

ORGANISMIC

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1. Core Definition

The term **organismic** refers to the characteristic structure and function of a living system viewed as an integrated, coordinated whole. It is derived from the word 'organism,' which is defined not merely as a collection of parts, but as a system where various, specialized components interact dynamically to produce a total operation greater than the sum of its individual elements. Crucially, the organismic perspective emphasizes that these parts are not independent; rather, they serve varied operations that perpetually interplay to maintain the stability and coherence of the entire living being. This perspective is foundational in biological and psychological sciences, where understanding behavior and physiological processes requires acknowledging the inherent interdependence among subsystems, whether they be cellular, cognitive, or social.

In essence, an organismic process is characterized by an intrinsic unity. For example, a single physiological response, such as the regulation of body temperature, involves the coordinated action of the nervous system, endocrine system, circulatory system, and muscular system. The organismic viewpoint argues that studying these systems in isolation yields an incomplete picture; true understanding requires examining how their complex feedback loops and regulatory mechanisms contribute to the integrated, self-regulating nature of the whole entity. This holistic focus differentiates the organismic approach from strictly mechanical or reductionist interpretations of life, advocating instead for a concept of life defined by active self-maintenance and intrinsic goal-directedness.

Furthermore, the concept extends beyond basic physiological maintenance to encompass behavior and development. To describe a psychological process as **organismic** is to assert that it reflects the entire personality or system of the individual, rather than being an isolated, modular function. This means that motivation, perception, and learning are understood as manifestations of the individual's overall striving for growth, adaptation, and coherence within their environment. The organismic lens thus provides a powerful framework for interpreting complex phenomena that cannot be adequately explained by analyzing discrete variables alone, emphasizing the continuous, coordinated total operating system that characterizes a living being.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The concept of **organismic** processes gained prominence largely through the reaction against the mechanistic and elementaristic approaches that dominated 19th and early 20th-century science. Mechanistic reductionism sought to explain complex biological phenomena by breaking them down

into simple physical and chemical laws, treating the organism akin to a machine whose parts could be disassembled and analyzed independently. However, philosophers and biologists began to recognize that the unique properties of life--such as self-regulation, development, and intentionality--could not be adequately accounted for by studying constituent parts in isolation.

A major philosophical foundation for the organismic view can be traced to holistic thinking, which posits that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. In psychology, this approach was profoundly influenced by the **Gestalt school**, which argued that perception occurs in organized, meaningful wholes rather than discrete sensory units. This intellectual climate paved the way for explicit organismic theories, most notably developed by the neurobiologist and psychiatrist **Kurt Goldstein** in the 1930s and 1940s. Goldstein, working with brain-injured soldiers, proposed that the organism behaves as a unit and that all its processes are expressions of a fundamental drive toward self-actualization or competence. He asserted that any localized disturbance inevitably affects the entire system, necessitating a holistic interpretation of pathology and function.

The organismic perspective later became central to humanistic psychology, particularly through the work of **Carl Rogers** and **Abraham Maslow**. Rogers specifically formulated an "organismic valuing process," suggesting that individuals possess an inherent, internal compass guiding them toward growth and health. This historical trajectory solidified the term **organismic** as a keyword signifying the rejection of purely atomistic views and the embrace of systems thinking, emphasizing the inherent unity and self-directing capacity of the living entity across various levels of complexity. The progression from vitalism (which posited a non-physical life force) to the organismic view (which describes system-level organization) marked a maturation in scientific attempts to define life in terms of emergent properties.

3. Key Characteristics

The organismic view defines living systems through several critical, interlocking characteristics that distinguish them from non-living assemblages or mechanical systems:

Holistic Integration: The most defining feature is that all components (cells, tissues, organs, psychological structures) are functionally interdependent. A change in one part necessitates coordinated adjustments across the entire system to maintain overall equilibrium and function. The organism operates as a single, coherent unity, where specialized parts serve the needs of the integrated whole.

