REMO H. LARGO

The Right Life

HUMAN INDIVIDUALITY AND ITS ROLE
IN OUR DEVELOPMENT, HEALTH
AND HAPPINESS

PENGUIN BOOKS

THE RIGHT LIFE

Remo Largo is a Swiss paediatrician and educationalist, internationally known for his long-term studies of child development. He has written several popular books on the topic. He lives in the Swiss village of Uetliburg with his three daughters.

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whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

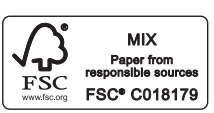
First published in German under the title *Das Passende Leben* by
Fischer Verlag GmbH, 2017
This translation first published by Allen Lane 2019
Published in Penguin Books 2020
001

Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–141–98533–6

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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For
Eva, Johanna and Kathrin
Jana and Remo
Aroǹ and Miguel
Brigitt

We are not the playthings of a blind external power, but the sum of the gifts, weaknesses and the other things we inherit, which a person brings with him. The goal of a meaningful life is to heed the call of this inner voice and to follow it as far as possible. The path would thus be: recognize yourself, but do not judge or desire to change yourself. Rather, let your life most closely approximate that predetermined shape, an inkling of which you already carry within you.

Hermann Hesse (1877–1962)[1]

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Introduction: Living Together as Individuals

Every human being is unique. Exercising your individuality amounts to the meaning of life.

> *Be true to thyself now that thou hast learnt what manner of man thou art.*
>
> *Pindar (c. 518–442 BC)*[1]

I love to observe people of every age – on a summer's day in Zurich's Old Town, for instance. The Münsterhof – Minster Square – is a constant bustle of strolling tourists, hurrying businesspeople, locals exchanging news and children playing. I am fascinated by the diversity in their faces and characters, the different ways that children, adults and old people interact with each other: the differences in their body language when the grown-ups greet one another or the little ones chase each other around; and the differences in the adults' interest in the venerable Fraumünster Church or the shop window displays. I never get bored of it. I am sure that no two people with exactly the same appearance and mannerisms will ever walk across this square, because I know that each and every one of the nearly 8 billion people who currently inhabit this planet is unique. This diversity is by no means unusual. Plants and animals are just as diverse within their own species. But what makes humans special, and what makes me an observer of them, is that we are the only ones – thanks to our highly developed intellectual abilities – who are aware of our own individuality and the diversity of our species.

We begin to recognize ourselves as independent beings from when we are just two years old. Over the years that follow, we learn to imagine and empathize with other people's emotions, thoughts and

behaviour. And in so doing we learn that every person has their own characteristics, talents and ideas. By the time we have started school, at the latest, we begin to compare ourselves with others, and we continue this behaviour all our lives. As adults we measure ourselves against other people, in terms of appearance, or professional and social standing, or performance and income. We delight in our strengths and deplore our weaknesses. We wonder how other people see us. And again and again we are thrown back on ourselves: what do we have to accept about ourselves as 'given', and what can we change if we just try a little harder? Over the years, however, we realize that there is no ideal path to follow through life – even if countless self-help books confidently promise us such a thing. And this book can't offer an 'ideal path', either. Rather, it is an attempt to give readers an understanding of human individuality and the various ways humans try to survive in this world. Because we still have difficulty with the concept of individuality. We think and behave as though we were all the same, with the same needs and the potential to achieve the same things. But this is a long way from the truth. There are no universally applicable rules for living in harmony with your environment. This is a challenge that we must all overcome in our own way.

Exercising our own individuality isn't the only challenge; we also have to deal with the diversity among our fellow humans and how different they are from us. Imagine if we were all the same: the same height and weight, the same looks, born with the same feelings and talents and the same needs. Life would be monotonous – though there are some problems that diversity creates within families, schools and societies that wouldn't exist. But without diversity *we* wouldn't exist either, and nor would any other life form. Diversity and individuality are the fundamental preconditions for all life.

Just how diverse humans are and how many difficulties this diversity brings with it are what made the most lasting impression on me in my thirty years as a researcher and practising developmental paediatrician. From 1974 to 2005, I had the privilege of continuing a large-scale research project begun in 1954 at the Zurich Children's Hospital. The Zurich Longitudinal Studies followed more than 700 normally developed children from birth to adulthood, in two consecutive generations, documenting the development of each child in

areas such as motor skills and language. Our motivation for undertaking such extremely labour-intensive studies was the conviction that only when we are familiar enough with the diversity and the typical patterns within normal development can we do justice to children's individual needs and abilities, and support their development effectively in our roles as parents, therapists and teachers. In fact, when we looked at the data on the various areas of development, it revealed that there was no ability, no behaviour, and no physical or mental characteristic that is developed to exactly the same level in all children. Children differ in terms of height and weight at every age. They require differing amounts of sleep and eat different quantities of food. Some children take their first steps at ten months; others don't walk until twenty months. Occasionally children are interested in letters when they are just three or four, though most learn to read between the ages of six and eight, and some still have difficulty reading well into adulthood. In every respect, this diversity increases steadily as children get older, and it continues to increase – though to a lesser extent – when they become adults. Some adults' understanding of numbers never gets beyond primary-school level, while others have logical and mathematical abilities that enable them to perform complex IT tasks.

