

APPRECIATIVE ONTOLOGY of HUMAN BEING



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"Our way of thinking, feeling, and operating is always determined by what we believe or assume, explicitly or implicitly, about what it means to be human."

INTRODUCTION

The Appreciative Paradigm, like any paradigm in the social sciences, has an explicit or implicit view of what we call the Appreciative Ontology of the Human Being. But what is this vision that the Appreciative Ontology of the Appreciative Paradigm has of the human being? Is there any publication where we can find the answer to this question? Based on what I know, the answer is no. That's why I'm going to try in this essay to offer a first sketch of what the Appreciative Ontology of the Human Being is from the Appreciative Paradigm.

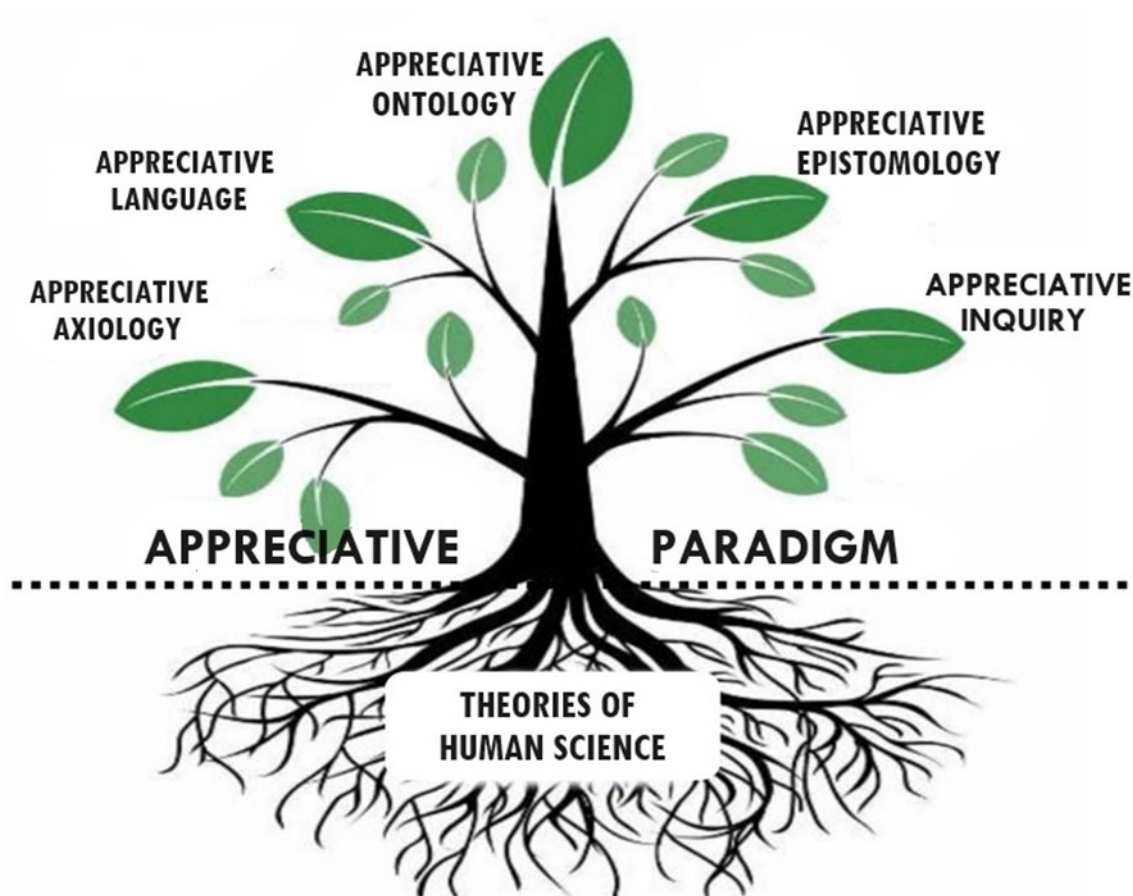
The aim of this essay, therefore, is to open a window to begin seeing the human being from the Appreciative Paradigm. So, I invite you to join me in looking through this window to discover and delve into the identity of the Appreciative Ontology of the Human Being: its origin and fundamental characteristics and thus differentiate it from the ontologies of other paradigms in the social sciences. To do this, these are the topics I will present: First, I offer a very brief summary of the new theoretical framework of what the Appreciative Paradigm is, which will allow us to understand in an organic way how Appreciative Ontology is a component of the Appreciative Paradigm. Second, I define what Appreciative Ontology is and its three components: 1) the Human Being, 2) the Social World (Social Systems/Organizations), and 3) the Natural and Cosmic World. Third, I propose some of the reasons why I consider it important to discover and define what Appreciative Ontology is. Fourth, I present some of the theoretical and empirical foundations of Appreciative Ontology. Fifth, I identify and very briefly develop what I consider to be the ten fundamental characteristics of the Appreciative Ontology of the Human Being."

