

## How the Individualist-Competitive Model of Human Nature

### Perpetuates Arrogant Perception:

The current model for human nature maintains that we are individually capable of self-preservation and as such, the relationship between self and other is necessarily one of competition. The two main ideas of this model are that we are individualists and inherently competitive, such that I will refer to the model as the “Individualist-Competitive” model. In this model, it is said to be in human nature that we can preserve ourselves independently through only our inward perception of what we need to in order to survive and reproduce. There are many overlaps between the type of perception called for in this model and the type of perception explained through Lugones’ definition of Arrogant Perception. This paper will demonstrate that the Individualist-Competitive Model for human nature perpetuates Arrogant Perception, which is harmful for a loving society. As such, it calls for a modification to the model that preserves the aspect of individualism.

First, in order to see how the Individualist-Competitive model perpetuates Arrogant Perception, an understanding of Arrogant Perception is necessary. Arrogant perception, as first introduced by Marilyn Frye, is an inwardly focused way of perceiving others through their relation to *yourself*. At first glance it may seem like every type of perception would count as Arrogant Perception because all of the information that we take in about the world and about others can only be provided through our own senses—in other words—it seems impossible that we *not* perceive others through ourselves. However, this purely physical constraint on our perception, is very different from the kind of voluntary constraint on our perception that Frye is talking about. Specifically, she means the self-imposed constraint in which the Arrogant

Perceiver *filters* sensed information about the world and other people through how it relates back to *themselves*. With this inward-looking mode of perception, the only experiences and perspectives of the Arrogantly Perceived object that are acknowledged to exist are those few that relate to the perceiver only. In the extreme case that the Arrogantly Perceived object has no use to the perceiver, the entire person goes completely ignored.

Clearly, this is a harmful mode of perception to the people who are reduced to minimal aspects of themselves or who become completely invisible to society altogether. However, this is not the only way in which it proves harmful. Consider an Arrogant Perceiver in the field of science and you will see the epistemological consequences: Arrogant Perceivers arrive at an incomplete and insufficient picture of the world through their omission of knowledge by the inward-focused filtering process; the information that they filter out necessarily inhibits their capacity to discover epistemological truths no matter how carefully or specifically they collect their data about the world, simply because they do not consider the full story.

While Frye introduces this term in the context of women, Lugones builds on the definition to include not just women of one culture, but men and women across cultures—it is seen to be a universal phenomenon. Further, Lugones does not view people as falling into only one of the two categories, but presents the more nuanced picture that people are oftentimes both the Arrogant Perceiver and Arrogantly Perceived simultaneously. She shows this nuance through her reflection on her own life in which she recounts herself to have Arrogantly Perceived her mother whilst at the same time being Arrogantly Perceived by others, including Argentinian and White/Anglo men and women alike (Lugones, 4).

The nuance in which people can be *both* the Arrogant Perceiver and the Arrogantly Perceived motivates the question: why might people participate in this voluntary mode of

perception if they feel the direct harm of being invisible to other people or even entire societies themselves? To clarify what I mean when I say “voluntary”, I do not necessarily mean that it is a conscious choice made to be an Arrogant Perceiver, but rather “voluntary” in the way that we have the capacity to change this mode of perception through solutions proposed by Frye and Lugones, unlike the involuntary physical constraint of our inability to enter the bodies of other people and fully experience the world through them. In understanding why people perpetuate Arrogant Perception who are themselves victims of Arrogant Perception, Lugones’s account proves to be insightful.

Lugones shows that we are *taught* to Arrogantly Perceive others, even if we feel and know the harm that it does to ourselves. Arrogant Perception is *taught* to us by our predecessors who Arrogantly Perceive, and then reinforced by us when we follow in their suit. In this way, Arrogant Perception becomes so deeply embedded in societal roles that your gender, race, or role defines you to be an Arrogant Perceiver, Arrogantly Perceived, or both depending on the specific circumstance. Lugones writes, “Being taught to perceive arrogantly is part of being taught to be a woman of a certain class in both the U.S. and in Argentina, it is part of being taught to be a White/Anglo woman in the U.S., and it is part of being taught to be a woman in both places: to be both the agent and the object of arrogant perception” (Lugones, 5). This phenomenon in which Arrogant Perception constitutes one’s role in society seems to undermine my argument that it is voluntary, but a closer look at the example Lugones provides shows how one can, in fact, voluntarily free themselves from the cycle.

