

The Language of Nature and Personal Integration

Anthropological, Emotional and Therapeutic Bases According to Magda Arnold's Theory of Emotions

María D. Barroso-López,¹ Paloma Alonso-Stuyck²

1. Universitat Abat Oliba CEU

mbarrosol@uao.es  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6659-0777>

2. Universitat Abat Oliba CEU

palonsos895@uao.es  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1976-7653>

DOI: [10.17421/2498-9746-12-03](https://doi.org/10.17421/2498-9746-12-03)

SUBMITTED: 31.03.2026 – REVIEWED: 15.07.2026 – ACCEPTED: 21.07.2026

Abstract

The expression “language of nature” underscores that human nature is not a neutral biological fact but a meaningful structure oriented towards the good. Three fundamental tendencies—preservation, connection and knowledge—are distinguished, which, in the individual, require learning and deliberation. These tendencies underlie educable dimensions (executive, affective and cognitive) whose integration depends on the virtues. According to Magda Arnold, emotion reflects the evaluation of that which affects the self and operates as a functional signal for self-regulation. This framework allows us to understand the relationship between nature, virtue and mental health, and provides a foundation for educational and therapeutic applications aimed at human flourishing.

Keywords: Language of nature, Personal integration, Emotions, Virtues, Magda Arnold, Psychological therapy.

CONTENTS

1	Listening to the “Language of Nature”	44
2	How Can We Listen to the Language of Nature?	46
3	The Aristotelian-Thomistic Teleological Perspective	47
4	An Integrative Grammar: Assuming and Humanizing by Elevating	49
5	Educable Tendencies and Dimensions: The Unifying Function of Virtue	50
6	The Compass of Change: The Cognitive-Affective System	52
7	Magda Arnold: Emotion, Identity (Self-Ideal) and Personality in Psychotherapy	53
8	Values, Motives, Attitudes: Towards the Ideal Self as the Axis of Identity	57
9	Emotions as Guardians of the Ideal Self: A Compass for Self-Regulation	58
10	Conclusions	60

1 LISTENING TO THE “LANGUAGE OF NATURE”

It is important to clarify the status of the expression “language of nature.” In this paper, this expression is not used as a strictly technical term in contemporary psychology, but rather as a synthetic formulation that draws on the Thomistic tradition of natural law and on the reflections of Benedict XVI, who associates listening to nature with the recovery of practical reason in the face of legal positivism.¹ The Thomistic doctrine of natural inclinations provides the anthropological basis for this formulation.² In this sense, the expression is proposed here as an interpretative framework that integrates these sources. The specific contribution of this work lies in placing this anthropological grammar in dialogue with Magda Arnold’s theory of emotion,³ especially with her notion of appraisal and her account of the self-ideal as a principle of personal integration.

Within this framework, human nature is understood as possessing a structure or order that guides human action towards fulfilment: the human person does not arbitrarily create meaning, but discovers it as inscribed in nature and may freely follow or reject it. Listening to this grammar, the order towards the fulfilment that permeates the entire cosmos, entails simultaneously testing human greatness and its limitations. From this perspective, the orientation towards the Good should not be reduced to mere obedience to external laws, even though such laws may express and protect goods.

If human nature may be read as a “language”—that is, meaning inscribed in vital, affective and spiritual dynamics—then the moral compass does not proceed from an external command but from refining the conscience⁴ so that it recognizes and embraces that meaning. Listening to the language of nature is equivalent to learning to read within oneself the direction towards personal fulfilment, which is not to be confused with capricious self-affirmation, but rather with the capacity to discover—not invent—the concrete form of the good possible here and now.

In the universal quest for personal fulfilment, conscience can be regarded as practical judgment, reason as the discernment of ends, and affectivity as the evaluative resonance of what promotes or harms happiness. Thus, emotion—as described by Arnold—manifests a personal evaluation, an internal indicator of the congruence or dissonance between choices and the good towards which human nature tends. This aligns with Magda Arnold’s idea that emotion arises from the

¹Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, June 29, 2009, n. 48; BENEDICT XVI, *Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI in the Bundestag*, Reichstag Building, Berlin, September 22, 2011.

²THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

³M. B. ARNOLD, *Emotion and Personality. Vol. 1: Psychological Aspects*, Columbia University Press, New York 1960.

⁴N. BUZZONE, *Afinar la conciencia. Educación y búsqueda de sentido a partir de Viktor E. Frankl*, San Pablo, Buenos Aires 2011.

personal appraisal of what affects the self; nature ‘speaks’ through tendencies and emotion reacts to how experiences are appraised, i.e. whether they favour or hinder fulfilment.⁵

The importance of teaching people how to read the language of nature takes on even greater significance at a time when human beings are receiving so many external inputs, when it seems that AI should be making decisions rather than people, and when the market economy offers countless substitutes for the good. Added to this is the fact that, while innate drives orient human beings towards the pursuit of good, they simultaneously experience a resistance to inner integration, a gap between the intellectual and operational levels.⁶ In this scenario, the grammar of nature can serve as a criterion for discerning what makes a human being truly good and what practical implications follow from this. Education in the virtues—the ordering of desires—then appears as an essential resource for achieving human fulfilment.⁷

On the basis of Harter’s self-system,⁸ it may be suggested, within the integrative framework proposed here, that the inner integration of the person, from a psychological perspective, can be achieved through education in virtues. Each dimension of the self-system—self-esteem, self-control and self-awareness—can be said to be based on the educable dimensions of personality—ffective, executive and cognitive—and that these are ordered and therefore can be integrated thanks to the cardinal virtues of temperance, fortitude and prudence. From a psychoeducational perspective, this can be translated into programmes designed to strengthen self-awareness—the realistic acceptance of oneself—self-esteem—the positive evaluation of oneself—and self-control—necessary for good behaviour.