I. THE APPRECIATIVE PARADIGM AND ITS COMPONENTS

To understand what Appreciative Ontology is, in all its depth and organically, we need to see it as one of the components of the Appreciative Paradigm. 'The Appreciative Paradigm is a new way of seeing and understanding (Ontology), studying (Epistemology/Research), transforming (Intervention/Inquiry/Praxis), valuing (Axiology), and talking (Language) about the human being and their behavior in the organizational and natural world in which they operate; which has been adopted by a community of scholars and practitioners globally because they find it more effective than other paradigms of social change, as evidenced by the development and success achieved, both practically and theoretically, in the first 35 years of its existence' (Varona, 2023, p. 15; 2024, p. 14). The fundamental characteristics of each of these components of the Appreciative Paradigm are developed in the essay: El Paradigma Apreciativo: de la

Metodología al Paradigma (Varona, 2022). The Appreciative Paradigm. From Methodology to Paradigm (Varona, 2023)

Figure 1
Components of the Appreciative Paradigm



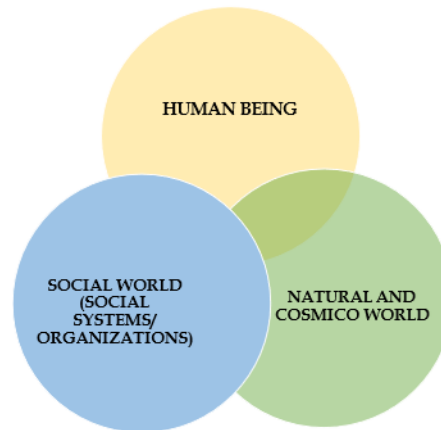
II. THE APPRECIATIVE ONTOLOGY AND ITS COMPONENTS

Ontology is the science that 'deals with being in general and its transcendental properties.' Some see it as a part of metaphysics and others as part of philosophy. In the field of social sciences, we see ontology as a component of a paradigm and it refers to the knowledge we have of man, the social world, and the natural and cosmic world, that is, how we define them. This knowledge is created and formulated through the generation of theories that explain the nature of human beings and social phenomena and how they relate to the natural and cosmic world. In the specific case of the Appreciative Paradigm, Appreciative Ontology refers to this new way of understanding

the human being, the social world (social systems/organizations), and the natural and cosmic world. Therefore, the three components of Appreciative Ontology are: 1) The Human Being, 2) Social World (Social Systems/Organizations), and 3) The Natural and Cosmic World.

Figure 2

Components of Appreciative Ontology



III. THE APPRECIATIVE ONTOLOGY OF THE HUMAN BEING.

Let us now define what the first component is, that is, what is the Ontology of the Human Being? This is a question we do not ask ourselves as often as we should because we assume we already know the answer. But the truth is, if we review history, we see that this question has been answered in very different ways, and each of these answers offers us a facet of that mystery and miracle that is the human being. For example, Aristotle defined it as 'a rational animal,' and many centuries later, René Descartes in the 17th century said, 'I think, therefore I am,' reaffirming that the fundamental capacity of the human being was their rational capacity, and in doing so, they devalued and almost ignored their emotional capacity – a position that has dominated Western and global culture to this day. From the Appreciative Paradigm, we accept and value, with an appreciative attitude, all the definitions that have been given of the human being because they remind us of the complexity of what it is. Therefore, the Appreciative Ontology sees the Human Being as a Mystery that we cannot fully comprehend or control and as a Miracle for being the most perfect being of creation. But we also highlight some characteristics that have been forgotten or ignored by other philosophies

or paradigms in the social sciences; characteristics that I develop in the following section.