This means that humans have very different resources with which to overcome the challenges, large and small, that life throws at them. Take Luca, for example, who came to my clinic with his parents. He felt he was a failure because, at the age of nine, he still couldn't read. He was painfully aware that he was unable to fulfil the expectations of his parents and teacher. Luca's sense of wellbeing was significantly impaired, and he reacted by becoming distracted and fidgety. In the course of my work, I have seen thousands of children like Luca, who have been brought to us because they deviated from the 'norm'. They were suffering from a wide variety of developmental and behavioural abnormalities such as waking up at night, poor coordination or underdeveloped social skills. Though they often didn't say as much, their parents and teachers wanted us to help bring these children back in line with the 'norm' – which, as our many years of experience had taught us, cannot be done. For us, the children's real problem was that, because they didn't conform to ideas of normality, they weren't

allowed to be 'themselves'. And so we tried to help them by understanding their individual needs and abilities. We would then discuss with parents and other care-givers how best to support each child with their individual strengths and weaknesses. It wasn't a simple undertaking; the adults had their own expectations of the child, their own ideas about his abilities and, above all, about the things he should have been able to achieve. But when we did manage to tune the adults into children's individual needs and abilities, the children's mental and physical condition improved and their willingness to learn increased.

Exercising your own individuality remains a constant challenge even in adulthood. Let's take someone who works for a bank, for example. Just like Luca, the schoolboy, her wellbeing is impaired when she can't achieve what she expects of herself in the workplace, and what her managers and colleagues demand of her. She feels overwhelmed, becomes exhausted and, in the worst-case scenario, starts to suffer from burnout. Her wellbeing won't usually be improved by trying to improve her performance, through additional training, for example – though that is the path employers often take. What she needs is for people to respect her individual talents and bring the demands of her work into line with her abilities as far as possible. The same problem of adaptation arises when people aren't being challenged enough; the sense that what they have achieved is unsatisfactory, or even meaningless, can also significantly impair their sense of wellbeing.

Several times a day, in both research and clinical practice, we were confronted with the question: why does one child feel comfortable and develop well, while another's wellbeing is affected, causing abnormal development? We almost always found the answers to this question in the degree of harmony between children and their environment. Thus, for example, we realized that sleep disorders frequently occur because parents have the wrong idea about how much sleep their child needs. At the age of twelve months some infants sleep for fourteen hours a night, while others find nine is enough. If the parents manage to tune into their child's individual sleep requirements, the sleep disorder disappears. Over the years, observations like these taught us to pay attention to whether there was harmony between the child and his environment, in all areas of development – and, if not,

to recognize how the child was being affected by the disharmony and how this could be remedied.

Questions of human individuality, and of the interaction between human beings and their environment, have essentially been my preoccupations since I was a teenager. At the age of thirteen I was confined to bed for eight weeks, and during this time I devoured Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. I was so fascinated by the empathetic and lifelike portrayal of different human characters and the dramas that played out between them that – once I was well again – I read my way through all the Russian literature that was available in German. Since that time, I have never stopped thinking about why people are so different, what shapes their lives, and what ingredients go to make up a human being. I began my medical degree at the University of Zurich in 1963, hoping it would give me a more profound understanding of humanity. But my degree was a strange experience for me: I encountered an immense number of mental and physical phenomena of all kinds, but my catalogue of questions grew longer rather than shorter, and I still hadn't gained a deeper insight into the essence of humanity. In the decades that followed I went in search of a holistic view of humans, engaging with the most diverse specialisms, in particular evolutionary biology, philosophy, pedagogy and psychology. I read the writings of geniuses like the philosopher Immanuel Kant and the evolutionary biologist Charles Darwin, the educator Maria Montessori and the psychologist Jean Piaget. But again and again I was disappointed. Their writings illuminated important partial aspects of the human condition, but I still didn't have a comprehensive view.