The systemic perspective would add to all of this the context in which the relational dimension of the human being unfolds and the cardinal virtue that orders it: justice. When this integration is not achieved, since the person is free to contradict these natural tendencies, an internal, emotional and existential conflict arises.⁹ For example, a person who perceives, as a result of their appraisal, any limit as a threat to their identity might experience extreme self-criticism. They would then need to re-evaluate this limit in light of Nature’s grammar, which includes imperfection—and with it, vulnerability, the need for rest and gradual personal growth. This re-appraisal would gradually shift their anxious emotional

⁵M. B. ARNOLD, *Emotion and Personality*, vol. 1, cit.

⁶ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 13, 1102a26-1102b28.

⁷J. L. LORDA, *Moral. El arte de vivir*, Palabra, Madrid 2017.

⁸Cf. S. HARTER, *The Development of Self-Representations*, in *Handbook of Child Psychology: Social, Emotional, and Personality Development*, ed. by W. Damon, N. Eisenberg, Wiley, New York 1998, pp. 553-617.

⁹M. B. Arnold, J. A. Gasson (eds.), *The Human Person: An Approach to an Integral Theory of Personality*, The Ronald Press Company, New York 1954.

state towards a compassionate, serene realism.

2 HOW CAN WE LISTEN TO THE LANGUAGE OF NATURE?

Listening to nature itself seems to run counter to the rapid pace that characterizes our society. The rise of mindfulness reflects, in part, a reaction to overstimulation and the resulting fragmentation of attention; a desire to connect with natural dynamics in pursuit of a more integrated life.

Listening to the language of nature requires distinguishing between the anthropological foundation of the proposal and the psychological analogies that can illuminate it. The main foundation lies in the Thomistic tradition of natural law, especially in Aquinas's classical formulation of natural inclinations in *Summa Theologiae*¹⁰ according to which the person is oriented towards basic goods: preserving life, procreating and caring for children, knowing the truth and living in society. Aquinas's account of natural inclinations can be further illuminated by Aristotelian insights concerning character formation, virtue and prudence¹¹. From a psychological perspective, Arnold¹² allows us to understand how these orientations manifest in concrete experience through emotional appraisal: emotion expresses how a situation is perceived as favourable or unfavourable to the self and its goals. Within this framework, authors such as Lersch,¹³ McClelland¹⁴ and Harter¹⁵ can be interpreted as partial convergences regarding the existence of dynamics of self-preservation, connection, achievement, meaning and self-regulation but do not constitute the primary source of the proposed triad.

The cosmic perspective—that of ecological niche creation—reveals that the tendency towards fulfilment is present throughout nature through the same tendencies experienced by human beings—the Trinitarian DNA of revelation. The first two—preservation and verification, or survival—are achieved instinctively in plants and animals, while in human beings, rational nature assumes and elevates these tendencies, and thus learning replaces instinct. Rational nature spiritualizes them, so that eating or movement becomes an art. The social character of human nature is expressed in the cosmic dimension through the Butterfly Effect, that delicate interrelation and mutual dependence of all creation.

From this perspective, the classical tendencies towards preservation, procreation and rational-social fulfilment can be interpreted as dimensions of human

¹⁰THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 94, a. 2; A. RODRÍGUEZ LUÑO, *Ética general*, EUNSA, Pamplona 2010.

¹¹ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 13, 1102b13-1103a10; II, 1, 1103a14-26.

¹²Cf. M. B. Arnold, J. A. Gasson (eds.), *The Human Person*, cit.

¹³Cf. P. LERSCH, *The Structure of Personality (Aufbau der Person)*, Scientia, Barcelona 1968.

¹⁴Cf. D. C. MCCLELLAND, *Human Motivation*, Scott, Foresman and Co., Glenview (IL) 1985.

¹⁵Cf. S. HARTER, *The Development of Self-Representations*, cit.

life that open the person to beauty, goodness, truth and connection. This is the sense in which they may be described as a “language of human nature” that calls for attentive interpretation. Shaping existence according to the grammar of nature entails something crucial: listening to the intelligible order of basic dynamics (inclinations, motivations, aspirations toward truth, goodness, beauty and communion). It is not a question of following a mechanical script but of learning the alphabet with which freedom can ‘write’ a fulfilled life. This does not mean that a person is determined by biological impulses; rather, it implies that their freedom does not start from scratch: they are born already situated in a natural condition, with needs and openness that point towards the fulfilment of being. And the way to listen to them is to integrate them in such a way that none of the tendencies/faculties negates the others.

Learning to read this grammar entails at least three consequences: Firstly, it avoids symmetrical reductionisms: biologism—believing that ‘what is natural’ is simply what ‘comes naturally to me’—and voluntaristic constructivism—believing that meaning is entirely invented through willpower. An integrated reading of human nature recognizes that inclinations guide, but do not replace, deliberation. Secondly, it transforms affectivity into an ally of discernment: well-cultivated emotions are not noise but signs of whether something fosters or harms our own fulfilment. When we act against fundamental goods, an internal ‘echo’ often appears: tension, dissonance, sadness, anxiety or emptiness that reflect the inner fracture. And thirdly, it makes freedom as self-governance possible: freedom does not consist of ‘being able to choose anything’, but rather of being able to choose the good that perfects us.