Self-Regulation (Homeostasis): Organismic systems possess intrinsic mechanisms for maintaining stability in the face of environmental fluctuations. This regulatory capacity, or **homeostasis**, is achieved through complex feedback loops that ensure essential variables remain within viable operational limits, reflecting the continuous, coordinated total operating of the system. This active maintenance is intrinsic and autonomous.

Goal-Directedness and Actualization: Unlike passive mechanical systems, organisms are understood to be inherently active and directional. Organismic theories often posit a primary drive toward maintenance, adaptation, growth, and the realization of inherent potential (e.g., self-actualization). All subsystem activities are ultimately oriented toward serving this overarching systemic goal.

Hierarchical Organization: While the system is integrated, it is also structured hierarchically. Lower-level systems (e.g., organs, physiological reflexes) are nested within and serve higher-level systems (e.g., the complex behaviors of the organism as a whole). This structure allows for differentiation (specialization of function) without sacrificing integration (the unity of the total organism).

Emergent Properties: The coordinated interplay of parts gives rise to properties--such as consciousness, subjective experience, or complex adaptive behavior--that cannot be predicted or explained by studying the parts in isolation. These emergent qualities are considered the defining features of the total organismic operation, representing a qualitative shift in complexity.

4. Organismic Theory in Psychology

In psychology, the organismic perspective forms a critical pillar of the humanistic tradition and developmental psychology, profoundly influencing how clinicians and researchers understand human motivation and personality. **Carl Rogers' Person-Centered Theory** is perhaps the most famous application, proposing that the individual has an inherent "actualizing tendency"--an organismic drive to develop all capacities in ways that maintain or enhance the organism. According to Rogers, the organismic self encompasses all aspects of the individual's experience, both conscious and unconscious, functioning as a unified field of perception and operation that strives for coherence.

Rogers introduced the concept of the **organismic valuing process (OVP)**, which acts as an internal, bodily wisdom that guides the individual toward growth-promoting choices. The OVP is the organism's innate system for evaluating experiences, labeling those that facilitate actualization as positive and those that hinder it as negative. When individuals are psychologically healthy, they trust their OVP, allowing their actions and attitudes to align with their deepest needs and genuine self. This results in an integrated personality structure where the concept of self is congruent with the overall organismic experience, leading to psychological adjustment.

Conversely, psychological distress often arises when an individual adopts "conditions of worth" from external sources (e.g., parents or society), leading to a split between the perceived self (or concept of self) and the true organismic experience. This incongruence disrupts the coordinated total operating, resulting in anxiety and defensive behaviors designed to protect the artificial self-concept rather than serving the actual needs of the organism. Therapy, from this view, is the process of creating a climate where the individual can safely reconnect with and trust their inherent

organismic valuing processes, thereby restoring integrated function and fostering authentic growth.

5. Significance and Impact in Science

The significance of the **organismic** concept extends far beyond psychology, acting as a crucial intellectual precursor to modern **General Systems Theory** (GST), formulated by biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy. GST explicitly formalized the principles inherent in the organismic view, arguing that the same fundamental laws governing the organization and interaction of parts apply across disparate scientific fields--from cell biology and ecology to sociology and engineering (cybernetics). The organismic paradigm provided the necessary language for understanding complex, open systems that exchange matter and energy with their environment while maintaining structural and functional integrity.

The impact of this shift is profoundly evident in modern biology, particularly in fields like physiology and developmental biology, which rely heavily on recognizing the integrated nature of biological functions. For instance, in molecular biology, understanding gene expression is increasingly viewed not as a simple one-to-one correlation between gene and trait, but as a vast, highly coordinated network of interactions modulated by the entire cellular environment--an inherently organismic approach known as network biology. Similarly, ecological science treats ecosystems as complex, interacting systems, emphasizing the coordinated, often symbiotic operations between varied species that generate the stability and resilience of the environmental whole.