Over the course of forty years the things I have learned in the hospital and through my research, along with findings from diverse areas of study such as genetics and sociology, gradually came together – like pieces of a puzzle – to form a complete picture. I called it the Fit Principle. What it amounts to is that *every human, with their individual needs and talents, strives to live in harmony with their environment*. The Fit Principle rests on a holistic approach that sees the diversity of humans, the unique nature of each individual, and the interaction of individual and environment as the basis of human existence.

How successful are humans at exercising their individuality in harmony with their environment? More and more people are feeling overwhelmed by the struggle to live a fitting life. Children are expected to fulfil their parents' often exaggerated expectations, and schools place them under an unbearable pressure to achieve. Adults fight a constant battle to balance family life with work and the growing demands of the economy. Older people, especially those who live in care homes, suffer from a lack of emotional security and from social isolation. People of every age are feeling increasingly at odds with the world and less able to live a life that corresponds to their individual needs and talents. On an individual level, the Fit Principle can help people find their way back to their individuality. And, on a larger scale, it can help people to start reshaping their society and economy so that they can live as successful a life as possible.

This book describes a wide arc from the beginnings of evolution to modern humans, and the following brief overview of its ten parts is designed to give readers an introduction to the intrinsic connection that exists between subjects as different as evolutionary biology, nature and nurture, human development and the Fit Principle.

CHAPTER 1: HUMAN BIOLOGICAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Humans are related to every living thing on this planet.

There are many aspects of our own lives that we can only understand and explain to ourselves when we call to mind what has happened to us in the past. In the same way, a glance back to the distant origins of humanity can also help us to understand our (modern) nature.

In the Old Testament, in the first Book of Moses, the creation story tells us that man was made in a single day. The latest findings of anthropology, evolutionary biology and genetics have led to another – no less miraculous – conclusion. Over the course of 450 million years, humans emerged out of the relentless interaction between countless living things and their environments. We share a common origin with all living things on this earth and are therefore genetically related

(albeit to varying degrees) to insects, reptiles and mammals, and even to algae, palms and fruit trees. You might say our responsibility for the environment is written into our genes.

For 450 million years, all living things have striven to adapt themselves as well as possible to the conditions in which they live, in order to survive and reproduce. Two conditions must be fulfilled in order for this process to succeed: great diversity within a species, and a set of genes which is subject to constant change.

Changing genes, diversity within our species and the attempt to live in harmony with our environment are both the foundations of evolution and the basis of human existence. Our genetic material is put together in a new way every time a child is conceived, and that means every one of the world's nearly 8 billion people is unique. Every human spends their whole life adapting to the many and varied demands of the environment, in a way that will allow them to satisfy their needs to the greatest possible degree. This effort to live in harmony with the environment is at the very heart of the Fit Principle.

Modern humans are the only living creatures to have developed an irresistible and constant drive to develop their abilities and expand their knowledge. Our aim is not just to understand our environment, but to make use of it and ultimately gain mastery over it. The effort to achieve harmony with the environment has become a need to dominate the environment. Over the past 200 years, scientific, technological and economic progress has accelerated exponentially. There have been far more innovations in the last few decades than in the whole of human history before that period – and they have brought great rewards, but also increasingly worrying consequences for the environment and for ourselves. We no longer live in small communities, as our forefathers did for 200,000 years, but in an anonymous mass society.

Questions we will consider here:

- How can the incredible diversity among humans be explained? And why do all humans have a common genetic code, despite this diversity?
- How much does our genetic makeup change from one generation to the next?

- How did our cognitive, linguistic and social abilities develop? Where does our insatiable thirst for knowledge come from?
- What lies at the root of our irrepressible need to control our environment? How do we prevent ourselves from destroying life on earth, and ourselves along with it?

CHAPTER 2: THE COMBINED EFFECT OF GENETIC PREDISPOSITION AND ENVIRONMENT

What our genotype accomplishes,
our environment cannot achieve – and vice-versa.

What applies to evolution on a macro level also affects our own development on a micro level. From birth to old age, our lives consist of the constant interaction of our genotype (the sum total of all our genetic material, combined in a way that is unique to each of us) and our environment. And so we wonder: what part of our essential being is inherent or innate, and what do we acquire? It's a question that intrigues scientists and laypeople alike. Roger Federer is one of the most successful tennis players of all time. Why has he pulled off twenty Grand Slam victories? Because he has been blessed with an extraordinary talent, because he has trained a great deal, or because talent and the desire to train came together in him to form an ideal combination? If parents are particularly empathetic and caring with their children, is their behaviour rooted in a high innate social competency, or was that caring behaviour instilled in them as children? If young people devour a huge Harry Potter book in the space of a week, while some of their schoolmates have trouble deciphering a short column in a tabloid newspaper, is it because their innate reading abilities are miles apart, or because they've received different levels of support at home and school – or are both of these things true?