From what has been presented so far, hearing the language of nature may be understood as presupposing the integration of personal dimensions; this coherence requires deliberation (cognitive-affective unity) and habits (virtues, operational perfection). Arnold offers an integrated view of the cognitive and affective dimensions, which has been termed the cognitive-affective system—the human way of knowing that underlies all behaviour.

3 THE ARISTOTELIAN-THOMISTIC TELEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Aristotle, when referring to the order of human nature, emphasizes that it is directed towards an end (*télos*), towards a form of fulfilment—*eudaimonia*. He observes that human beings experience an internal tension between reason and appetite. Moral development therefore requires the cultivation of virtue, through which the non-rational dimensions of the person are progressively educated and brought into harmony with reason.¹⁶ To restore this order and

¹⁶ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 13, 1102a26-1102b28.

reach its fulfilment—human flourishing—each person faces the challenge of inner governance.

Among the consequences of this reality, he highlights, first and foremost, that nature's orientation towards the good does not determine the person, who must choose freely. These desires for partial goods (life, friendship, knowledge, etc.), if absolutized, break inner unity. Hence, Aristotle distinguishes between the simple capacity to desire (*órexis*: appetite) and the stable configuration of character (*héxis*: habit) that allows one to desire in an ordered way. He suggests that internal dynamics require education in order to learn to desire what is truly good. Secondly, the state of virtue orders the passions, integrating them into the totality of the person for truly human action: it teaches us to fear, desire, be indignant or rejoice 'as is fitting', at the appropriate time and for the right reasons, and in due measure.¹⁷ And thirdly, he considers prudence (*phrónesis*) as a wise reading of reality, the capacity to deliberate well about what leads to a good life in specific circumstances.¹⁸

Aquinas, taking up the Aristotelian intuition of *télos*, articulates it with an anthropology in which reason and will introduce a qualitative change; the human being not only 'tends' but knows the good and can freely will it, introducing an integrating 'hierarchy' into universal tendencies. Inclinations are not mere impulses but manifest a structure oriented towards the good. In his classic formulation of natural inclinations, three major areas emerge: self-preservation—the good of life, health and integrity, common to all living things; procreation and nurturing—sexuality and generation, but also care, education and protection of offspring, common to animals; and knowing the truth and living in society—openness to God, sociability, justice and friendship. The latter integrates the previous two by situating them within the specifically rational and social horizon of human fulfilment.¹⁹

The 'grammar of Nature' begins with inclinations that offer a 'vocabulary' (basic goods), virtue provides 'syntax' (order) and prudence composes 'phrases' (concrete decisions) consistent with the fulfilled life. In short, nature guides, but only the virtuous individual knows how to interpret it and bring it to fulfilment. For Arnold, it is the ideal self that acts as the operative goal on many occasions, generating frustration or satisfaction depending on the appraisal of the achievement attained.

¹⁷*Ibidem*, II, 6, 1106b36-1107a8.

¹⁸*Ibidem*, VI, 5, 1140a24-1140b30.

¹⁹THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

4 AN INTEGRATIVE GRAMMAR: ASSUMING AND HUMANIZING BY ELEVATING

It has been argued that these natural inclinations do not overlap as independent layers, but rather are integrated into the unity of the person. That is, in human beings, self-preservation and procreation are ‘humanized’ by rationality and freedom.

To assume implies to know. For spirituality to assume natural tendencies means that the person recognizes the good they imply—life, family, truth, coexistence. Freedom transforms the decision regarding the experienced inclination into a terrain for virtue or vice. One can choose, according to the order of good—virtue—over the disorder of rejection—vice. This is key to distinguishing the language of nature from any external ethics; the normativity of its grammar stems from the intelligibility of the good inscribed in human nature, as recognized by practical reason.

To humanize means that the attraction to these goods combines the instinctual aspect with the rational as part of a narrative with meaning and purpose. This characteristically human elevation is the opening to properly spiritual goods. The person integrates survival and reproduction into a higher order: truth, love as self-giving, justice as recognition of the other, friendship as participation in the common good. The tendencies that human beings experience by their sensitive nature become, by their spiritual nature, paths towards fulfilment. Thus, for example, one can transform the sexual impulse into faithful and fruitful love, or sociability into authentic charity and justice.

As has been discussed, experience teaches that contradicting these tendencies of natural order generates an internal conflict. If human inclinations shape the structure of the person, systematically denying them fractures inner unity. This fragmentation can manifest itself in an emotional conflict characterized by restlessness, irritation, guilt, sadness, apathy... when affective dissonance arises, the perception that one is not good.²⁰ One could also experience an existential conflict by disconnecting concrete choices from the meaning of life; freedom obscured by the repetition of acts against the good would make it difficult to desire what perfects the person. In Aristotelian terms, the person would suffer from incontinence—*akrasía*: knowing something and acting against it, generating inner turmoil.²¹ In Thomistic terms, it would be the emergence of ‘ungoverned’ passions which, lacking virtuous integration, would disorient the person. This would explain why, when the language of nature is consistently contradicted, personal coherence breaks down, giving rise to emotional and existential con-

²⁰M. B. ARNOLD, *Emotion and Personality*, vol. 1, cit.