Lugones provides the example of her relationship with her mother in order to show how she freed herself from the cycle. As a child, Lugones recounts observing the abusive ways in which the four people who came before her loved their mother (Lugones, 5). It seems

counter-intuitive to talk of an abusive way of loving, but the notion becomes clearer as the example unfolds. From observing her siblings, Lugones naturally followed suit, engaging in the same abusive ways with her mother. She describes ‘taking her mother for granted,’ ‘demanding her services’, and ‘grafting her mother onto herself’ — a form of using up her mother until she admits that her mother had “little left of herself” (Lugones, 5). The same way that Lugones was taught by example to love her mother abusively, her mother had previously been taught to accept it as the proper form of love. Her mother had already equated her role in society as a mother with being *Arrogantly Perceived* — a martyr who gives up herself in the name of child-rearing. In the same way that Lugones admits that she “was taught to practice enslavement of [her] mother and to learn to become a slave through this practice,” we can understand her mother to have enslaved herself prior. Crucially, Lugones questioned this form of love for two reasons: she did not feel comfortable treating her mother this way, and she did not want to condition herself to this abusive treatment as a mother herself.

Essential to this realization that she did not want to follow the same cycle as her mother was an acknowledgement of *separation* from her mother. She explains this separation with a negative connotation when she writes, “...I could not identify with her, I could not see myself in her, I could not welcome her world, I saw myself as separate from her, a different sort of being not quite the same species” (Lugones, 6). This is explained with a negative connotation because as a child, not being able to identify with your mother is a difficult process, one that necessarily requires the child to abandon their mother that symbolizes protection. While it therefore seems to be a negative process in which one separates from their mother, it is revealed to instead be necessary for Lugones’ to break free from the cycle; Lugones no longer needed to “graft” her

mother onto herself and was free to act upon her own desires and interests that differed from her mothers.

While separation was thus a crucial step in the process towards freedom for Lugones, it is not to say that it was the *only* step. On the contrary, separation cannot be the only key to freedom if you consider the case that Lugones presents of White/Anglo women who Arrogantly Perceive women of color. In this example, Lugones claims that White/Anglo women take separation between women of color to the extreme, stating that “they ignore us, ostracized us, render us invisible...all of which points of course towards separatism...they want us out of their field of vision” (Lugones, 7). Then, she makes the explicit connection to the harm that this separation can do when she states, “...none of us loves each other in this independence” (Lugones, 8). In this way, separation is not always a step towards freedom, but one that can have the opposite effect by encouraging Arrogant Perception instead. A fine line is thus revealed: on the one hand, you need to establish separation from others and on the other hand you cannot go so far as to make others invisible. It might at first seem idealistic that we be able to balance separation and inclusion at the same time, but Lugones’ explanation of world-traveling demonstrates how one can do this effectively.

World traveling is the conscious or unconscious shift between personalities within oneself based upon the ‘world’ that they are in. Here, ‘world’ is a complicated term to grasp, but becomes clearer through examples. Consider a first example in which you travel to another country with a completely different language, with new customs and societal expectations than you are used to practicing in your country back home. This calls for you to shift who you are in order just to get around—you see yourself through the culture and context of that country and the people living in it. Consider a second example in which you interact with someone at work with

a completely different background than you, who has experiences that you cannot in any way relate to by virtue of never having been in the places of the world that they had been or had their same familial and life experiences. This still calls for you to shift you are in order to communicate even at a fundamental level—you imagine yourself through the life experiences of the coworker, you express sadness at what they take to be sad, and humor at what they take to be funny—even though it may not at all align with how you interpret those same experiences in the ‘world’ that you come from. Through both of these examples, the ‘worlds’ in which one travels between can be a physical setting or a fabrication of the mind, but regardless, both are just as ‘real’ in the same way that your personalities in both worlds are just as ‘real.’