IV. FUNDAMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE APPRECIATIVE ONTOLOGY OF THE HUMAN BEING

Each of us has our own definition of what it means to be human based on our personal experiences, academic training, and professional experience as practitioners of Appreciative Inquiry/Intervention and other appreciative social change modalities. But I also believe that we can collaboratively construct an Appreciative Ontology of the Human Being with which we all feel somehow identified. From this perspective, I will briefly propose in this section what I consider to be the 10 core characteristics of the identity of the Appreciative Ontology of the Human Being.

First, human beings are a mystery that we cannot fully understand and that instills in us both admiration and disappointment."

There is always something that we cannot explain, which at the same time fills us with admiration and disappointment because we are capable of both the best and the worst. We never cease to marvel at the always surprising and limitless creativity of human beings in all fields and activities (such as technology, music, medicine, agriculture, architecture, folklore, and an endless etcetera). But we also never cease to be horrified by the cruelty of some of their criminal and destructive behaviors that we witness every day. This vision of seeing ourselves as a mystery radically changes our relationship with ourselves, with others, and with the natural and cosmic world. For example, when we say that the human being is a Mystery, we are affirming, among other things, that although we know much about them, there is still much more to know, that we have not yet found the recipe to achieve their happiness and fulfillment in a complete and stable way. At the same time, when we affirm that we are a Mystery, we live life with a sense of admiration, gratitude, humility, and hope for a better future that is waiting to emerge and that we know is possible if we commit to creating it collaboratively. This appreciative attitude toward life is discovered and developed through Appreciative Inquiry/Intervention and other appreciative modalities of personal and social change.

Second, human beings are an organic and indivisible unit, interconnected and interdependent. gunda, lo seres humanos somos una unidad orgánica e indivisible, interconectada e interdependiente.

The human being is an organism where the physical, rational, emotional, and operational aspects are intimately connected, and what we do or do not do with one of these components affects all the others. Moreover, this organism is also connected to the

organizational, natural, and cosmic worlds and is permanently affected by them. We are an organic unit in which the traditional dualism between the corporeal and the psychic does not fit. Our physical state conditions our emotional, mental, and operational state, but our emotional, mental, and operational state also influences our physical state, which is known as somatization. Scientific evidence confirming our organic unity and interconnectivity is supported by research conducted in different disciplines such as Neuroscience and Positive Psychology (Rogers and van Dam, 2015). From the Appreciative Paradigm, we highlight the emotional component, which has been almost forgotten by other paradigms since Aristotle defined the human being as a 'rational animal.' The result of this focus on the rational while neglecting the emotional has led to this reality that I paraphrase from what I once read in a blog by Barbara Fredrickson, author of several books on positivity and emotions (Fredrickson, 2009), which is both very descriptive and challenging: we wake up thinking about what I am going to do today and what I am going to say, but we forget to do it while feeling what emotions I am going to experience today.

Third, human beings possess a core of capabilities that we can discover and develop to achieve our personal fulfillment and collaborate in the construction of a better social, natural, and cosmic world.

