Elliott Jaques on the Life and Behavior of Living Organisms

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I had the pleasure of getting to know Elliott Jaques and his wife, Kathryn Cason, over the course of several visits to his Gloucestor, Massachusetts home. We were introduced by Professor Douglas Kirsner, who initiated the meetings in light of the strong mutual interest Elliott and I shared in the functioning of complex social systems. I quickly began to look forward to these visits, which were a forum for Elliott to espouse his latest ideas, often those concerning complex management systems. Elliott had old-world courtesy, manners, and hospitality. We were housed in a old inn, which served the best lobster that I have ever eaten, freshly caught from multiple family traps on the waterfront, just outside the hotel. Elliott even had his own traps, as each home-owner had two traps by city ordinance. When he had guests, Elliott held court in a most humble yet aristocratic manner, in a townhouse full of all the things of importance to him, prominent among them an etching of Melanie Klein, his psychoanalyst.

The complexity of Elliott's break with psychoanalysis in 1952 is for others to discuss, but it is noteworthy that in this, his last book, he on more than one occasion engages Kleinian ideas, to bolster the fundamental contributions of this theory of the life and behavior of living organisms. So he comes full circle in an apparent rapprochement with psychoanalysis, a field he spoke of with some bitterness in our conversations. I for one am glad to not have been brought up as a psychoanalyst in the British Society, with its various schools one must chose from, even to this day, to have any sort of voice or status in the field.

I think it hurt Elliott that his ideas, which often questioned the importance of psychology in dysfunctional management systems, ostracized him, he felt, from the very field of study that marked the beginning of his career. Remember

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he had started as one of the bright young stars of the fledgling British society, as Pearl King notes in her article in this issue, one of a cadre of brilliant young analysts interested in research into family and social systems which also included John Bowlby. I am especially sorry that Elliott did not have the opportunity to use his remarkable charisma to inspire interest in young psychoanalysts in these areas where psychoanalysis has so much to offer.

And now to *The Life and Behavior of Living Organisms* (Jaques, 2002). Elliott asked me to review this book for the *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, and it gives me great pleasure and considerable honor to bring that undertaking to fruition. Like that of Freud, Elliott’s writing style is quite attractive to me, and it mirrors a common style in nineteenth-century philosophical writings: the writer sets up the reader as an open-minded skeptic, articulating the various arguments that could be raised against the propositions under discussion, and then answers them with courtesy, humor, and, at times, cutting sarcasm. Elliott’s writings in this vein are easy to read and his arguments flow succinctly, concisely, and reasonably. His examples are relevant and to the point, but the way he defines terms makes his writings both transparent and dense. He takes ordinary, ubiquitous words such as *work*, *capability*, *trust*, and *management* and defines them in an often idiosyncratic way. It is a blessing that Elliott included in this book a glossary of definitions of these terms.

Clearly, this book is Jaques’ swan-song, in the best sense. It summarizes his 50 years of work in the management sciences and his enormous experience in what he calls “consultancy”—consultation to organizations as an expert in the management sciences – as well as his vast experience as a prominent psychoanalyst and classically trained scholar.

Elliott takes his unique conceptual framework derived from the management sciences and applies it to living organisms in the broadest possible sense. He considers all living organisms, from amoeba to human. Interestingly, he was somewhat nonplussed by the role of plants in this hierarchy and, though he expresses an interest in plants, he confesses to little understanding of how they are alive. His ideas relating to other living organisms will be quite controversial and of interest to both biological scientists and philosophers of mind.

“Awareness” is viewed as a primal and basic feature of living organisms. As Elliott defines it: “[Living organisms] take note of either external or internal worlds, by whatever sensory means they have available for doing so . . . awareness is a property of all life but does not include or even imply the ability to describe in language what the organism is aware of.” (Jaques, 2002, p. 51). He goes on to point out that quite complex social behavior is possible in animals that are paralinguistic, including the capacity of 100,000 amoeba to cooperate to form a slime enabling the colony to survive, and lions who strategize the hunting of prey without obvious language.

In consideration of space issues and the extraordinarily comprehensive reach of Elliott’s book, I am going to take a fairly narrow approach to the discussion of this book and some of the ideas it has generated for me. My intent is to describe
in a very broad way the main propositions of the book and then take one limited area for more detailed comment.

Jaques proposes a general theory of life as a whole. His style is reminiscent of EO Wilson (1998), who occupies a chair of science, probably the last human being to occupy a chair of science in general rather than its innumerable subspecialties. Subspecialization has its price, including those like Wilson and Jaques, whose broad and deep grasp allows a perspective impossible for the more specialized. People like this are a buffer against the accidental power scientists have in our culture generated by the undue regard we have for things scientific. Bertrand Russell, the great British philosopher, analyzed this problem in his BBC Reith Lectures on "Authority and the Individual" (1949). He was worried that the lack of perspective of scientists on the big issues like nuclear war could lead to misuse of scientific data for political agendas. His fears are coming to pass in the USA today; for example, the presidential attitude to stem cell research.

