmitted nonverbally the same way. Feelings, attitudes and behavior are contagious.

My point is that most of our operating assumptions exist without our awareness and come to our attention, generally, only when being learned or when violated. There is far more to human existence that is unconscious than is conscious. Hanna observed this fact in *Bodies in Revolt* when describing the automatic intelligence possessed by somas.

This observation of automaticity is telling. “Sensory-Motor Amnesia” implies set patterns of assimilating, accommodating, and timing the behaviors of standing, facing, turning toward or away, and of handling. As used, the term, Sensory-Motor Amnesia generally denotes pathological or maladaptive patterns of these actions, but if we are to understand the significance of SMA in its fuller (not necessarily fullest) sense, we must account for much more than pathological adaptations. We must account for every adaptation that involves habits of action of which the individual is unaware. In other words, Sensory-Motor Amnesia is not a negative thing; it is neutral.

SMA One Notch Higher

The term, Sensory-motor Amnesia, implies limitation to the fleshly realm of sensation and movement, but it applies equally to the realm of attention and intention. Attention and intention are the underpinnings of sensation and movement. Attention is the action of directing the senses; intention is the purpose underlying action of all kinds. In other words, attention and intention transcend sensation and movement and are the senior locus of control of sensation and movement. Attention and intention are properties of all living things, varying from species to species and from individual to individual only according to the objects to which they are directed and according to the complexity of action.

Just as movement is limited by Sensory-Motor Amnesia, just as sensory awareness is limited by it, so also are our intentions limited by it, and also our ability to direct our attention. The inherited habits of our lives, by limiting our lives, define our lives.

Having covered that most basic territory about the nature and scope of sensory-motor amnesia in the terms that Thomas Hanna defined to describe somas, let us now extend that understanding further. We are going to cover how sensory-motor amnesia forms as an inevitable and necessary process that supports the lives of somas and we’re going to consider the nature of *free will*, that most precious of religious concepts that gives leverage to controlling others through guilt.

How Sensory-Motor Amnesia Forms

Getting back to the idea of humanity as the *learning* species, in which individuals develop by the imposition of learning upon their genetic inheritance, we are in a position to get a look at how SMA forms.

In brief, two observations supply the explanation of SMA: (1) somas perceive changes and that's all we perceive, (2) what does not change fades from our awareness. New experience leads to familiarity, and then, to a fading of awareness of the new experience as we get used to it. When learning is involved, we learn, and then, with familiarity, we forget that we have learned. This is not to say that we forget *what* we have learned, but that we forget *that* we have learned it. As the novelty of an experience fades and as what has been learned becomes second-nature, the learned behaviors become automatic and amnesia takes over. When this happens, the soma can be said to have adapted to that new experience.

In other words, SMA is a kind of persistent motor (or behavior) pattern, but one which is changeable over time, rather than one which is passed phylogenetically in unchanged form from generation to generation.

By this means, the knowledge and ways of a culture and of a civilization are passed from generation to generation in a cumulative process, without it all having to be explicit. As I indicated, much learning and conditioning are passed from generation to generation and from person to person non-verbally, through "somatic contagion," which is then preserved via SMA. Hence, "bad backs (or bad tempers) run in my family."

Sensory-motor amnesia preserves civilization and allows it to develop, as well as preserves the limitations and liabilities of that civilization. Again, SMA is neutral.

Free Will

Discussions of free will almost always neglect the role of free attention in free will. More than that, such discussions almost always overlook how our cultural inheritance, in SMA, shapes how we exercise our will.

Generally, no matter how rational we may wish to believe we are, our decisions are based upon considerations that exist outside of (actually below) our threshold of awareness. Assumptions and values inherited from our culture and decisions we have made in the past color our perception of our present situation and shape our decisions. We are not generally aware of the process.

In other words, SMA has a lot to do with our decision-making. So much for free will. (Free will within involuntary/unconscious constraints isn't really free.)

Let's touch a little more upon "free attention."

Free Attention

Free attention is the capacity to place our attention where we want it and to have it stay there until we decide to move it elsewhere.

The opposite of free attention is distraction, the mind out of control, the "monkey mind," "the mad scientist," the internal monologue or dialogue, "TV commercial" mind.

Free attention permits us to discern more and more features of our experience. “The more you look, the more you see.” This is contemplation. The sanscrit-language term is “dhyana.”

Free attention permits us both to assimilate our experience (shape conditions to our liking) and to accommodate ourselves to experience (fit in).

Free attention is adaptive. It is the gateway of emergent consciousness.

On the other hand, SMA limits free attention. The limitations of perception and automatic behaviors that continue in SMA constitute a distraction. That distraction prevents us from discerning new features in our experience.

SMA is the Nature of Memory and of Unconsciousness

Thus, on one hand, SMA permits the adaptations of the past to be passed into the future with much-reduced labor (memory on “automatic”), and on the other hand, SMA impedes new development and adaptation to new conditions (unconsciousness).