This focus on the core of capabilities that we possess as human beings has been one of the most original and revolutionary contributions of the Appreciative Ontology of the Appreciative Paradigm. We can affirm that this appreciative vision of the human being indeed arises as a reaction to the negative focus that dominated the field of research and social change in the social sciences (Cooperrider, 2021). The list of talents that human beings possess is astonishingly diverse and includes all possible fields of human activity, whether physical, intellectual, emotional, artistic, cultural, or professional. One of the capabilities that human beings need to discover and develop is appreciativity, which in the words of Laura Isanta, creator of the word 'appreciativity,' is the power we have to take a moment to recognize, discover, and appreciate the things, events, and people around us, including ourselves, to see the whole, what we like and what we do not, the functional and dysfunctional, to deliberately choose to stay with what gives us life (Isanta, 2018, p. 41-65). But, as with all human talents, we need to discover and cultivate it through the use of appreciative modalities of personal and social change, such as Appreciative Dialogues and Appreciative Inquiry/Intervention. From the Appreciative Paradigm, we believe that in the individual and collective discovery and development of these capabilities, and when we put them at the service of building a better organizational, natural, and cosmic world, lies the main source of human fulfillment and happiness.

Fourth, human beings possess a set of limitations that we can control and overcome.

This set of limitations, which we all experience daily, consists of various physical, mental, social, financial, material, etc., limitations and circumstances that we cannot control and that do not allow us to realize the ideal dream of what we want to be as individuals and the ideal dream of what we want for humanity. These limitations are simultaneously the source of our physical suffering and our emotional frustrations. Also part of this negative core are all the destructive tendencies and behaviors that we sometimes have toward ourselves, other human beings, and the organizational, natural, and cosmic world, which simultaneously horrify us and cause us deep pain.

From the Appreciative Paradigm, we accept the existence of this set of limitations and circumstances, but we believe that we have the power to face, control, and overcome them. This is how we see the nature of the human being from the Appreciative Ontology of the Appreciative Paradigm. We do not deny or ignore the core of limitations we have; instead, we accept them and believe that we can control and overcome them with the core of capabilities with which we have also been endowed. Discovering, controlling, and overcoming these limitations at both individual and collective levels is precisely one of the objectives of Appreciative Inquiry/Intervention and other appreciative models of social change (Varona, 2020; Cooperrider, 2021; Subirana, 2013, Isanta, 2018). Recognizing the limits of our condition as part of what we are as human beings is an appreciative and very healthy act because it reminds us of what we are and helps us overcome arrogance, which is deceptive, superficial, vain, and ultimately destructive. It makes us more humble, understanding, and compassionate toward ourselves and others, while also being a source of peace, satisfaction, and happiness.

Fifth, human beings seek what gives us life in the ordinary, the extraordinary (success), and the difficult (failure)

This capacity, which G. Marian Kinget calls 'The tendency to actualization is the most fundamental of the organism as a whole. It presides over the exercise of all functions, both physical and experiential. It constantly tends to develop its conservation and enrichment, taking into account the possibilities and limits of its environment' (Kinget, 1971; and Rogers, C. R. and Kinget, G. M. (1971)). This confirms the definition of the human being by the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset when he said, 'I am I and my circumstance' (Ortega y Gasset, 1914), which I paraphrase as 'The human being is he and his circumstances.'

We aspire to live a meaningful life where we can be happy and fulfilled. We find this happiness and fulfillment when we can enjoy comfortable living conditions and physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. When we feel valued and recognized for who we are and what we do personally and professionally. But above all, when we understand that our ultimate mission is not only our personal happiness and fulfillment but also serving the common good. That is, when we operate more from the 'we' than from the 'I.' This secret of the source of happiness, which we all seek in different ways, we never fully find because it is elusive, and we cannot control it entirely. But we also find happiness and fulfillment when we are able to accept our limitations and continue to strive, without giving up, for the personal and common good. It is in this process of living with hope, gratitude, moderation, hope, solidarity, and humility that we find those moments of peace, happiness, and fulfillment that give us life. From the Appreciative Paradigm, we believe that human beings have the power to discover what gives us life and live it through the cyclical use of Appreciative Inquiry/Intervention and other appreciative models of personal and social change.

