



Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Humanity is part of Nature

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Gregory Bateson's monumental book "Steps to an Ecology of Mind" highlights his intellectual-experiential adventure in his effort to build a way of thinking that he names "the ecology of mind" and to point out the mental processes as they exist in the world and throughout the whole evolutionary structure. It is a collection of lectures and essays, which covers a period of thirty-five years, as he dealt with the scientific fields of anthropology, psychiatry, biological evolution and genetics, in the light of the epistemological principles of Systemic Theory and Cybernetics.

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Gregory Bateson did not have a specific scientific identity or a standard income. As a thinker was characterized by a specific way of thinking rather than a specific scientific subject. He dealt with native societies in Bali, with psychotic people and trainee psychiatrists, with wolves and dolphins, with Cybernetics and Ecology. He organized long-term weekly debates with people from many fields of knowledge, including artists. His typical questions were about the communication of genes with the embryo for the construction of the right or left hand, the communication of plants in a field, the “interactive complexity of a meadow’s species”, which he perceived as an endless dance vibrating with information –that is to say differences in air, temperature, and so on, constituting thus a diffused sensory organ. His knowledge and his questions have connected those in the field of mental health, with domains that had not been approached until then, such as Systems’ Theory and Cybernetics.

Gregory Bateson's work is pervaded by the idea that humankind is part of a living systemically evolving system. It therefore evolves altogether as a set of parts that interact and transform each other. The living world is a world of communication, organization, meaning, full of mental functions. Bateson’s idea is that when an interacting parts circuit is self-correcting, it implies mental function. Thus, the man, the ax, the tree, the forest, with its various plants and trees, all around us, are circuits of interactive parts which are capable of self-correction, meaning that they finally achieve a balance between competition and co-dependence: "*Mind is inherent in the wider system: man and environment*". This fully self-correcting unit, man and environment, which processes information, or as I think of it, "thinks" and "acts", is a system whose limits do not coincide with the limits of either body or what is widely called ‘self’ or ‘conscious’.

Human beings, according to Bateson’s idea, will be able to survive if they develop a unified understanding of the world, which will be expressed in the understanding that man has for himself as part of the whole, and in his action in this interconnected whole. The way we think should be in functional coupling with the world we live in.

He therefore believed that there are two main problems with regard to the functional coupling of the concepts “way of thinking” and “the world we live in”. The first problem relates to *language* and the second to the meaning of the term *conscious purpose*.



Our *language*, as subject, verb, object, is suitable for the description of the inorganic world, the world of physics and chemistry. But it doesn't fit the nature of the living world, which has circular organization and circular etiology. For example, when we kick a stone, we can calculate, depending on some data (force of the kick, the friction, etc.), where the stone will go. When we kick a dog, we do not know if it'll go away or turn to bite us, if it'll cry complaining - and then we will end up taking it home. Obviously, the inorganic and the living world are not separate and cannot be separated. My arms and legs on the one hand obey laws relating to weight, length, temperature, and on the other obey to very different laws related to their controlled and synchronized movements.

For example, in *what language* will we describe the complexity of human interaction? "I look at you as you are looking at me, and you look at me as I am looking at you. And as I see you looking at me looking at you, I am thinking that, probably, I am not speaking well, since it seems to me that you are bored. And I lose my courage, or I get angry, because I think you are not interested in what I am saying etc etc. In language, everything that is produced by human interaction is described as a "thing". "The table is stiff". This means that the interaction between the table and a sensory organ, such as my hand's skin, acquires the quality of "stiff". That is, I attribute the sensation of that quality of the interaction/relationship to one of the interacting parts. The thing is defined by its relationships - and not by its own qualities - and all its relations are what we call context. Language confirms through its syntax that things have qualities. If I prefer to speak in a more accurate way, I would make clear that things are "produced", and are perceived through internal, interactive, relationships and through their "behavior", their's participation, in relation to other things and to me as the speaker, meaning circular and not linear relationships, that is, there are levels of feedback and there are self-correcting mental mechanisms. So, "I am looking at you and I am feeling that you are bored. I will tell a joke". Bateson explores more appropriate ways of description. The structure of the language to be used to describe a living organism should fit or mimic its complexity, which means that a plurality of individual parts/units is simultaneously unified in a whole.