Memory is a particularly interesting thing, when we consider that most of what we know is submerged until either experience or an intention to remember something causes it to surface. SMA is “beneath the water line” and some things are more submerged than others.

Because of the limiting nature of SMA as a memory function, its opposite may be termed, “awakening.”

This distinction casts new meaning to the term, “human nature.” It indicates that human nature is maintained by SMA but evolves by awakening from old patterns of SMA into new patterns of SMA (where certain “below the surface” content is now easier to get to the surface) and ultimately beyond SMA more and more into free attention and free will. Humanity is awakening.

Free Will and Free Attention

So Free Will and Free Attention go together.

An intriguing question might be, “How do we cultivate them both?” or “How do we awaken?”

Answer: Apply free attention to our habits of perception and action. In other words, “question assumptions” (of self) and “question authority” (of others).

Catch 22: It takes free attention and free will to have enough presence of mind to decide to question assumptions and habits of action.

In general, we don’t question what works for us. However, if we are wise, we do question what isn’t working for us. Even if we are not so wise, experience has a way of requiring us to question in that way.

The action of questioning what isn't working, however, is a kind of emergent consciousness. It isn't automatic; it isn't favored by traditional culture; it isn't favored by SMA.

Emergent Consciousness

Getting back to Thomas Hanna's description of the somatic evolution-revolution in *Bodies in Revolt*, Hanna discussed two kinds of perception, which he termed *analytical perception* and, the tongue-twister, *phenomenological perception*.

He described *analytical perception* as the kind of perception that identifies things of importance to us in this moment and distinguishes them from things-not-important. It puts important things in the foreground and non-important things in the background. The important things get noticed (focused-upon) and the non-important things don't get noticed.

Phenomenological perception he described as a kind of openly being present to experience without anything in particular grabbing attention. The word, *phenomenonological*, however "official" it may be, is, in my opinion, non-descriptive. I would like, therefore, to suggest the word, *emergent* in place of *phenomenonological*. The reason? *Analytical* or "particular" perception emerges out of *phenomenonological* perception, as foreground and background become differentiated from each other. Plus, *emergent* is simpler and has fewer syllables, making our brain less tired and our tongues, less confused.

A word or two about SMA and emergent consciousness. SMA operates in the domain of memory; emergent consciousness operates in an additional domain, the domain of *creativity*. Emergent consciousness awakens from SMA by recognizing its forms (forms of habituation) and by transcending them in the free ability *both to arrive at new perceptions of the present experience* (new accommodation) *and to generate new forms of experience* (new assimilation). That act of creative generation (originality) may involve integrating familiar things in a new way (e.g., new chemistries or technologies) or it may involve arriving at a new viewpoint and a new set of intentions in life.

SMA is particularly interesting because it operates in the domain of *analytical* perception and because it impedes *emergent* perception.

SMA tends to confine attention and intention to what has already been learned or experienced.

We see this mode of functioning vividly in the behavior of many scientists, who on one hand pride themselves upon emerging knowledge and on the other hand denies the status of knowledge to views that arise from origins other than science.

So, is science a disease? Some people say so – both people who are at an earlier developmental stage than the SMA that characterizes objective science and people who are at a later developmental stage!

But scientists, themselves, will be the first to try to convince you of the necessity of the form of SMA known as “scientific skepticism.”

In reality, we are seeing what happens when SMA is not recognized as SMA – impediments to adaptation result. When society-wide SMA prevails, it preserves desirable features of human behavior, but also prevents adaptation to change and the creativity necessary for continually evolving human well-being.

SMA is neutral, but to be stuck in SMA may lead to pathology and that is the gist of the view that SMA is a disease.

The human task is to master SMA. As an adaptive function, it is necessary and useful. But, like the mind, itself, SMA should be the servant and not the master of humanity. So far, it has mostly been the master of humanity, but necessary, like training wheels for a learning bicyclist, for safety.

Thomas Hanna developed a means of interfering with SMA, a clinical form of somatic education that enables humans to upgrade their SMA to a higher stage of freedom by overcoming habituation. The growth of authentic freedom of which he wrote has to do with the ability voluntarily to encounter one's own SMA in order to upgrade one's own functioning in life. It's a case of “include, transcend, and if necessary, relinquish the old and create the new.”

Now, we can see SMA in broader terms. SMA is not a disease. It's just another self-regulatory function of human beings, the master self-regulatory function by which human evolution and human destiny can be shaped voluntarily.

The greater frontier of humanity is not the growth of knowledge and the building of a technological civilization, but the mastery of the process that regulates the growth of knowledge and technology and of human consciousness, itself – the mastery of SMA. The mastery of SMA is the mastery of *education*, of *learning*, of *adaptation*, of attention and of free will, themselves.

Humanity, as the sole species on Earth capable of mastering SMA (as far as I know), is a grand experiment. The diversity we exhibit, though not all equally viable or functional, is the sign of that experiment as we fan out into innumerable lines of cultural and personal evolution and explore those lines.