Table 1:

APPRECIATIVE ONTOLOGY OF THE HUMAN BEING

Human Beings:

We are a mystery that we cannot comprehend, and which fills us with both admiration and disillusionment.	We are an organic and indivisible, interconnected and interdependent unit	We possess a core of capabilities that we can discover and develop	We possess a set of limitations that we can control and overcome
We seek what gives us life in the ordinary, extraordinary, and difficult	We have an unlimited creative capacity that we can discover and develop	We possess a spiritual dimension that connects us with the transcendent	Everything we experience in our lives is momentary, cyclical, and ephemeral
	We have a view of ourselves that is subjective and socially constructed	We can, with effort and perseverance, build a better world	

Tabla 1:
ONTOLOGÍA APRECIATIVA DEL SER HUMANO
Los Seres Humanos

Somos un misterio que no podemos comprender y que nos infunde admiración y desilusión.	Somos una unidad orgánica e indivisible, interconectada e interdependiente	Poseemos un núcleo de capacidades que podemos descubrir y desarrollar	Poseemos un conjunto de limitaciones que podemos controlar y superar.
Buscamos lo que nos da vida en lo ordinario, extraordinario y difícil.	Tenemos una capacidad creativa ilimitada que podemos descubrir y desarrollar.	Poseemos una dimensión espiritual que nos conecta con lo trascendente.	Todo lo que experimentamos en nuestra vida es puntual, cíclico y efímero.
	Tenemos una visión de nosotros mismos que es subjetiva y socialmente construida.	Podemos, con esfuerzo y perseverancia, construir un mundo mejor.	

Sixth, human beings have an unlimited creative capacity that we can discover and develop.

Just observe what human creativity has been able to achieve in all fields of human activity such as technology, medicine, art, music, architecture, agriculture, etc., and what is waiting to emerge. For the Appreciative Paradigm, 'we can all be original creators' (Cooperrider, 2021, p. 29). We all have the power to anticipate a different way of acting and be original creators if we dare to do so with discipline and perseverance, without fear of making mistakes and without worrying about what others will say, especially if we introduce creativity into educational programs and practice it in our daily and professional lives. One of the main objectives of Appreciative Inquiry (Varona, 2023, 2024) is the creation of new theoretical and practical knowledge. Perhaps the most original characteristic of Appreciative Inquiry, according to Cooperrider himself, is its prospective dimension, that is, being a research model whose fundamental objective is the creation of theory that allows us to anticipate and project possibilities for the construction of a better future for human beings and the social, natural, and cosmic systems in which humans operate (Cooperrider, 2021, p. 15-39). Moreover, the entire process of Appreciative Inquiry/Intervention focuses on generating creativity, with special emphasis on the phases of Dreaming the ideal future we want to emerge and Designing the culture and structure of that ideal future we want to create (Varona, 2020)

Seventh, human beings possess a spiritual dimension that connects us with the transcendent.

This spiritual dimension allows us to generate deep mental and emotional connections with realities and forces that are immaterial and transcend the physical dimension of our condition as human beings, and which we name and relate to in many different ways. This includes those who believe in God, Allah, or other deities, and who practice meditation, prayer, yoga, etc. For the Appreciative Paradigm, this dimension is fundamental to understanding the human being because it is in this dimension that many human beings find what gives them life, the deepest sense of their existence, and the source of happiness and commitment to building a better human being and a better organizational and natural world. From the practice of Appreciative Inquiry/Intervention and other appreciative modalities of personal and social change, we know that this spiritual and transcendent dimension is extremely transformative and powerful.

Eighth, everything we experience as human beings in our lives is punctual, cyclical, and ephemeral.

This permanent condition of change, which is punctual, cyclical, and ephemeral, is confirmed in Mayan culture, to which this saying and metaphor is attributed: 'Everything in life passes and returns like the wind.' Human beings are in constant bodily change (sensations of well-being or discomfort, pain or pleasure); emotional (how we feel and what we feel in relation to others, the social, and the natural); rational (what we think of ourselves and others, the social and natural world); and operational (how we act in relation to ourselves, others, and the organizational and natural world). Everything in our life is very punctual, transient (happens in a moment and disappears), and everything is cyclical (repeats); it passes, goes away, and returns, but it is always different in some way, like the wind and the waves of the sea.