According to Bateson, metaphor, for example, is a pattern of thinking, of perception and communication, throughout the living world. It may be part of an intellectual



strategy throughout the entire biosphere. The metaphor declares the relationship between two whole, similarity or difference. The phrase "the world is a theater scene" is a statement of the relationship between the connected elements that constitute the theater and the connected parties that constitute the world in the context of that specific communication. The metaphor consists of parts in which each has its own complexity (world, scene), being at the same time a whole . Thus, it is useful as a way of thinking, since it mimics the organization of living beings: A body organ, for example, consists of cells, each having its own complexity, being at the same time integrated as it is.

Bateson asks, "How genes, with what kind of message, give the order to the fetus 'now make a right hand and now a left'?" Obviously, the message is about relationships. So, to the question "What is the elephant proboscis?", the answer "The elephant's proboscis is a 'nose'", highlights that it is the context that identifies it as a nose, meaning something which stands between two eyes, north of a mouth is a 'nose' and that's all. The communication phenomena in the human living world lead us to look for explanation in even larger systems. The ability of an organization to recognize the context means that it can decode the meaning of a message. For example, "Does he smile because he is flirting with me or because he is kind? He's probably flirting."

Bateson's most famous work, double bind theory, describes relationships' conditions in which this ability has not been developed in the so-called schizophrenic patient. An example Parent gives incongruous messages. For example, he/she invites the patient to express a courageous opinion, and when he expresses it, it will be treated as an uncaring, devious, disobedient opinion, or the behavior of the parent initially seems to be developed into a specific mood, e.g. into a seriousness mood, and then this mood changes completely to teasing or manipulation. Furthermore, additional restrictions complement this: you are not allowed to highlight parents' inconsistency (if you are a child), or to leave the field, or not respond.

Double bind is unbearable dilemma for the patient. It's not just an unpleasant situation in which if someone acts in a certain way he is lost and if he acts in the other he is again lost. It is rather a swing situation, as a result of dilemmas, where he would prefer not to choose anything. The circumstance, however, requires choice. Under



these circumstances, the human being will adequately protect himself by emitting messages that cannot be mistreated or distorted. This is done by stripping the messages from indirect or direct post-communicative messages. For example, he will avoid the articles or treat a metaphor without the necessary indications of what metaphor is about, or will defend as if it were literal. He will express an insignificant message as if it was significant, or he will deny the importance of a message which was vital to him. He can also develop strategies, such as looking behind every expression for a harmful meaning, proclaiming that no one can deceive him, understanding literally what the others say, ignoring all post-communicative messages, or treating all messages as ridiculous, trying to ignore all messages, any kind of stimuli (visual, acoustic, tactile). In a few words, he tries to react in a way described by psychiatry as "paranoid, hebephrenic or catatonic".

Double bind is developed when there are contradictory context demands from the environment, which requires at the same time to increase and decrease the same factor. These demands are not equal: One is of higher level than the other. For example, we would say that on mining or on the industry field in general, humankind faces a double bind: the development of the economy calls for further growth and the preservation of the environment, that is, of life, for decline. If this double bind isn't resolved, mankind will be lost, like dinosaurs that did not resolve their own double bind. Bateson believes that if mankind continues to think and act in the same way as far as nature is concerned it "has as many chances of surviving as a snowball in hell".

However, apart from *language*, which prevents us from describing the complexity and cyclical nature of things, there is another big issue, another source of distortion, that of *conscious purpose*. The systemic nature of the world and the self - in systems no single part has control over the rest - is not conscious, we are not aware of it, when the content of our consciousness is determined by intentional thoughts. We are not aware of the self's and worlds' cybernetics circularity. We consciously choose data or information which conceals the whole, and we can only see arcs of the whole cut off from their matrix because of our selective thinking and attention. If we try to change a variable without understanding the homeostatic network around it, this leads to distortions, and can, at times, be disastrous. The function of consciousness, in the coupling between man and the environment, is extremely important because of



technology's tremendous ability to intervene. Rehabilitation process comes from less conscious or unconscious parts of ourselves. Bateson describes Companies as the sum of people with entirely conscious purpose/self-interest, as "inhuman creatures".

The book "Steps for a Mind Ecology" does not only concern those who deal with the fields of anthropology, psychiatry, biology, genetics, ecology, but also is addressed to all those who want to experience a new way of thinking that opens up new fields of thinking and action. Particularly, the book concerns all those who have begun to perceive the present impasse as an after effect, among other reasons, of modern scientific way of thinking.

In conclusion, in these troubled modern times, Bateson's book offers us a way of thinking that helps us to reflect and redefine the way we connect to ourselves, to others, to nature, to the world as a whole.

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