

Unistentialism: One Life, Many Expressions

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A Philosophical Framework for Remembering the Interconnected Self

Abstract

Unistentialism is a philosophical framework that posits ontological unity as the fundamental nature of reality. It asserts that there exists only one universal life, of which all individual beings are expressions or manifestations. This perspective bridges traditionally separate domains of thought including monism, systems theory, deep ecology, and mystical traditions, offering a unifying language for discussing interconnectedness in both academic and spiritual contexts. By recognizing the illusory nature of separation, Unistentialism provides a foundation for addressing contemporary challenges including ecological crisis, existential isolation, and the fragmentation of knowledge.

Introduction: Why This Matters Now

In an era marked by ecological collapse, social fragmentation, and existential uncertainty, humanity faces unprecedented challenges that stem, in part, from a perception of fundamental separation—separation from nature, from each other, and from a sense of meaningful belonging in the cosmos. The dominant worldview in industrialized societies has emphasized individualism, competition, and the exploitation of resources, leading to cascading crises across environmental, social, and psychological domains.

Unistentialism emerges as a response to these challenges, offering a moralphilosophical lens rooted in ontological unity. Rather than proposing entirely new ideas, it synthesizes ancient wisdom with contemporary scientific understanding, providing a coherent framework for recognizing the interconnected nature of existence. This recognition is not merely conceptual but has profound implications for how we understand identity, purpose, ethics, and our relationship with the living world.

Core Premises of Unistentialism

The One Life

The foundational premise of Unistentialism is that there is only one life—the life of the universe itself. This is not merely a poetic metaphor but an ontological claim about the nature of reality. All individual beings (humans, animals, plants, bacteria, etc.) are expressions or fragments of this singular cosmic life. Just as waves belong to one ocean,

all living entities are inseparable parts of one universal existence.

Identity as Expression, Not Separation

Conventional understanding often frames identity as separation—what makes one distinct from others. Unistentialism inverts this perspective, suggesting that individual identity is not a separation from the whole but rather a unique expression of it. Each being is a localized manifestation of the universal life, with boundaries that are functional rather than absolute.

Chaos as Unrecognized Order

What appears as chaos or randomness in the universe may be unrecognized order at a larger scale. The apparent separation and conflict between entities masks a deeper coherence in the whole system. This perspective aligns with systems thinking and complexity science, which recognize emergent order in seemingly chaotic processes.

Compassion as Systemic Response

From a Unistentialist perspective, compassion emerges naturally as the "system responding to itself." When one recognizes that harming others is literally harming oneself (since all are expressions of the same universal life), ethical behavior becomes grounded in ontological reality rather than abstract moral principles.

Theoretical Context and Lineage

Unistentialism draws from and resonates with multiple philosophical and spiritual traditions, synthesizing them into a coherent framework relevant to contemporary challenges.

Substance Monism (Spinoza)

Baruch Spinoza's philosophy held that only one substance (which he called "God or Nature") truly exists, with everything else being modes or expressions of that one reality (Spinoza, 1677/1992). Unistentialism echoes this monistic view, though it emphasizes the living, dynamic nature of this singular substance.

Deep Ecology (Arne Naess)

The deep ecology movement, particularly Arne Naess's concept of "Self-realization," recognizes the "oneness and interconnection of all life" and its cycles of change and transformation. Naess (1989) wrote plainly, "Life is fundamentally one," a statement that directly parallels Unistentialism's core premise.

Systems Theory (Fritjof Capra)

Systems theory emphasizes that wholes are more than the sum of their parts and that relationships interlink all components of a system. Capra and Luisi (2014) observed that "everything is fundamentally interconnected," providing scientific language that

supports Unistentialist premises.

Non-Dual Traditions (Buddhism/Advaita Vedanta)

Mystical traditions across cultures have long asserted the oneness of all existence. Hindu Vedanta's "Tat Tvam Asi" ("Thou art That"), Ibn Arabi's "wahdat al-wujūd" (the Unity of Being), and Rumi's (2004) poetic expressions all articulate insights that align with Unistentialism's central claims. Thich Nhat Hanh (1988) further developed the concept of "interbeing" to express the interdependent nature of all phenomena.

Process Theology/Panentheism

While not necessarily theistic, Unistentialism shares with panentheism the view that the divine or ultimate reality is expressed through the natural universe while also transcending it. This perspective, similar to ideas explored by Wilber (1996), provides a bridge between religious and naturalistic worldviews.

Contrasts with Other Philosophical Perspectives

To better understand Unistentialism's distinctive contributions, it is valuable to contrast it with other major philosophical positions.

Unistentialism vs. Materialism

Materialism holds that physical matter is the only or fundamental reality and that all

phenomena, including consciousness, are results of material interactions. In contrast, Unistentialism posits that reality is fundamentally unified and that consciousness and matter are expressions of the same underlying reality rather than separate domains or with one subordinate to the other.

Materialism tends toward reductionism, explaining complex phenomena by breaking them down into constituent physical parts and processes. Unistentialism, by contrast, embraces holism and sees reductionist explanations as useful but incomplete. It suggests that understanding the whole is not merely a matter of aggregating knowledge about parts but requires recognizing the inherent unity that precedes differentiation. The materialist worldview often leads to instrumental approaches to nature (viewing it primarily as a resource) and can struggle to provide compelling grounds for environmental ethics beyond human self-interest. Unistentialism offers a framework where ethical treatment of nature emerges from recognizing ontological unity rather than from utilitarian calculations.

Unistentialism vs. Cartesian Dualism

Cartesian dualism, following René Descartes, posits two fundamentally different substances: mind (*res cogitans*) and matter (*res extensa*). This creates a sharp division between subjective experience and the objective world. Unistentialism rejects this division, seeing mind and matter as expressions of a single underlying reality.