All living organisms, from the microscopic to the large-scale, share what Jaques calls "intention bound work" (Jaques, 2002, p. 5); that is, organisms are engaged in creating goals, choosing how to work toward achieving them, and figuring out how to overcome obstacles on the way. From Jaques' point of view, intention and meaning are interchangeable terms, since the meaning of life is inextricably intermingled with intentions, or what an organism chooses to achieve. As he continues: "organisms live out and gain their true meaning through continuous choice," (Jaques, 2002, p. 5).

The book then dissects these processes and, in doing so, connects all living things in a way much more broadly than Darwin did. Jaques then adumbrates the ways in which even the most primitive unicellular creatures are, in broad strokes, similar to the most complex ones, reminding us of our connections with the most primitive and our legacy from and responsibility to them as part of the complex ecology of our planet. He implies that our intelligence and skills do not automatically give us the right to dominate other species, and that even if it did, to do so would not be advisable!

Roughly half of the book is essentially a blueprint for the effective functioning of human social systems, that these systems can focus in a goal-oriented way to the mutual benefit of all, with peace and without war and sadism. Jaques' writing is in no way political nor, for that matter, particularly activist. But he has a perspective that could help politicians to lay the groundwork for the possibility of global peace and a world without terrorism, without forcing democracy upon others or fighting wars in the name of peace.

One of Jaques' major contributions to management sciences is the concept of "capability:" the ability of a person to do work, that is, to function in a specific role at a given level at a particular time. It is a function of how much he or she values the work of the role, has the skilled knowledge for the tasks in the role, and the ability to carry out the behaviors in the role. Jaques emphasizes intellectual capabilities and structure of the system over psychological make-up, which has made his views quite controversial. In my various discussions
with him, he did admit that severe mental illness like psychosis will have dramatic effects on the management structure, but, to the end, he did not alter his position that the way the system is structured encourages pathology or efficiency in workers, not vice versa. In other words, the system causes the illness.

So, in many ways, Jaques is to management science what culturalists are to psychoanalytic thinking. In 1946 he moved from his work co-founding the Tavistock Institute in London, to a series of consultancies to organizations that offered them group dynamic processes to help improve their decision-making skills. Jaques claims he had an epiphany during these experiences, when he realized that such an approach was wrong. It was impossible, he felt, to arrive at a group decision over management decisions and that the problem was not in the psychological conflicts of the managers and chief executive officer (CEO), but in their attitude as to how decisions were made. He concluded then, that group decisions “cannot be made in a managerial hierarchy, since the CEO was held accountable by the board for their decisions,” (Jaques, 2001).

Beyond technical matters, such as the one described above, the book explores broader issues regarding the social system as the vehicle through which individuals gain individuality, by living with social constraints and achieving meaning and purpose through social interaction. This viewpoint is shared by the interpersonal school of Harry Stack Sullivan and more recent variations, for example the concept of mentalization by Fonagy et al. (2002). Jaques does not say, but implies, that the individual is defined in a Hegelian way, by dialectical interaction with the other from which develops social biofeedback, a sense of self and a separate theory of mind. I have chosen Chapter 17, titled “Values for a living world: Freedom, constraint and mutual trust and morals,” for more detailed commentary. Here, the Jaques as psychologist/psychoanalyst comes to the fore again, in what seems to be an original plan for peace for our world.

As I summarize Jaques’ arguments I wish to note in advance that, as with the system of management hierarchies, the question that is much more complex and still remains unanswered; it is not how to organize a social system so that it will work, but why people will not organize it in a way that enables it to work.

Jaques addresses this issue by pointing out a direction that might be motivating; a natural attraction to certain life- and culture-saving values. In that sense, for Jaques, the death instinct is not dominant, but instead perhaps altruistic. His sense of altruism comes from a tradition steeped in the rational man view of man and his future, which, from my perspective, is the huge question for this new century, as we face a world in which man, for the first time, has the power to literally destroy the planet. Value is defined by Jaques as “what ever a living organism chooses to be attracted by and to locomote towards,” (Jaques, 2002, p. 245). He distinguishes values driven by genes, which underlie the wish for each individual to survive, adapt, reproduce, and co-operate. These values then become increasingly complex and easily overridden in social animals. Jaques points out that human beings can replace
and obscure the gene-driven values with a variety of hedonistic ones. That is, humans create values that are not genetically inbuilt, as he calls it, but instead anti-survival. Jaques notes the interesting etymological link between the values of freedom, liberty, and justice via the requirement for mutual trust, defined as “relationships in which individuals can rely on each other, not to engage in doing damaging hurt, harmful, or injurious things to each other,” (Jaques, 2002, p. 251). And he points out that people do not have to like or love each other to trust each other, but for a social system to function, mutual trust is essential. What Jaques does not address so clearly is why people are unable to trust each other, except in so far as he feels that the problem lies within the organizational structure of the social system itself, although there is a syllogistic quality to this argument. There are exceptions: those who influence social systems dramatically, such as religiously motivated terrorists, whose salvation and real life is in heaven.