²¹ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 1-10, especially VII, 3-5, 1145b-1147b.

flicts as a sign of a life that has lost its orientation towards the good.

Learning to listen to the grammar of nature requires the art of integrating inclinations through virtues: recognizing the goods towards which the human person tends (love, family, truth), deliberating on how to realize them here and now, and consolidating habits that unify emotions, reason and will. Aristotle shows that this task requires character formation and prudence, while Saint Thomas adds that natural tendencies are assumed and elevated by spirituality, becoming the substance of freedom and personal fulfilment.²² It is the literacy of one's own human dynamism that leads to understanding why certain constructive behaviours—order, responsibility, cooperation—strengthen life, while others— isolation, disorder, lying—impoverish it. For example, in the case of complicated grief, the pain could be interpreted as manifesting the rupture of the natural tendency towards bonding, thus facilitating narrative reorganization.

5 EDUCABLE TENDENCIES AND DIMENSIONS: THE UNIFYING FUNCTION OF VIRTUE

In order to develop an educational-therapeutic map that brings together the various contributions on human dynamics, a common model is proposed in which the universal tendencies of the human heart underlie the educable dimensions of the person: executive (action and habits), affective (sensitivity and connection) and cognitive (understanding and meaning). The integration of these dimensions would be achieved through the ordering action of the virtues. This reflects the unity of the human being and its systemic nature. Within this approach, Arnold's proposal of emotion as a hinge that articulates cognition and action, by offering functional information about the alignment between goals and context, is incorporated.²³ This model should therefore be understood as an integrative proposal that articulates these traditions within a unified framework, rather than as a direct derivation from any single author.

Next, the educational-therapeutic model and the integrative function of the cardinal virtues are developed through their Aristotelian conception of the 'golden mean', complemented by the Thomistic vision of ordering towards the Good.²⁴

²²THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 47, a. 2; I-II, q. 24, a. 3; I-II, q. 59, a. 1-5; I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

²³Cf. M. B. ARNOLD, *Emotion and Personality*, vol. I, cit.; M. B. Arnold, J. A. Gasson (eds.), *The Human Person*, cit.

²⁴ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 6, 1106b36-1107a8; THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 55, a. 3; I-II, q. 64, a. 1.

In this model, the survival instinct can be situated within the executive dimension (action and habits). The tendency to preserve life appears in daily life as the impulse to protect one's integrity, to work, etc. This vital energy, when faced with difficulty, relies on the strength to see the pursued good through to the end. The risk, if the virtue that provides the middle ground is absent, lies in shifting from self-protection to withdrawal, from security to rigidity, from self-care to paralyzing fear or the compulsive pursuit of control. Thus, the impulse to survive is not translated into 'avoiding pain', but rather into *affirming the good* despite the risk. Survival becomes fully human when it ceases to be a mere reaction and becomes virtuous self-governance.

The reproductive tendency—to procreate and raise children—understood broadly as openness to life and care—manifests in human beings as a need for connection, belonging, intimacy, protection of the vulnerable and the building of stable relationships, which leads to its placement within the affective dimension. Without the golden mean provided by temperance, one could confuse bonding with dependence, desire with possession, care with control, or, at the opposite extreme, emotional avoidance. Virtue, by personalizing desire, prevents instrumentalization through affective education aimed at learning to love well. The relational nature of human beings requires the ordering action of justice, which leads to the establishing of relationships founded on respect and reciprocity, in this case to recognize the other as 'someone' and not as an instrument for self-gratification.

The tendency towards self-improvement inherent in rational nature can be situated within the cognitive dimension, in the need for understanding and meaning. It is the inclination to know the truth, to seek meaning, to comprehend the world and to strive for excellence. It is the virtue of prudence that orders this dimension through the realistic interpretation of experience, the formation of judgment and the construction of valuable goals: the search for truth. Without this virtue, the risk lies in rationalization disconnected from life, using ideas to justify whims, or paralyzing relativism. Through virtuous order, the love of truth flourishes, manifesting itself in a healthy pursuit of study, openness to reality and intellectual honesty in loving the truth. The virtue that regulates relationships—Justice—includes in the tendency towards self-improvement the responsibility for the common good as one's own.

In summary, the universal tendencies of the human heart underlie the educable dimensions—executive, affective and cognitive—which operate systemically. The inclination towards survival is primarily expressed in the executive sphere as a need for effective action and stable habits; the inclination towards reproduction and care is manifested in the affective sphere as a demand for bonding, belonging and emotional regulation; and the inclination towards improvement, characteristic of spiritual openness, is situated in the cognitive sphere as a search for truth,

understanding and meaning.

6 THE COMPASS OF CHANGE: THE COGNITIVE-AFFECTIVE SYSTEM

Arnold's metaphor of emotion as a 'hinge' between cognition and action has been presented. Emotion arises from an appraisal of what happens in relation to the self and its aims. It connects cognition – interpretation/appraisal—with action—tendency. In functional terms, it offers information about the alignment between goals—human tendencies—and the context—perception.²⁵ It is the evaluative sign of congruence between what I tend toward—goods—and what I experience—appreciation. It is key that this appreciation respects reality and the good, or in other words, learning to read the language of nature.

This is where virtue is necessary so that no dimension becomes absolutized, negating the others and resulting in emotivist, voluntaristic or intellectualist behaviour. Virtue, through its loving order, integrates impulses, prioritizes goods and respects reality so that the person can be free. This dynamic is easier to understand in the absence of virtues. For example, a lack of fortitude may underlie impulsiveness; a lack of temperance may underlie possessive or avoidant attachment; and a lack of prudence may underlie poor, aimless goals. In the situations described, the emotional state would be a warning of this disintegration, an indicator that something requires a virtuous reordering.