The importance we attach to genotype and environment respectively is also relevant to society. What is our attitude, for example, to equal opportunities in education? Do children achieve such different degrees of academic success because they have different levels of potential, or

because they receive different levels of encouragement at school? How do we create fairness in the economy when people with such different abilities have to meet the same demands? Do we attribute a great performance to talent, a good education or an exemplary attitude to work? What should we reward: talent, hard work or success? We behave differently as parents, teachers, employees and citizens depending on the significance we attach to genotype and environment.

The important questions to be considered here:

- What portion of our characteristics and abilities is inherent? What do we mean by our genetic predisposition, or genotype?
- What portion of our characteristics and abilities is acquired? What do we mean by the environment?
- What is an individual's potential for development, and where do their limits lie?
- How must our society and economy be constructed in order to do the greatest justice to the diversity of needs and talents among humans?

CHAPTER 3: DEVELOPING INTO UNIQUE INDIVIDUALS

Curiosity is the driving force of development.

Every child's development recapitulates a stretch of evolution – on fast-forward, so to speak. Children are born with a huge potential for development, which has evolved and been put to the test over many hundreds of thousands of years. They want to realize this potential. Just a few months after birth, a child starts to grasp objects and understand simple causal connections. At a year old, he can walk unaided and understand a few words. At three, he starts drawing and building houses out of Lego bricks. At five, the child's speech is largely error-free, and he has a basic understanding of numbers. Then he goes to school, and between that point and the end of puberty his abilities take another quantum leap.

When this child begins to grip, to speak, to read and do sums, an exceedingly complex process of maturation is taking place in his brain,

which can only be achieved if he is permitted to have the necessary experiences. To this end, he is equipped with a boundless curiosity and a genuine love of learning. He can't help but be interested in every aspect of his environment. He wants to encounter the world, to understand it as well as he can and to prove himself within it.

Insights into child development aren't just helpful for supporting a child in his development. They are also a wonderful point of access for improving our understanding of ourselves, and how we became what we are now. Why some of our abilities are so well honed, and others much less so. Why we have such great interest and such an astounding willingness to learn in some areas of life, and hardly any in others.

Important questions:

- What does brain maturation contribute to development? How significant are our experiences with our social and physical environment?
- What do we mean by curiosity and willingness to learn? How does a child acquire abilities, skills and knowledge?
- What forms can learning take? What does child-centred, lasting learning look like?
- What are we able to learn as adults, and what can we no longer learn? How does our adult learning behaviour differ from that of children?

CHAPTER 4: BASIC NEEDS THAT SHAPE OUR LIVES

Each human has a unique profile of needs.

Humans have always shared elementary needs, such as the need for nourishment, with the more highly developed animals. In the most recent phase of our evolutionary development, however, humans have expanded the ways in which we satisfy our needs to such a degree that these needs have taken on a completely new meaning. Humans don't just find food. For thousands of years we have been cooking and seasoning our food, and holding celebratory communal

meals on special occasions with elaborate table settings, wine and candles.

From the Fit Principle point of view, our lives are determined by six basic needs. Alongside the *satisfaction of physical needs*, we have a great *desire for emotional security*, as well as for *social recognition* and a secure position in the family, in our circle of friends, the world of work and in society. If we receive enough emotional security and recognition, we feel at ease and accepted. If we are sidelined, we feel rejected and emotionally insecure. Two other basic needs are the *desire to develop our talents* and *to achieve* the things for which our talents suit us. Children in particular have a strong urge to develop their abilities and acquire skills. The final basic need that drives us is the need for *existential security*. A regular income and security for ourselves and our possessions are very important to us. Unemployment, financial worries, or even the loss of our worldly goods and the threat to life and limb can have an extreme impact on our wellbeing.

Our mental and physical state depends on whether we manage to satisfy our basic needs sufficiently. Pursuing this aim takes up all our strength and time.

The following questions arise here:

- What do we mean by 'basic needs'? Where do they come from, and what do they consist of?
- How do our basic needs develop over our lifetimes, and how significant are they in the different periods of our lives?
- What feelings and ideas are connected with our basic needs? What are we trying to express with them?
- How different can these basic needs be among humans?

CHAPTER 5: COMPETENCIES WE WANT TO DEVELOP

Humans achieve countless things no other living creature is capable of.

Intelligence is frequently equated with intellectual ability and the intelligence quotient. But our mental abilities go far beyond what can be measured by established tests. We need to factor in motor skills, which are essential for craftsmen such as joiners, or for playing a musical instrument, and social behaviour, which encompasses the different forms of interaction between people and the ability to put yourself in another person's shoes and understand their behaviour.