The most important part of this process is its distinction from empathy. When one travels between worlds, they do not merely ‘put themselves into someone else’s shoes,’ as we are often taught to do when listening to others. That phrase would mean that you travel into the other person’s world *through yourself*—all you can do is offer an understanding of their world, problems, and experiences, still through the context of yourself—you would laugh at what you find funny in the situation, cry at what you find sad in the situation, and offer advice that *you* would follow. This is specifically not what ‘world-traveling’ entails. It should not be read as empathy in this way, but should instead be read as ‘putting the other person in their shoes.’ In this reading, you would let the other person explain their problems or experiences in the context of their world-view, and not yours. For example, you would put them in their own shoes so that they can cry at something even if in a different world, you would have laughed. Lugones explains this distinction, stating “The reason why I think that traveling to someone’s “world” is a way of identifying with them is because by traveling to their ‘world,’ we can understand *what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes*” (Lugones, 17) . Therefore, there is a

crucial distinction between empathy — traveling into someone’s world *through yourself*—and “world-traveling” — traveling into someone’s world *through someone different*.

In this way, ‘world-traveling’ is the solution to balancing the need for both separation while maintaining a sensitive awareness of others that freed Lugones from her Arrogant Perception of her mother and the track that she was on to be Arrogantly Perceived as a mother just the same. This is seen to resolve the problem, because when someone participates in ‘world-traveling,’ they put themselves on an equal footing with the other person so as to see how they are different if all else—the world, and the customs of the world—is the same. This allows the traveler to acknowledge their independence while still acknowledging that there are world-views besides their own. Lugones explains this concisely, stating, “Seeing myself in her through traveling to her ‘world’ meant seeing how different from her I am in her ‘world.’” (Lugones, 18)

In understanding Lugones’ expanded definition of Arrogant Perception—the universal phenomenon of inwardly perceiving individuals— as well as her solution to free both the perceiver who obtains an insufficient understanding of the world around them and the perceived who goes unnoticed to the world around them—a solution of ‘world-traveling’ — it becomes clear that the ability to see outside of oneself in the form of outward perception is essential for a ‘loving society.’ Not only would this ‘loving society’ include more perspectives and backgrounds in order to prevent systematic suppression through sheer dismissal of those who do not exist in relation to you, but furthermore, it would facilitate truths that are closer to being epistemologically significant by seeing a bigger picture with inherently more information.

Although the requirement of outward perception is proven to be crucial to a ‘loving society’ in this way, it is instead completely ignored in our current model of human nature: the

“Individualist-Competitive” model. Moreover, the model not only ignores the need for outward perception, but *encourages* inward perception—the exact feature of Arrogant Perception. The model is able to encourage inward perception by virtue of being a statement of human nature shrouded in scientific rhetoric. As such, it is difficult to overturn. In this way, whatever the statement decrees to be inherent to us or in our nature is synonymous with the way we now ought to act—otherwise, something is wrong with us. More than just encouraging harmful behavior, however, this model of human nature is also deeply pessimistic, especially when read through the words that Keller quotes by Ghiselin:

“The economy of nature is competitive from beginning to end...No hint of genuine charity ameliorates our vision of society, once sentimentalism has been laid aside,... Given a full chance to act for his own interest, nothing but expediency will restrain [an organism] from brutalizing, from maiming, from murdering his brother, his mate, his parent, or his child. Scratch an ‘altruist’ and watch a ‘hypocrite’ bleed.” (1974: 247)

With this power, the model encourages inward perception as explained by Keller in her “Language and Ideology in Evolutionary Theory.” Here, she describes the relationship between self and other in the “Individualist-Competitive” model to be one in which the genes that encode our actions are “sealed off from the outside world, communicating with it by torturous indirect routes, manipulating it by remote control” (Keller, 155). By extension of our genes, this implies that we can function completely fine by ourselves—everything that keeps us alive exists within us. In another quote, she explains the representation of the Hobbesian man in the “Individualist-Competitive” model:

“The Hobbesian man: simultaneously autonomous and oppositional, connected to the world in which it finds itself not by the promise of life and growth but primarily by the threat of death and loss, its first and foremost need being the defense of its boundaries. In psychological terms, we might say that such an individual betrays an idealized conception of autonomy: one that presupposes a radical conception of self and that simultaneously attributes the relation between



self and other an automatic negative valence, a relation, finally not so much of independence as of dynamic opposition.” (156)

Here, she affirms the notion that the organism in the “Individualist-Competitive” model is sealed-off from the outside world by a defensive wall. Crucially, it is not just that the self and other are separate, but it is that they are pitted against each other.