And all these changes happen at the moment when the factors that make them possible meet (the theory of Encounter). Some of these factors we can control, but others we cannot. For example, we can change our emotions, thoughts, and actions by deciding to go to the beach, a restaurant, a church, etc., and wait for all the factors that need to meet to come together for the change, the new emotion, idea, decision, action, etc., to emerge. If we live each moment or experience with this attitude, we will live life with more appreciativity, realism, intensity, and as an opportunity to learn from it. Perhaps the metaphor of the wind is the best metaphor to understand what a human being is: a being that, like the wind, is punctual, cyclical, fragile, ephemeral, and elusive. We all want to be appreciative and have more positive emotions always, but we do not fully achieve it. That is why we need Appreciative Inquiry/Intervention, Appreciative Dialogues, and all the other different modalities of appreciative personal and social

change to embrace the punctuality, fragility, ephemerality, and cyclicity of our human condition and activate the appreciative resources we have to overcome it.

Ninth, human beings have a vision of ourselves that is subjective and socially constructed.

For the Appreciative Paradigm, the way we see and define ourselves is a social construction (Social Construction Theory) that we begin to build from the moment we are born through relationships and language (communication) with other human beings and the organizational and natural world in which we live. When we say that the vision we have of human beings is a social and subjective construction, we are saying, first, that we have different opinions about what a human being is and how we change; second, that we must accept, respect, and value those differences; and third, that we also have the option to share them and the freedom to choose the one we find most transformative and powerful. These possibilities are discovered and activated through Appreciative Inquiry/Intervention and other appreciative models of change. From the Appreciative Paradigm, we see the human being as the result of the interaction between the self and the surrounding circumstances, as affirmed by the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset when he said, 'man is himself and his circumstances' (Ortega y Gasset, 1914), and we also share with Martin Buber that the human being is built in dialogue with other human beings and with God (Buber, 1971).

Tenth, human beings can, with effort and perseverance, build a better world if we activate the innate powers we possess.

The innate powers we possess and need to activate are many, but I would like to highlight a few of them. The first is the power to be in a permanent state of improvement, creativity, and commitment to live a fuller life and build a better world. From the Appreciative Paradigm, we believe that we can always improve how we live, think, feel, behave, work, and perform daily tasks. But maintaining this state of improvement requires other powers that we also possess as human beings, such as the power to generate motivation, that is, the desire to do it, and the power to sacrifice to achieve it. And the most wonderful thing is that human beings also have the ability to discover and develop these innate powers through the practice of Appreciative Inquiry/Intervention and other appreciative modalities of social change. We can then affirm that the 'Achilles heel' in humans is not that we do not have these powers, but that we do not activate the powers with which we are endowed. Or, in appreciative language, the strongest point of human beings is that we have the powers we need to be better and build the future we dream of and the power to activate them.

We can be better and build a better world if we strive and persevere in it. The path will not be easy, and we have to walk it, as the Spanish poet Antonio Machado said: 'Walker, there is no path, you make the path by walking...Walker, your footprints are the path' (Machado, 1912, Loc. 197). We are and build in proportion to what we are willing to sacrifice and the effort we are willing to put into it until we achieve it. No excuses! We are talking about effort, perseverance, discipline, courage, and sacrifice, something we do not hear much from the Appreciative Paradigm, where we may emphasize more the ephemeral moments that caress us but pass, like the gentle wind, leaving no trace. We need to recover the wisdom accumulated by the experience of our ancestors who left us messages like: 'What is worth costs'; 'We reap what we sow'; 'The gardener has to take care of his garden if he wants to harvest its fruits.' In this process of constructing what we want to be and a better future for humanity, we need the help of others because we cannot do it alone.

To discover and develop each of these 10 characteristics of the Appreciative Ontology of the Human Being, we have Appreciative Inquiry/Intervention and other appreciative methodologies of social change. Moreover, these 10 characteristics of the Appreciative Ontology of the Human Being are the pillars that underpin and guide the practice of Appreciative Intervention. I would like us to ask ourselves now, do we keep these characteristics in mind when planning an Appreciative Intervention? How would it affect the way we conduct it and the impact on the change we want to achieve?"

V. THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL FOUNDATIONS OF APPRECIATIVE ONTOLOGY OF THE HUMAN BEING

5.1. Theoretical Foundations of Appreciative Ontology of the Human Being

The theoretical foundations of the Appreciative Ontology of the Human Being from the Appreciative Paradigm, as I have indicated, have not yet been thoroughly researched and documented. However, this does not mean that they do not exist. These theoretical foundations are implicitly and unsystematically present in the numerous publications that have been made about what is known in the English-speaking world as Appreciative Inquiry, from its creation in 1986 by David Cooperrider and many other authors, to the present day (Cooperrider, 2021; Barrett and Fry, 2005; Subirana and Cooperrider, 2013; Isanta, 2023, 2018; Varona, 2020). The fundamental, but not the only, theoretical foundations of the Appreciative Ontology of the Human Being originate in the theory of Social Construction and how this theory conceives the nature of the human being. The fundamental principle of Social Construction Theory regarding the human being is that human beings construct our vision of reality through the language

we use, that is, through the words we use in our social and work relationships (Gergen and Gergen, 2004, pp.16-17). This theory also asserts that it is through language that we can generate different forms of dialogue that can lead us to co-construct new and different visions of the human being and the organizational, natural, and cosmic world.

5. 2. Empirical Foundations of Appreciative Ontology of the Human Being

The power of the Appreciative Ontology of the Human Being is solidly and consistently confirmed by empirical evidence, that is, based on personal, group, and community experience, and what we gather in our global practice of Appreciative Inquiry/Intervention. Perhaps the most powerful empirical evidence we can present for now about the Appreciative Ontology of the Human Being is our own experience, through which we discover how the human being and their behavior is a mystery we cannot fully understand or control, and that simultaneously amazes and disappoints us. This empirical evidence is further confirmed by the testimony of the majority of people who have participated in the process of Appreciative Inquiry/Intervention at a personal, group, or organizational level, some of which are documented in numerous existing publications (books and articles) and the shared testimony in global appreciative summits and meetings like AI JAMS (Global Virtual Meetings held annually organized by the Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry: Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry and the publications in the IA Practitioner International Journal: IA Practitioner International Journal; and at the regional level, such as the webinars promoted in the Ibero-American region by the Ibero-American Network of Practitioners and Academics of the Appreciative Paradigm (RIPAPA). Regarding scientific evidence, which is obtained using a scientific research method and generates an explanation or theory, there are also publications that confirm it (Mandal, 2022; Varona, 2021).

VI. WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO DISCOVER AND DEFINE THE APPRECIATIVE ONTOLOGY OF THE HUMAN BEING?

Every Appreciative Inquiry/Intervention and human activity of personal and social change is inspired and based on an ontology, that is, a vision, whether conscious or not, explicit or implicit, of what a human being is. For example, the four core phases of the Appreciative Inquiry/Intervention methodology arise when Cooperrider recognizes that in the human being: first, there is a positive core that we need to discover (Discovery Phase); second, they have the capacity to anticipate, visualize, and imagine a better future (Dream Phase); third, they can realize their dreams when we concretize them into specific values and action commitments (Design Phase); and fourth, they need to participate in motivation, education, and evaluation programs to

keep their commitments alive (Destiny Phase). Consequently, the practice of Appreciative Inquiry/Intervention must be inspired, based, and guided by the Appreciative Ontology of the Human Being from the Appreciative Paradigm. It is from this vision that we must decide what we do, why we do it, how we do it, what we need to change, and above all, what we need to create to be more effective and coherent in our work when we act as facilitators of personal and social change.

CONCLUSIÓN

I hope that with this essay I have achieved the goal of opening a window to begin seeing the human being from the Appreciative Ontology of the Appreciative Paradigm. And that the invitation to accompany me in discovering it through this window has been an enriching and inspiring experience. I am aware that what I present in this essay falls far short of what is possible. Delving into what Appreciative Ontology is, is a task that belongs to all academics and practitioners of the Appreciative Paradigm. Therefore, I want to end by inviting you to share your version and to walk together to build our vision of the Appreciative Ontology of the Human Being.

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