Jaques, then, defines freedom and constraint, in contrast to license, in a very interesting and creative way. He contends that for people to live together, to communicate, and to collaborate, there must be effective constraints, and that freedom does not mean the license to indulge personal whims without restriction. Jaques notes that in the past 4000 years, constraints have been handed down in the form of laws, policies, regulations, and procedures, beginning with the ten commandments etched in stone tablets, and satirized in George Orwell’s 1984.

On p. 250 Jaques touches on the contribution of his Kleinian studies, pointing to an understanding of how good constraints are influenced by unconscious constraints, thereby creating a balance of primal hatred, greed, and envy with a spirit of goodness, love, and justice. He points out that the binding of individuals together in a social system must be trusting, not coercive. Trust builds confidence and faith, which implies a suffering through with those you trust. On p. 352 he gives a brief idea of how Klein’s discoveries about the infant mind affect team behavior. Primitive envy of goodness in others spoils the capacity for trust. Greed spoils goodness in others, and trust through its insatiability. Among other psychological contributions derived from these Kleinian insights, Jaques is known for his phrase “paranoiagenic organizations,” that is, actions within organizations that foster mistrust or paranoia Bureaucracies, he felt, were a breeding ground for mistrust. No doubt Jaques intended to develop these ideas more fully, and it is perhaps part of his legacy to us to do just that.

Jaques then proceeds, in a revision of Kant, to create a perfect moral imperative (p. 253), which he defines as:

social constraints (laws, policies, and regulations) that can be universally valued. Because they set limits to behavior such that any and all spontaneous behaviors within those limits will support and induce mutual trust, understanding and helpfulness in relationships between people, and paranoiagenic (suspicion-induced) behaviors will be ruled out.
In a clarion call for democracy in the ideal sense, Jaques expresses it as “total freedom [in a democracy, my addition] is the experience of being in a social setting that is ordered by mutual trust-induced constraints.” If only man was rational and wanted to live in peace and freedom. Aristotle in *Politics* did not suggest that democracies were ideal forms of government. He noted that democracies are only as good as the leaders, and the leaders elected are the distillate of the envy of the workers, potentially leading to a striking mediocrity in leadership. According to Aristotle, eventually the workers, suffering from an excess of freedom, will elect a tyrant who will eventually be defeated, so the cycle again begins with constitutional monarchy.

Are we destined to always recreate ourselves like the phoenix from our own ashes of destruction, or can something different happen? These remarkable contributions stimulated in me a different view of an area of research of special interest, the role of human altruism in establishing growth and order in complex social systems. The persistent problem in social systems is that goodness alone does not appear to motivate people to change and grow. For example, economic theories of altruism suggest that egoism is often the basis for altruistic action. The need for the species to survive as a species (kin altruism) and even with a cross-species altruism, for several species to survive for the good of each other, for example as a food source (reciprocal altruism), seems such a limited idea of the human condition and it seems to make so little of untapped human potential, lying hidden in the frontal lobes.

A much-extended concept of survival value beyond the mere survival of the species for its own sake is necessary to explain the extraordinary prodigality and excesses of human growth, even just in the last century. Advanced social growth will only occur in the context of mutual trust and agreed-upon freedoms, allowing for a broadened and deepened perspective of the human race as part of a larger ecology of animate and inanimate things, a complex mutual interdependence necessitating compassion (awareness of suffering of others) which stimulates altruism (the actions to relieve suffering). The free and generous mixing and exchange of knowledge between cultures with varying degrees of expertise becomes a necessary precondition, not just for survival but for growth, a direction Julian Huxley called “psychosocial evolution.” Whether or not we have ended a Darwinian phase and instead will use our frontal lobes to continue to grow towards an ideal of increasing social complexity with compassion and peace, will require retaining Jaquesian freedom with mutually agreed-upon social constraints on the deep level of mutual trust in a worldwide requisite organization.

I thank Elliott Jaques for his brilliant concepts, which have proved to be great generators of ideas in others. The world has lost a true genius. As one of the editors-in-chief of the *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, I believe it is a great honor for us to be able to publish writings about his work, including some of his unpublished work, and to sponsor a book with John
Wiley that records in print commentary his contributions to an understanding of complex social and management systems.

In his seminal work, “Death and the mid-life crisis” (Jaques, 1965), Jaques refers to the task of resolving the mid-life crisis as a Proustian process “of turning to the past, working it over consciously in the present, and weaving it into the concretely limited future.” (Jaques, 2002, p. 513). This book is such a sculpting process. It is fitting to end my article with the quote from Dante’s Paradiso that Elliott used to end “Death and the mid-life crisis:” “But now my desire and will, like a wheel that spins with even motion, were revolved by the love that moves the sun and other stars.”

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