It is easy to verify the systemic nature of the virtuous life—a manifestation of the unity of the person—by observing, for example, that the absolutization of emotions—emotivism—leads to erratic decisions as a consequence of the cognitive biases necessary to justify oneself and thus to a departure from the truth. Without regulated affectivity, a blockage could occur; without clear cognition, disorientation is experienced; and without sustained action, there is no progress. For example, in the case of social anxiety, cognition interprets 'they are going to judge me', while affectivity experiences the fear of rejection, which translates operationally into avoidance. An effective intervention will attempt to combine realistic reappraisal, affective reinterpretation and gradual exposure, thus aligning meaning and behaviour as proposed by Arnold.

The connection between the language of nature and Arnold's theory may be summarized as follows: if nature 'speaks' through tendencies, the subject interprets—or appraises—those tendencies; if emotion indicates congruence/incongruence with the good, appraisal indicates perceived goodness or harm; if affectivity is 'evaluative resonance', emotion is affective-cognitive judgment. That is, emotional appraisal reflects not only the 'psychological

²⁵M. B. ARNOLD, *Emotion and Personality*, vol. 1, cit.; cf. R. REISENZEIN, *Arnold's Theory of Emotion in Historical Perspective*, «Cognition and Emotion», 20/7 (2006), pp. 920-951.

self' but also the objective order of human nature oriented towards the good. Teleologically, the appraisal must conform to reality and objective human good, implying an ethical and anthropological interpretation of the appraisal. In Arnold's view, emotion depends on its meaning for the self, but that meaning is anchored in an objective natural structure (the language of nature), since the correct emotion is the one that adequately recognizes the good.

Emotional conflict reflects disorder with respect to the good. Not only is there psychological distress but also a loss of meaning. Arnold speaks of subjective maladjustment, to which objective (teleological) maladjustment is added. That is why it is not enough to simply reinterpret—one must reinterpret correctly.

7 MAGDA ARNOLD: EMOTION, IDENTITY (SELF-IDEAL) AND PERSONALITY IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

Within the framework developed so far—where human tendencies unfold in executive, affective and cognitive dimensions, and where emotion can be read as a sign of congruence or incongruence between the person and the world—Magda Arnold's approach becomes especially fruitful for psychotherapy. Her perspective makes it possible to approach the patient not as a generic mechanism, but as a concrete person whose emotional life expresses a particular history, a hierarchy of values and a certain orientation of the self. At the same time, Arnold's anthropology avoids collapsing into subjectivism, because the person's growth is not presented as the mere affirmation of whatever ideal he or she happens to prefer, but as a process of integration oriented toward a meaningful and normative horizon of fulfilment.²⁶

From this standpoint, Arnold's most distinctive contribution can be formulated more clearly: personality is not integrated merely through symptom reduction, nor through internal consistency achieved at any cost, but through the progressive convergence between the self-ideal that a person in fact pursues and the self-ideal as it ought to be. In this sense, integration is not mere equilibrium, but ordered self-actualization. The person becomes inwardly unified when affectivity, judgment, choice and habit are progressively organized around a valid ideal of life, instead of around immediate relief, defensive compensation, partial goods or distorted aspirations.²⁷

²⁶M. B. Arnold, J. A. Gasson (eds.), *The Human Person*, cit.; cf. J. GARCÍA-ALANDETE, *Magda Arnold's Understanding of the Human Person: Thomistic Personalism, Psychophysical Unity of the Person, Integration of Personality, and Transcendence*, «History of Psychology», 27/2 (2024), pp. 159-177; R. R. CORNELIUS, *Magda Arnold's Thomistic Theory of Emotion, the Self-Ideal, and the Moral Dimension of Appraisal*, «Cognition and Emotion», 20/7 (2006), pp. 976-1000.

²⁷GARCÍA-ALANDETE, *Magda Arnold's Understanding of the Human Person*, cit.; F. RUIZ-FUSTER, A. BERNAL-MARTÍNEZ DE SORIA, M. F. ECHAVARRÍA, *Emotional Regulation and Arnold's Self-Ideal: A*

Several aspects stem from this intuition that remain original and clinically useful and that also help to coherently articulate what has been discussed in the previous sections.

To clarify why Arnold's perspective is especially relevant at this point, it is necessary to begin with her notion of appraisal. This is not a secondary theoretical digression, nor a merely cognitive explanation of emotion. Rather, it is the conceptual point of entry that allows us to understand how emotion gives access to the person's inner orientation and, therefore, how affective life is related to identity, to the self-ideal and, ultimately, to the integration of personality.