Because this model is therefore opposite to what we would expect to see in a “loving society” that requires outward perception, the question can be asked why a model of mutualism or co-existence does not replace it. Keller explains that to this question, evolutionary theorists answer “How else could it, realistically, be? Yes of course, mutualist interactions occur in nature, but they are not only rare, they are necessarily secondary” (Keller, 159). Keller attributes the difficulty of co-existence models to gain traction in the field to ‘tacit language,’ or specifically, the use of the colloquial term ‘competition’ — aggressive combat in the scientific context to mean any sort of struggle whether it be aggressive or even peaceful. The latter would be called competitive coexistence. Keller explains that doing so is a “widespread investment of an ostensibly neutral technical term with a quite different set of connotations associated with its colloquial meaning” (Keller, 161)

Keller further explains a second way in which the term competition causes problems in the model, namely, by a set of assumptions that in a world of scarcity, competition between individuals is inevitable. The possibility that someone can be an individual without being competitive is completely overlooked. She writes that the model is written “...as if autonomy and competition were semantically equivalent, collapsed into one by that fundamentally ambiguous concept, self interest” (155). She nevertheless acknowledges why it is understandable that these words be conflated in this way, pulling from the notion of scarcity.

There is no denying that resources are limited and therefore, scarce. In the face of scarcity, people do in fact compete for what they need in order to survive such that competition does logically follow from scarcity. Crucially, however, this view of scarcity relies on underlying assumptions that are not actually representative of the world that we live in. Specifically, Keller points out that we do not live in a world where my eating dinner necessitates your starvation (162). In this way, it is understandable that one makes the assumption from scarcity to competition if scarcity means that the resource attained by one organism prevents the second organism's ability to attain resources, but this is not the case for us. Rather, for us, survival of the fittest would be closer to Paul Colinvaux's proposal that "Natural selection designs different kinds of animals and plants so that they *avoid* competition. A fit animal is not one that fights well, but one that avoids fighting altogether" (1978:144). This defends the idea that we can identify as individuals without inherently being competitive—even in a world where resources are finite and scarce.

In order to modify the "Individualist-Competitive" model in a way that would account for the outward perception called upon by Lugones in her solution to Arrogant Perception, one should maintain the "individualist" aspect, but replace the "competitive" aspect. First, Lugones explains that there is nothing wrong with identifying yourself as separate from those around you and embracing individuality. However, when maintaining this term, it is crucial *not* to see it to be completely equivalent to completely self-reliant, but to acknowledge the dependency relation that Lugones puts forth when she states, "We are fully dependent on each other for the possibility of being understood and without this understanding, we are not intelligible, we don't make sense. We are not solid, visible, integrated; we are lacking." (Lugones, 8). Second, we should omit the

term “competitive” which has been demonstrated by Keller to be taken colloquially in the scientific context such that it is responsible for distorting the conclusion of the theory.

In conclusion, understanding Lugone’s definition and resolution to Arrogant Perception demonstrates that in order to have a “loving society” in which people are seen to exist, outward perception through the ability of world-traveling is necessary. In a comparison to the language of the “Individual-Competitive” model explained by Keller, it is revealed that our model for human nature is not consistent with the need for outward perception but instead states that we are completely individualistic, capable of existing through ourselves entirely, and therefore, build walls around ourselves for safety from others who are similarly acting in their own self-interest and fighting over scarce resources. After pointing out the flaws with this model—the colloquial use of the term ‘competition’, and the underlying assumptions associated with ‘scarcity,’ it was finally revealed that the model was not epistemologically significant in defining humans to be insular. Rather, it called upon modification by maintaining the individualism, but understood in a specific way, while omitting the competitive aspect.

Works Cited:

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