In clinical medicine, adopting an organismic perspective encourages a holistic approach to patient care, moving beyond the treatment of isolated symptoms to consider the patient's psychological state, lifestyle, and social environment as integral components of their disease process. This holistic view acknowledges that the breakdown of coordination in one system (e.g., chronic emotional stress disrupting the neuroendocrine-immune system axis) has cascading effects that impair the total operating function. Therefore, effective treatment often requires intervention that supports the organism's inherent tendency toward integrated health, underscoring the necessity of treating the patient as an integrated system, not just a collection of malfunctioning parts.

6. Relationship to Holism and Reductionism

The organismic perspective stands in direct philosophical opposition to **reductionism**, particularly mechanical reductionism. Reductionism attempts to explain complex phenomena by breaking them down into their simplest constituent parts (e.g., explaining consciousness purely through neuronal firing or explaining behavior purely through isolated stimulus-response bonds). While the organismic view does not deny the utility of analyzing parts, it asserts that the essential characteristics of life--integration, self-organization, and emergent properties--are lost when the focus is exclusively on the lowest level of analysis, thereby producing descriptions that are

accurate but ultimately incomplete regarding the function of the whole.

In contrast, **holism** is the foundational philosophical stance underlying the organismic viewpoint. Holism asserts that the properties of the system as a whole determine how the parts behave, and that the whole possesses characteristics that are irreducible to the properties of the isolated parts. The organismic concept operationalizes this holism by providing specific, dynamic mechanisms (feedback loops, coordinated physiological responses) through which the integration is achieved and maintained in a living entity. Thus, while holism is the philosophical principle, the organismic descriptor defines the functional, systemic nature of that principle within the context of biological life.

A key point of contention arises when considering causality. A reductionist view might seek a single, linear cause for an ailment or behavior. The organismic perspective, however, embraces circular causality and mutual interaction; causes are distributed across the network of the whole system, meaning that symptoms often reflect a system-wide imbalance rather than a simple defect in one component. This recognition that "We aren't always privy to the entire scope of **organismic processes** that occur" reflects the inherent, irreducible complexity involved in tracing the origins of a system-wide effect, necessitating multidisciplinary and integrated research methodologies that account for nested levels of influence.

7. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its widespread influence and theoretical coherence, the organismic concept faces several criticisms, primarily concerning its scientific testability and predictive power. Critics often argue that while the concept is philosophically appealing and provides a valuable framework for understanding integrated phenomena, its holistic nature can sometimes lead to explanations that are too broad or **tautological**. For instance, explaining a developmental outcome by referring to the individual's inherent actualizing tendency may be criticized for lacking specific, falsifiable mechanisms that dictate the precise pathway of development, making prediction difficult.

Furthermore, the organismic approach can occasionally struggle with empirical verification compared to highly reductionist models. While systems biology offers sophisticated computational tools to model complex interactions, the sheer scope and complexity of the total operating system--especially in disciplines like psychology, where subjective and developmental experience is central--makes isolating and manipulating variables challenging. Researchers focusing on discrete, measurable variables often achieve greater precision and predictive capability in narrow domains, leading some to prioritize reductionist methods even while theoretically acknowledging the reality of organismic integration.

However, proponents counter that the organismic perspective is not intended to replace reductionist investigation entirely, but rather to provide the necessary framework for interpreting

reductionist findings. The utility of the concept lies in its ability to prevent tunnel vision, ensuring that findings about isolated parts are always considered within the context of the whole, functional organism. Contemporary research attempts to bridge this gap by employing advanced network analysis and complexity theory, seeking to quantify and model the dynamic relationships that define the integrated organism, thereby transforming the organismic concept from a philosophical stance into a measurable scientific framework.

Further Reading

[Kurt Goldstein and Organismic Theory](#)

[Carl Rogers' Person-Centered Theory](#)

[General Systems Theory \(GST\)](#)

[Homeostasis and Self-Regulation](#)

[Philosophical Concept of Reductionism](#)

[Gestalt Psychology](#)