7.1 *Appraisal—not as Reductive Cognitivism, but as Access to Personal Structure*

The first step, therefore, is to clarify the role of appraisal in Arnold's thought. Although one of her best-known contributions is the formulation of appraisal as the antecedent of emotion, she should not be read as a cognitive author in the narrow sense in which the cognitive is often understood in psychotherapy today. Precisely because her approach is not limited to ideas or thoughts, it opens a broader access to how the person is configured as a living unit.²⁸ In this regard, the term appraisal helps us understand that, in many cases, the difficulty, suffering and internal conflict with which we work clinically are related to the way the patient sees the world and sees themselves within it.²⁹ Arnold allows us to describe why, when faced with the same event (a relationship, a threat, a loss, a conflict), two people can respond differently: how they receive it, integrate it, judge it, desire it or fear it, resist it or surrender to it. This difference is not limited to biology and environment alone; the focus is broadened to include the structure of resources, deficiencies and internal orientation from which the person reacts. Here a direct connection with identity emerges: what is valued as important or threatening, what is judged as desirable or objectionable, shapes the form of the self and its way of being in the world. This is why Arnold states: "Without this link, we are at a loss to explain why the same perception results sometimes in one and sometimes in another emotion and action."³⁰ And she further clarifies the personal nature of this appraisal:

To arouse an emotion, the object must be appraised as affecting me in some way,

Way to Flourishment, «Frontiers in Psychology», 15/1425850 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1425850>.

²⁸M. B. ARNOLD, J. A. GASSON, *Feelings and Emotions as Dynamic Factors in Personality Integration*, in *The Human Person*, ed. by M. B. Arnold, J. A. Gasson, cit., pp. 294-313.

²⁹EADEM, *The Theory of Psychotherapy*, in *The Human Person*, ed. by M. B. Arnold, J. A. Gasson, cit., pp. 493-538.

³⁰EADEM, *Emotion and Personality*, vol. I, cit., p. 178.

affecting me personally as an individual with my particular experience and my particular aims.³¹

This point becomes clearer if one distinguishes, with Arnold and Gasson, between two senses of the ideal self: the self-ideal as one in fact conceives it or wants it and the self-ideal as it ought to be, that is, the concrete form of human perfection genuinely attainable for this person. This distinction is crucial. Not every ideal integrates. A merely wished-for self-image may intensify self-reference, perfectionism or fantasy. In contrast, a valid self-ideal orders desire, clarifies evaluation and makes emotional life more objective and more educable.³²

From this perspective, intrapsychic conflict can be understood not only as tension between impulses or between cognition and affect, but more deeply as a divergence between one's actual self-ideal and one's valid self-ideal. When both converge, striving may be difficult but remains inwardly ordered. When they diverge, the person seeks substitute forms of harmony—defensive patterns, emotional indulgence, rigid self-images or compensatory goals—that reduce tension without truly integrating personality.³³

This point leads directly to the next one. If appraisal gives access to the person's inner structure, it is because what is appraised is never neutral: it is already perceived in relation to what matters to the self, to its aims, vulnerabilities, attachments and aspirations. For that reason, appraisal does not remain at the level of interpretation alone. It becomes affectively manifest in emotion. Emotion, then, is not something added extrinsically to appraisal, but the lived expression of that personal evaluation. This is why, in psychotherapy, emotions are so important: they make visible, in an immediate and concrete way, the meaning that reality has acquired for this particular person.

7.2 *Emotion as a Sign of what Matters: From Reaction to Indicator of Personal Meaning*

From this understanding of appraisal as access to personal structure follows a second crucial point: emotion ceases to be understood as a mere reaction that only becomes problematic due to its intensity (or as a mechanism limited to the order of survival) and comes to be understood as a sign of what, affectively, matters to the individual. In other words, emotion reveals relevancies, priorities, attachments, fears and aspirations; therefore, it opens a clinical avenue for understanding the person's internal orientation. In this respect, emotion—through appraisal—indicates what value these experiences have for us. Arnold expresses

³¹*Ibidem*, p. 171.

³²GARCÍA-ALANDETE, *Magda Arnold's Understanding of the Human Person*, cit.

³³*Ibidem*.

this by insisting on the same formulation because it encapsulates the idea that emotion arises from an appraisal that engages the subject's concrete identity.³⁴ This point has several facets. The first is that emotion implies an inclination: a felt tendency towards something. And this immediately introduces a level of integration highly relevant to psychotherapy: emotion is not merely something 'suffered' from the outside, but rather participates in the subject's active dynamism. Arnold formulates it this way:

Emotion is not something that happens to us but something we do: we evaluate something as dangerous and feel fear; as annoying and feel anger. Although unintended and often unwanted, emotion is still something we have initiated. Hence, we are active in emotion, not passive. We are the actor, the agent...³⁵

Therefore, it is something active that inclines us.

Continuing with this activity, Arnold describes the sequence by which we identify what we have experienced, interpret it in light of previous experiences, imagine consequences and deliberate on alternatives; that is, she situates emotion and action within an integrated personal dynamic and not as isolated reflexes. She expresses this in detail:

What is experienced is then identified by recalling similar situations and their effect on us; this recall can be spontaneous or deliberate. Once something has been identified, we imagine what it might do to us and evaluate it accordingly as good or bad in the here and now. Before deciding what to do about it, we imagine possible alternative actions and their consequences and compare them with remembered actions and their success or failure. Whether we are about to write a letter, bake a cake, or calculate the orbit of a rocket, we must imagine what will happen and imagine what can be done to deal with it. When we have judged one of the alternatives as adequate, we exclude all the others from consideration: the impulse toward that action is carried out because there are no opposing impulses to action.³⁶

Clinically, this passage reinforces the continuity with what has been stated in previous sections: emotion can be read as a functional data that informs of congruences or incongruences between tendencies, context and horizon of meaning and, at the same time, as a point of support to intervene in the integration of affective-cognitive-executive dimensions and in the orientation of the subject towards a fuller way of living.