Terms like 'intelligence' and 'intelligence quotient' also suggest a unified performance by the brain. Nowadays, however, we recognize a multiplicity of intellectual abilities. They are set at different levels not only from one person to another, but within individuals. This means there are people who are very talented linguists, but are much less good with numbers. For other people, it's the other way round. And that means a single figure like the intelligence quotient can't do justice to a person's individual profile of talents. This chapter introduces eight talents, or 'competencies'. Each of these competencies stems from abilities such as visual perception, which we have in common with more highly developed animals. Visual experiences give rise to our first ideas about space, then to linguistic concepts such as spatial prepositions, and finally to activities such as drawing or building houses.

Questions to be addressed here:

- What do we mean by competencies? What do they consist of?
- How do competencies develop into abilities, skills and ideas?
- How different can the level of these competencies be from one person to another?
- How different can the level of these competencies be within an individual?

CHAPTER 6: OUR IDEAS AND BELIEFS

Humans are the only living creatures that have to explain the world to themselves in order to live their lives.

Ideas enable us to think, understand things and use speech. For example, I am currently contemplating what ideas mean to me, and setting down my thoughts in these lines. We start trying to understand the world when we are very young. We create a world from the ideas we form based on our experiences with our environment. We explain the world to ourselves almost compulsively. We just can't help it. We can't imagine a life without ideas. The acquisition of ideas is what makes us into human beings.

We exchange our thoughts and beliefs with other people, and share common ideas, including those of a religious nature. Over the course of our lives, we take on some value judgements from the people around us. These values can exercise tremendous power over us and shape our lives within a community to a large extent. For centuries in many countries, the Catholic Church regulated human relationships with its dogma and morality. It insisted that people accept its ideas on the roles of men and women, and marriage and divorce. But even mighty works are abandoned or just lose their significance when living conditions undergo a fundamental change. Today, after more than 200 years of Enlightenment, people are guided more by secular than religious ideas, for example when it comes to the equality of men and women, or attitudes towards homosexuality.

We are guided by our ideas, and use them to justify our actions in everyday life just as we do in global politics. It is therefore worth examining the nature of our ideas and the influence they have:

- What do we mean by ideas? What distinguishes thoughts, memories, words and mathematical formulas?
- How are ideas formed during a child's development? How do our experiences within the family and in educational institutions influence our world of ideas?
- What is the significance for society of ideas such as equal opportunities? How do they come about? How do they win through?

- What is the significance of consciousness for the accessibility of our ideas? What *is* consciousness? Do ideas exist in the unconscious mind?

CHAPTER 7: FROM NATURE TO THE MAN-MADE ENVIRONMENT

In order to survive, all living things need not just any environment, but one suited to their needs.

For some decades now, we have been very concerned about our environment – and with good reason. Global CO_2 emissions reached a record level of 36 billion tons in 2013, which in the worst-case scenario will lead to a rise of several degrees in global temperatures this century. In the short period between 2000 and 2012, deforestation destroyed a 1100 x 1100 kilometre area of forest and the habitat of countless animals and plants. In a few decades, human cities and areas of habitation will have grown to cover an area the size of Australia. We are plundering the earth's mineral reserves, polluting its waters with chemicals and littering our environment with waste. It is high time we realized our responsibility towards the natural world. But we should ask ourselves not just what we are doing to nature, but how much we are damaging ourselves in the process. How much of the natural world do humans need in order to remain mentally and physically healthy? After all, our forebears spent the past 200,000 years living out in the natural world, not in sterile rooms. We were originally made for a life in nature.

In the space of just 200 years we have largely cut ourselves off from nature and created an environment shaped by scientific progress, technology and economics. This migration has also fundamentally changed the ancient structures of communal life. With the advent of industrialization, our traditional communities began to dissolve. Large families with numerous children and relatives shrank to become small families with one or two children and just a few relatives. Partners and parents increasingly live apart. The modest communities of our ancestors, allied to the natural world, have become anonymous mass societies based in cities.

Do we, especially as children, still feel secure under modern living conditions? As adults, do we still receive the recognition and affection we need? Can we really get by without a stable network of familiar people? Could it be that a lack of emotional security and social recognition has led to a rise in psychological disorders such as ADHD in children and depression in adults?

We must therefore examine not only our interaction with the natural world, but the influence that the environment we have created has on our lives:

- What is the significance of nature for our wellbeing?
- What effect has the transformation of our original communities into an anonymous mass society had on our wellbeing?
- What effect have reduced family structures had on child development? To what extent are adults dependent on reliable partnerships and a stable social network?
- What happens if we can no longer fulfil our emotional and social needs in modern society? What effects will that have on our mental and physical health?