Dualism creates several philosophical problems, most notably the mind-body interaction problem (how two fundamentally different substances can causally affect each other) and the epistemological gap between subject and object. Unistentialism dissolves these problems by denying their premise. If mind and matter are expressions of the same reality, there is no fundamental interaction problem.

While contrasting with both materialism and Cartesian dualism, Unistentialism does not simply reject their insights but seeks to integrate them within a more comprehensive framework. This integrative approach allows Unistentialism to serve as a bridge between seemingly opposed philosophical traditions.

Modern Relevance and Implications

Unistentialism transforms our understanding across multiple domains of human experience and activity.

Ethics

By grounding ethics in ontological unity rather than abstract principles, Unistentialism suggests that ethical behavior flows naturally from accurate perception of reality. If harming others is literally harming oneself (since all are expressions of the same universal life), compassion becomes rational rather than merely virtuous.

Psychology of Identity

Unistentialism challenges the assumption of fundamental isolation that underlies much existential anxiety. While acknowledging the subjective experience of separation, it suggests that this experience is ultimately illusory. This reframing can address existential despair by recognizing a larger context of meaning: one's life gains significance as an integral expression of the universe's life.

Ecological Behavior

If there is only one life, then harming the ecosystem is literally harming oneself. This perspective, aligned with Lovelock's (1979) Gaia hypothesis, provides a philosophical foundation for environmental ethics that goes beyond utilitarian resource management to recognize intrinsic value in all living systems as expressions of the same universal life.

Spiritual Practice

While not necessarily religious, Unistentialism provides a philosophical basis for contemplative practices focused on recognizing interconnectedness. Meditation, mindfulness, and other practices that dissolve the sense of separate self align with Unistentialist principles without requiring adherence to specific religious doctrines.

Empirical Touchpoints in Psychology and

Neurophilosophy

Unistentialism's philosophical framework finds support and application in various empirical fields, particularly psychology and neuroscience.

Psychological Connections

Transpersonal Psychology

Research in transpersonal psychology provides empirical support for Unistentialist concepts through studies of peak experiences, altered states of consciousness, and self-transcendence. Maslow's research documented moments when individuals report transcending ordinary boundaries of self, experiencing unity with a larger whole—experiences that align with Unistentialism's premise of underlying unity.

Positive Psychology and Well-being

Multiple studies demonstrate that subjective well-being correlates with feelings of connectedness to others, nature, and something larger than oneself. Research on compassion meditation shows that recognizing connection with others activates reward centers in the brain and reduces stress markers, supporting Unistentialism's view that compassion emerges naturally from recognizing unity.

Developmental Psychology

Jane Loevinger's and Susanne Cook-Greuter's research on ego development identifies stages where individuals move from conventional self-identity to more expansive, systems-aware perspectives that recognize interdependence. This suggests that Unistentialist awareness may represent a developmental achievement rather than

merely a philosophical position.

Neurophilosophical Perspectives

Embodied Cognition

The embodied cognition paradigm demonstrates that cognition is fundamentally shaped by bodily experience and interaction with the environment, supporting Unistentialism's rejection of sharp mind-body distinctions. Work on the extended mind theory provides empirical support for the view that cognition extends beyond brain boundaries into the environment.

Neuroscience of Self and Boundaries

Studies of the brain's default mode network (DMN) show that self-referential processing is a specific brain state rather than a fundamental reality. DMN deactivation during meditation correlates with reported experiences of unity consciousness, suggesting a neurological basis for experiences central to Unistentialism.

Consciousness Studies

Theories like Integrated Information Theory propose that consciousness emerges from integrated information in complex systems, potentially supporting panpsychist aspects

of Unistentialism. Field theories of consciousness suggest consciousness may be better understood as a field-like phenomenon rather than localized to specific brain regions.

Clinical and Research Applications

Unistentialist perspectives have empirically supported applications in clinical settings, particularly through mindfulness-based interventions, existential therapy, and ecotherapy. These approaches, which foster awareness of interconnection, have demonstrated efficacy for conditions including depression, anxiety, and existential distress.

Academic and Public Engagement

Philosophical Framing

In academic contexts, Unistentialism can be positioned as a form of "metaphysical monism" or "priority monism," which asserts that the cosmos as a whole is the fundamental entity. It can be described as "a non-dual ontology that posits no fundamental separation between self and universe," situating it within established philosophical discourse.

Scientific Language

The philosophy can be presented using scientific metaphors like "all life shares a

common origin in the Big Bang; we are literally one family" or by referencing the "web of life" concept from ecology, extended to cosmic scale. Terms like "emergence" and "interdependence" from systems science (Capra & Luisi, 2014) can give academic credibility to essentially spiritual insights. Bohm's (1980) work on quantum physics and wholeness provides additional scientific grounding for these concepts.

Public Communication

For broader public engagement, Unistentialism's core message "we are all one" is highly shareable and already present in social media subcultures. Personal insights, metaphors, and visual demonstrations can effectively communicate the sense of being simultaneously individual yet part of a greater whole.

Conclusion: An Invitation to Expand

Unistentialism is not presented as a closed system but as a lens that invites participation and further development. It offers a framework for integrating insights from diverse domains—science, philosophy, spirituality, ecology—into a coherent understanding of reality that addresses contemporary challenges.

By recognizing the fundamental unity of existence, Unistentialism suggests that the path forward lies not in further separation and fragmentation but in remembering our essential interconnectedness. This remembering is not merely intellectual but has profound implications for how we live, relate, and find meaning in a complex and rapidly

changing world.

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