Psychotherapeutically, this means that treatment cannot be reduced to symptom control alone. It also involves clarifying the patient's operative self-ideal: what kind of person they are in fact trying to become, what values are organizing their choices and whether that ideal can integrate their emotional life or is

³⁴M. B. ARNOLD, *Emotion and Personality*, vol. I, cit.

³⁵EADEM, *Unpublished autobiography*, Family papers, Tucson (AZ), p. 7.

³⁶EADEM, *Story Sequence Analysis: A New Method of Measuring Motivation and Predicting Achievement*, Columbia University Press, New York 1962, p. 19.

instead a source of chronic disturbance. In this light, therapy is not simply emotional relief but a gradual reorganization of affect, judgment and action around a valid life goal. The therapeutic task is therefore both interpretive and formative: to uncover the patient's lived hierarchy of values, to correct distorted self-images and to restore emotion to its role as an ally of self-integration.³⁷

8 VALUES, MOTIVES, ATTITUDES: TOWARDS THE IDEAL SELF AS THE AXIS OF IDENTITY

From the preceding discussion, the connection with motives and the motivating nature of affect becomes clearer. If appraisal gives access to the person's inner structure, and if emotion reveals what, affectively, matters to the individual, then the next question is how these personal relevancies acquire stability and begin to shape character. It is at this point that Arnold's account of values, motives and attitudes becomes especially important, because it explains how what is affectively significant for the person gradually becomes organized around a more enduring axis of identity. For Arnold, motives are not blind impulses: they are understood as embodied values that guide the individual. Motives are hierarchically ordered according to the most important objective and this objective shapes the self in its development. Arnold expresses it thus:

Motives are ordered in a hierarchy according to what, as a whole, is the most important objective. This goal, embodied in loved ones, important causes, and deepest aspirations, attracts us, but also requires our devotion, our will to live up to the ideal to which we aspire. In this way, the main objective becomes the main motive, the ideal self that shapes us as we strive to achieve it.³⁸

Emotion does not only reveal isolated preferences or episodic reactions; it points toward a hierarchy of values that, over time, becomes motivationally effective. In other words, what a person repeatedly experiences as worthy of pursuit, defence, fear, admiration or rejection does not remain at the level of passing affective episodes, but tends to be organized into a more stable orientation of the self. This is why Arnold's theory is so useful for psychotherapy: it makes it possible to move from the description of emotional life to the underlying organization of the person.

In this way, values and motives tend to stabilize and become habits, that is, attitudes. While all attitudes are tendencies towards action, evaluative attitudes (connected to values) are habitual tendencies to evaluate something as pos-

³⁷Cf. GARCÍA-ALANDETE, *Magda Arnold's Understanding of the Human Person*, cit.; RUIZ-FUSTER, A. BERNAL-MARTÍNEZ DE SORIA, M. F. ECHAVARRÍA, *Emotional Regulation and Arnold's Self-Ideal*, cit.

³⁸M. B. ARNOLD, *Story Sequence Analysis*, cit., p. 44.

itive or negative, while motivational attitudes (connected to motives) are habitual tendencies to engage in action, which can be constructive and positive or non-constructive and negative. Here, the relevance of what Arnold recognizes as emotional attitude becomes clearer, understood as a relatively stable style of responding affectively based on one's personal hierarchy of values and the habitual way of interpreting lived experiences. From this perspective, identity is not reduced to narrative self-definitions but is expressed on a deeper axis: the ideal self as an organizing principle that gives coherence to what is desired, feared, judged and pursued.

Once this point is established, the transition to emotion in a stricter sense becomes more intelligible. If the ideal self gives unity to values, motives and attitudes, then emotions can be understood not merely as passing reactions, but as signals that register whether the person's concrete experience is consonant or dissonant with that deeper axis of identity. This is precisely what allows Arnold to describe emotions as 'guardians' of the ideal self.

9 EMOTIONS AS GUARDIANS OF THE IDEAL SELF: A COMPASS FOR SELF-REGULATION

In line with the above, Arnold proposes that emotions become guardians of the ideal self. This idea follows naturally from the previous point: if values, motives and attitudes are ultimately organized around the person's governing self-ideal, then emotions can be understood as affective signals that indicate whether one's concrete way of living is in harmony with, or deviating from, that ideal. For this reason, the emotional world is repositioned in psychotherapy as a compass for self-regulation: not merely a release of symptoms, but a signalling and guiding light on the personal path. In this sense, emotions may be understood as guardians of the ideal self: negative emotions warn of errors and call for a correction of course, while positive emotions sustain progress toward the ideal self.³⁹

Emotions can thus be understood as 'guardians' of the ideal self: negative emotions may warn that one is deviating from what one most deeply ought to become, while positive emotions may accompany progress towards that valid ideal.

Ultimately, this thesis presents intentionality as the core of the subject and places freedom and responsibility at the heart of human development. The person does not respond automatically to stimuli; rather, they make sense of the world from within, opening themselves to the moral and spiritual dimension.

³⁹M. B. ARNOLD, J. A. GASSON, *Feelings and Emotions as Dynamic Factors*, cit., p. 306; cf. A. RUIZFUSTER, A. BERNAL-MARTÍNEZ DE SORIA, M. F. ECHAVARRÍA, *Emotional Regulation and Arnold's Self-Ideal*, cit.

This connects with the earlier point about integration and the horizon of virtue: emotions can become allies of good, recovering a psychology of integral character development. Therefore, the self-ideal constitutes a privileged framework for understanding how emotional regulation can be directed towards eudaimonic goals, promoting human growth.