CHAPTER 8: LIVING THE RIGHT LIFE: THE FIT PRINCIPLE

Being true to our individual nature is a challenge
that keeps us on our toes all our lives.

For millennia, humans have been trying to give meaning to life through religious and spiritual ideas, the humanities and, most recently, the ideas of neurobiology. And every religion, ideology and theory develops its own ideal image of the human. These ideas are frequently linked to lofty aspirations such as improving human nature or transforming the world into a paradise.

The Fit Principle is not designed to present another of these ideals. The intention is rather to come as close as possible – without an overarching metaphysical or theoretical structure – to the unique nature of individual human beings, and their effort to live the life that is right for them. The principle is based on the following core assumption,

which is taken from human evolutionary biology and which governs the everyday life of the individual:

> Every human strives to bring their individual needs and talents into harmony with their environment. The more successful they are in this, the greater their wellbeing, sense of self-worth and self-efficacy.

Of course, we don't always manage to live a fitting life, even if we strive for it day after day. Sometimes this is down to us: we have unrealistic expectations, don't understand our basic needs or don't make the best use of our competencies. Sometimes it's due to external factors in our lives – and often it's both. Again and again, we struggle back to our feet and set ourselves new challenges, to give our lives direction and purpose again. Over the course of our lives we get better at utilizing our strengths and accepting our weaknesses. We become more familiar with our needs and our potential for development, but also with our limitations, and in this way we gradually become our essential selves.

The Fit Principle is not about achieving as much as possible, reaching the highest social status or heaping up the most wealth. If humans could only be satisfied once they had reached the pinnacle of achievement, the overwhelming majority would sink into unhappiness. And that is by no means the case. Most people are satisfied if they can fulfil their individual needs sufficiently and realize most of their talents.

Questions to be answered on the Fit Principle:

- What does a Fit constellation look like? And what effect does it have on our wellbeing?
- How can we create harmony with our environment? What must we contribute to this, and what does the environment need to contribute?
- How can we understand our basic needs, competencies and ideas well enough to recognize our potential for development, but also to accept our limitations?
- How can we support others and help them live in harmony with their environment?

CHAPTER 9: MISFIT CONSTELLATIONS

The Fit Principle is all about tackling the Misfit situation
by questioning your current way of life.

No human manages to live in permanent harmony with their environment. Smaller Misfit situations, which an individual can overcome without any great difficulty, are part of everyday life. They have no impact on our physical or mental wellbeing. Rather, they are a constant incentive to re-examine our habitual behaviour, ideas and ambitions, and adapt to changing circumstances. But if demands on us (at work, for example) go beyond a certain level, which differs from person to person, they create a Misfit constellation that has repercussions. These constellations can make people feel helpless and powerless, and appear tense and anxious. They tend towards aggressive behaviour or become withdrawn. They may suffer from psychosomatic disorders such as stomach complaints, and increase their consumption of addictive substances like alcohol or prescription medication.

Misfit situations affect some people more than others, depending on which basic needs, competencies and ideas are involved, previous experience of Misfit situations, and the stresses and strains of their life in general. For an older person, losing a job can lead to a genuine life crisis, complete with existential anxiety and a feeling of having been devalued, while the stress remains low for a young adult in the same situation, as they have alternative career paths open to them.

There is a wealth of medical, psychological and esoteric treatments available for people going through any kind of Misfit situation. The Fit Principle doesn't just focus on relieving symptoms such as headaches or sleep disorders, but on tackling the Misfit situation itself. How much have I contributed to the current Misfit situation – by, for example, under- or over-estimating my competencies at work? What has the environment contributed, for example by overwhelming me with complicated tasks? What Misfit constellations have I already experienced, how did they come about and how did I deal with them?

Questions raised in Chapter 9:

- What do we mean by a Misfit? How can a Misfit arise? What are the causes behind it?
- How can we recognize a Misfit situation? How does it affect our wellbeing? How does it affect our physical health?
- How do we tackle a Misfit situation? What basic needs are affected? What expectations do we have of ourselves and the environment?
- How should we evaluate our current life situation? How does the environment contribute to a Misfit situation?
- How can we help others who find themselves in a Misfit situation?

CHAPTER 10: CHANGING TIMES

We have to think the impossible.

In an ideal society, a paradise on earth, all humans would be able to live a fitting life. In Fit Principle terms, this society would be set up in such a way that all people could live according to their individual nature. They would be able to satisfy their physical needs, and they would feel secure and provided for in their community. They would be able to develop their talents and achieve things they found fulfilling. They would feel existentially secure and not threatened in any way. And they would be able to live a life they themselves had determined in every respect.