This regulatory role of emotion also helps explain why Arnold's theory of personality cannot be reduced to biological or environmental causality alone.

Following this line of thought, the self-ideal allows for the articulation of a non-reductionist causal theory of personality: the biological and the environmental (matter and agents) do not exhaust the explanation; the form of character and the ultimate purpose of existence also play a role.⁴⁰ Arnold thus aligns herself with the line of thought that conceives of the person as a dynamic whole in which emotions fulfil a teleological function: they orient behaviour towards personal and social fulfilment. She emphasizes the final cause within the formation of personality and points out that emotion is directly linked to the final cause, insofar as it elicits an orientation towards what the person perceives as valuable or unworthy of being pursued. In this regard, returning to the term self-ideal—the normative image of what the person aspires to be—it is not merely a subjective project but an organizing principle that structures and guides motivation and gives coherence to emotional responses.⁴¹ Therefore, the full meaning of emotions emerges when they are integrated into the horizon of the self-ideal:

If, then, emotion is to be instrumental in self-actuation, the objects of emotion must be harmonized with the person's larger goal as a human being. If these objects are seen in their real value, if they are seen in the proper perspective of man's final end, then the judgment that they are suitable will be objective and well ordered.⁴²

And here the connection with the "language of nature" discussed at the beginning appears: the self-ideal is not a capricious invention but a normative reading of humanity at its best embodied in a concrete person. Gasson, in *The Human Person*, expresses it as follows:

Needless to say, this self-ideal is not an idealized version of one's self, but is human nature at its best incarnated in a concrete person. We strive not toward something but toward someone whose perfection we gradually make our own.⁴³

When emotions are no longer integrated into a valid self-ideal, they cease to sup-

⁴⁰M. F. ECHAVARRÍA, *The Four Causes of Personality. A Thomistic Approach to Personality Theory*, «Scientia et Fides», 13/1 (2025), pp. 233-256.

⁴¹Cf. R. R. CORNELIUS, *Magda Arnold's Thomistic Theory of Emotion, the Self-Ideal, and the Moral Dimension of Appraisal*, cit.

⁴²M. B. ARNOLD, J. A. GASSON, *Feelings and Emotions as Dynamic Factors*, cit., p. 306.

⁴³J. A. GASSON, *Personality Theory: A Formulation of General Principles*, in *The Human Person*, cit., p. 193.

port personal growth and instead contribute to the fragmentation of personality. This is why Arnold's teleological account of affect leads naturally to a warning about emotional indulgence and disordered self-formation.

Finally, Arnold warns that a disorganized personality—or a life driven by emotional indulgence—not only produces symptoms but also a profound discontent linked to contradicting the demands of one's own nature. She expresses this forcefully:

Since a valid self-ideal is the perfection of a man's humanity, he will court unhappiness if he chooses a self-ideal that suits merely his own convenience, and will experience conflict whenever he is tempted to act contrary to his proper ideal. [...] When a man's self-ideal sets too low an aim, or a perverted aim, he is in fact neglecting the requirements of his own nature and will reap discontent and disharmony instead of happiness and contentment.⁴⁴

Hence the need for a corrective emotional experience that allows one to advance in self-awareness, modifying one's self-image towards a truer conception that is closer to the ideal. For, on the contrary, as Arnold points out:

A man may be timid, and hence have an attitude of fear; but if he manages to do what is required in spite of his diffidence, it does not develop into a habit but continues simply as an attitude, alleviated or intensified depending on the results of his action. But if he gives in to his timidity on every occasion, it may develop into a habit of neurotic withdrawal.⁴⁵

In this sense, psychotherapy is not limited to reducing emotional discomfort but seeks to reorient affective life toward a truer self-understanding and a more valid ideal of personal fulfillment.

10 CONCLUSIONS

All of this leads us to several conclusions that, for Arnold, will be relevant to recognize in psychotherapy: The first is the influence that past experiences exert on our experience of the present. The second is the possibility of replacing these attitudes of avoidance and pleasure with a new way of behaving; that is, the importance of intentionality when wanting to change something: "In addition, breaking emotional habits requires a strong motive to ensure a deliberate decision to stop the indulgence or to act contrary to the emotion. It also requires a willingness to forego the pleasure of indulgence, to suffer the discomfort of thwarted desire, to take the risk fear urges us to avoid, to put up with the annoyance anger urges

⁴⁴M. B. ARNOLD, *Human Emotion and Action*, in *Human Action: Conceptual and Empirical Issues*, ed. by T. Mischel, Academic Press, New York 1969, pp. 167-196: 191-192.

⁴⁵EADEM, *Emotion and Personality*, vol. I, cit., p. 190.

us to combat.”⁴⁶ The third also addresses organic tension through specific actions as a therapeutic complement. And finally, through imagination, to uncover and reveal an authentic portrait of the person they wish to become: “The purpose of therapy, in our meaning of the term, is self-integration through aiming for the self-ideal as it ought to be.”⁴⁷

The ideal, therefore, constitutes the reason that sustains the will to pursue the rational end that opposes the pleasure sought by the passions, confronting the pain that is at the origin of the neurotic conflict and, in this way, resolving it little by little.

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⁴⁶*Ibidem*, p. 191.

⁴⁷M. B. ARNOLD, *The Theory of Psychotherapy*, in *The Human Person*, cit., p. 517.