Have we arrived in this paradise? In some respects, we have. The scientific, technological and economic progress of the past 100 years has vastly improved people's mental and physical wellbeing – even if this doesn't yet apply worldwide. In highly developed countries, the health of the population is better than it has ever been, and life expectancy has doubled. People have access to an advanced education system. In much of Europe, material comfort and peace have reigned for seventy years, an unprecedented length of time. And yet a general feeling of satisfaction has yet to emerge. There is a vague sense of unease in people's minds, the causes of which we are gradually starting to see.

One of these causes is the disregard for humans' emotional and social needs. Humans are deeply social animals whose wellbeing depends on a form of communal life that used to exist in earlier times: stable relationships with familiar people and a culture that creates a sense of identity and common purpose. Now, in the course of modern progress, within a few generations small communities have become a gigantic, anonymous society, for which we are not really suited. We find ourselves in constant competition with one another. We have to prove ourselves over and over as partners and workers, and we are always in danger of dropping out of all our relationships and becoming socially isolated. For most people, emotional security is only a temporary state of affairs. We lead our lives as if we could afford to do without enduring and sustainable interpersonal relationships, as if our mental wellbeing didn't depend on them. But this attitude is proving to be a fallacy. An anonymous, highly complex society and economy cannot create trusting relationships or fulfil our basic social and emotional needs. These things can only be done by a community of familiar people who form a reliable and sustainable network of relationships. It is high time we gave some serious thought to how we want to live together in future, but also to how we should deal with the other causes of general insecurity: the threat of mass unemployment, the meaninglessness of work and the loss of cultural values. To do this, we must imagine the supposedly impossible. Only then will we be ready to reshape our society and economy from the ground up, so that people can satisfy their own basic needs and exercise their individuality.

Questions we will address in Chapter 10:

- To what extent are people today shaped by the legacy of the past – for both good and ill? Are we really completely adaptable and suited to every kind of environment?
- How can we reconcile diversity and individuality with values such as equality and fairness? In view of the great diversity among humans, is a fair society even possible?
- How must a society be constituted so that people are able to exercise their individuality without destroying social cohesion?

- How can quality of life be maintained when automation and digitization are putting more and more people out of work?
- Within state and commercial institutions, who is actually responsible for the mental and physical wellbeing of billions of people?
- And the most important question: how can we strengthen the family so that people can recapture the joy of bringing up children? And how can we create new kinds of community, in which people can satisfy their basic needs better than in an anonymous mass society?

The diversity among living things, the unique nature of all living things and their constant struggle with their environment are some of the basic principles of evolution, and thus also of humanity and human nature. They are part of the human condition, and have found expression in religion, philosophy and art for millennia. In my clinical and scientific work, and of course in my own life, I have always been very moved by the efforts of individuals to bring their individuality into harmony with their environment. These experiences lie at the heart of this book.

1

Human Biological and Socio-cultural Development

Humans are related to every living thing on this planet.

> *There is g-randeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved.*
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> *Charles Darwin (1809–82)*[1]

It has always been one of the greatest puzzles for human beings: why do we, the world and the universe exist? The extraordinary naturalist Charles Darwin found no better answer than that already contained in the first book of Moses: God created the world. In 1863, in a letter to the famous botanist Joseph Hooker, Darwin wrote: 'It is mere rubbish thinking, at present, of origin of life; one might as well think of origin of matter.'[2]

The natural sciences have come up with no more convincing explanation to this day. But we do at least have an idea of what happened *after* the Creation, or – in modern terminology – after the Big Bang, 13.8 billion years ago. Astronomers and physicists are developing ever more sophisticated theories of the universe's expansion since that point, and how it separated into matter and energy. According to their findings, the earth was formed 4.6 billion years ago from gases condensing around the sun. The first evidence of simple life forms stems from around 3.8 billion years ago. Their home was the 'primordial

Figure 1.1: (*lower left*) Below the comment 'I think', Darwin made a sketch in his Notebook B of his first idea of the tree of life, 1837; (*right*) a current tree of life.

sea', and traces of them can still be found in fossil form today. In the mid-nineteenth century, Charles Darwin gave a scientific explanation of how life on earth diversified and developed from that point on. His theory of evolution continues to shape our understanding of how life developed. It provided the foundation stone for all discoveries made over the past 150 years in fields as diverse as embryology, evolutionary developmental biology, palaeontology and – above all – molecular genetics. Darwin's theory has been largely proven by researchers in these fields, who have also greatly expanded our knowledge about how all kinds of life forms developed, from bacteria to fungi, plants and animals, and of course humans.[3] The commonly used terms 'family tree' or 'tree of life' are misleading: the lines of descent don't lead off like branches from a trunk, but sprout in all directions like a bush.

The theory of evolution helps us to understand not only where we come from, but also how we became what we are today. It offers an explanation for why humans are related to all living things, such as bacteria and fungi, plants and other animals; how our physical and mental features like the hand or social behaviour developed; and why humans have managed to develop so quickly over what is, in evolutionary terms, an extremely short period of time. The theory of evolution also helps us find answers to the following questions:

How did the enormous diversity among humans come about, and why is each human being unique? Where does the insatiable human drive to understand and control the world come from? And why have humans developed into extremely social animals who also spend their lives attempting to live in harmony with their environment? The initial answers to these questions can be found in biological evolution. It represents the foundation from which socio-cultural evolution, which is what created humans as we know them, was able to develop.

ALL LIVING THINGS DEVELOPED OUT OF ONE ANOTHER

In 1863, when the British biologist Thomas Huxley first brought Charles Darwin's theory of evolution to public attention in his book

Man's Place in Nature, the idea that mankind might be descended from the apes caused an explosion of outrage. But through his wide-ranging observations of plants and animals, Darwin had made discoveries about the origins of man that went far beyond this. Erring on the side of caution, he kept these thoughts to himself, quite rightly fearing they would cause an even greater uproar and be rejected even more vehemently than Huxley's revelation. Darwin had ultimately come to the conclusion that all living things – plants and animals and humans, too – had a common ancestor.

Fossil evidence

Dating fossilized remains tells us at what point in the earth's history different species of plants and animals appeared, how long they existed for and when they vanished. The oldest bacterial life forms were discovered in a fossilized sea bed. They lived 3.8 billion years ago. The earliest evidence of single-celled organisms with an obvious nucleus (bacteria have no cells) comes from around 600 million years ago. These 'eukaryotes' developed into multicellular organisms at the time when the level of oxygen in the atmosphere began to rise from 3 per cent to today's level of 20 per cent. From this point on, palaeontologists are able to trace the origins of more and more new plant and animal species by means of fossil finds. They have discovered that vertebrates first appeared in the early to middle Cambrian period (540 million to 500 million years ago). Particularly significant finds are those that show transitional life forms, such as the dinosaur Archaeopteryx, a link between reptiles and birds, and the Tiktaalik, a link between bony fish and tetrapods.[4] Well-documented fossils of horse-like mammals illustrate the way in which, over the course of 65 million years, multi-toed browsing animals the size of foxes developed into modern horses, via many intermediate stages.

But research by palaeontologists has not only shown the evolutionary diversification of plants and animals. It has also revealed periods in which mass extinctions took place. In a relatively short period of time, geologically speaking, numerous groups of plants and animals were decimated or even disappeared from the earth altogether. In the

Permian period, around 250 million years ago, an estimated 90 per cent of all animal species were wiped out. At the end of the Cretaceous period, 65 million years ago, there was another mass extinction, probably as the result of a climate catastrophe caused by a huge meteorite strike, a massive volcanic eruption or another as yet unknown event. This catastrophe led to the extinction of the dinosaurs and numerous other animal species. But these mass extinctions, several of which have taken place over the course of evolution, didn't just destroy life; each time, new life was also created. After the last mass extinction 65 million years ago, entirely new species of plants and animals developed, including the ancestors of the mammals and birds we know today. Despite knowing nothing of mass extinction, Lucretius (*c.* 97–55 BC) captured this essential feature of nature when he wrote: 'Nothing is completely destroyed that we see living today. Nature creates new from old, and the life of the future blossoms in endless flux from the tomb of the past.'

Common features in developmental biology

Several hundred years ago, humans realized that the distinguishing features of living things didn't appear in haphazard combinations. Plants and animals could be grouped together according to their appearance and placed in hierarchies by looking at certain attributes. The Swedish naturalist Carl von Linné (1707–78) created the foundation for a modern botanical and zoological taxonomy with his binary system of classification. Charles Darwin regarded the similarities in how living things are constructed as a strong indication that they all had a common ancestor.

The zoologist Ernst Haeckel, a contemporary of Darwin's, observed that organisms like fish, tortoises and humans are very different once they are mature. But there are some similarities between them in their early embryonic stages. From this, he extrapolated the 'rule of recapitulation': in its development from fertilized egg to adult animal (ontogenesis), each living creature recapitulates the historical stages of evolution (phylogeny). The rule as Haeckel formulated it has been proved wrong, but it does hold true for the early embryonic stages of