

## **A systemic and constructivist epistemology for a relational vision of a man**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents an epistemology which integrates the systemic and constructivist visions of man; a man who is, at the same time, controlled by the systems to which he belongs, and the inventor of an individual reality.

The human being is part of an ongoing process of interactions with his environment and adapts himself to it by the way of what is called «processive learning». But a man is also coupled to his environment by consciousness; this reflexive knowledge is mostly derived from language which digitalizes the continuous process of experience.

This double vision of man can be useful for the strategic therapist in different ways: to map the «potential of the situation», to reframe patients' constructions of reality, to better understand reflexive problems and the limitations of willpower as a determinant of human behavior.

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Good morning.

I'm very happy and honored to be part of this first European conference of brief strategic and systemic psychotherapy.

A lot of things will be said about the techniques of brief therapy during these four days, and Giorgio Nardone has asked me to give a talk about epistemology. So I decided to share with you some ideas that help me to do my job as a therapist. I hope they will help you too and confirm the saying : «nothing is more practical than a good theory !»

Most of these ideas comes from Gregory Bateson and also from Chinese philosophy, so it will be my way of looking back in the past to see the future.

I will try to tell you why we can say that our therapeutic method is, at the same time, interactional *and* constructivist and how it can also be strategic *and* respectful.

### **Epistemology**

First, let me say a few words about epistemology. In the Western tradition, we consider that man can be studied and understood in himself, isolated from his context, from his environment. He is autonomous, independent of the rest of the world and all the essential determinants of his behavior must be found inside of him, inside of his skin.

This may seem obvious to most people but this way of looking at man is man's own invention, it comes from our philosophical and religious premises. It looks like a «Universal Truth» — as Saint Augustine would have said — so called «truths» that almost nobody questions anymore.

When Bateson was in the Iatmuls tribe in New Guinea and was trying to learn with great difficulties the language, the Iatmuls seemed very surprised and said to him : «look, it's very easy, you just open your mouth and... you speak !»

It is the same with our western «vision of man», we think that it is an evidence, that it goes without saying that man has a special place in the universe. He has been created following God's image. God created the universe and man, like Him, has the power and the mission of controlling the rest of the world. He observes from an external standing point.

But this is not the case in other cultures. In China, for example, — but it is also the case in many other cultures, such as the American Indians or cultures from Africa — it is very different. The French philosopher François Jullien explains that this conception of man maybe derived from the dominant economic activity of our countries. At the origin, our people were mostly breeders, they had to control cattle for survival, they were longing for complete control over their environment, so we created a God who commands, controls, imposes his will to the rest of the world.

In China, the dominant economic activity was agriculture and people were dependent on their environment, the weather conditions, the nature of the soil, and so on. The position of man is different, he must take into account the rest of the natural world to find his place, he sees himself as being part of the world that surrounds him. As he cannot control what is out of his reach, he must find his place, adapt himself, adjust to the environment. Relations are central in this conception of the world : man must manage to react adequately to always changing conditions of living and try to do the best he can to understand the process of nature and react to it in the best way in order to survive.

Our science reflects these different positions. Descartes has defined the best way of doing science in the Western culture: you take a neutral, external, objective point of view

and then you control all the factors of the studied phenomenon at the exception of one to measure the impact of this one on the phenomenon. But since the beginning of the 20th century, some scientists have discovered that if this principle can apply to the non living phenomena with an enormous success — our technology is unsurpassed in the world — it doesn't apply to living creatures in the same way. Life is organized, structured and when one changes an element, a factor, the others change also to restore the balance, the previous dynamic organization. Causality is different, it is circular and non linear as you all know now, I don't have to go through all this again.

It's interesting to take note that cybernetics and systemic approach have re-introduce a way of speaking about «the pattern which connects» as Bateson called it, in order to describe the net of relations which man is made of and is part of, the whole process of **coevolution**.

I find it interesting also to note that, very often, with our patients, we use metaphors and stories from China to help them to get out of their usual ways of looking at themselves or at their relationships. To help them to let go of their attempted solutions and to consider an other way of looking at things. Not that I think that Chinese approach to life is better than ours, but I think that it corrects the excesses of our individual and controlling vision of man in the world.

In order to simplify this matter, I will try to sketch an image of man which is a double image; first, as a part of an ongoing process of interdependences and, at the same time, as an individual constructing his own world and able to make personal decisions.

I will try to give an answer to the question: «when we let go, what is it that takes charge of our life?» or, to put it in another way: «When the centipede does not think, what makes it run?»

To answer those questions, I will follow a Chinese distinction between 2 types of human knowledge: processive knowledge and reflexive knowledge.

### **Processive knowledge**

The systemic approach has shown that in order to survive in this world, man must adjust to the continual changes of his environment, to preserve his difference, to resist entropy as Bateson could have said, to protect its autonomy. In nature, change is the rule and the different systems which compose the living world must transform themselves to stay the same, so to speak. As the Buddha said: «nothing is constant except change.»

The coevolution of the living organisms regulates itself by the way of reciprocal incitements and redundancies which take place between the different parts of our ecosystem: we are transformed by the interactions between us and the environment. Like when a tree grows it takes into account the trees which surround it, bending itself to seek the light if necessary, growing taller or smaller depending on its environment and the soil, man learns to find its ecological niche, by interacting with his environment.

We learn to react to different types of contexts even if we don't know why we do it neither how we do it, without being conscious of our ability to do it. We know how to walk, to dress, to stay at a good distance of our interlocutors, to speak our native language, and we have learned a lot of social skills that allow us to live in our culture. This type of knowledge doesn't seem to really belong to us but rather to have been passed down through

each of us as a result of our interactions with one another and our surroundings: it is the signals of the context which induce the learned answer.

The traditional Chinese philosophy call that **the processive knowledge**. This integrated knowledge of coevolution is very sophisticated and delicate. For example, when we learn to walk, we have to coordinate a lot of muscles, nerves, tendons, bones, and so on, and this very complex process make us able to walk and even to run on very different types of grounds, to climb stairs, and so on.

When we live an experience, we learn not only with our brains but also with our body, with our emotions, and with our organism as a whole. There's a kind of simultaneity between the experience and the knowledge, no distinction between the one who lives the experience and the experience itself: the experience transforms us, we «are» the experience, in a way; there's no reference to an internalized subject, an introjected authority like an ego for example. This type of knowledge is thus very special:

- it doesn't apply to an object but to an interactional flow;
- it doesn't belong to a subject but to a flow;
- it doesn't proceed by means of abstraction but we acquire it through the ongoing process: one doesn't learn by realizing the contents of what is learned but we are transformed by the experience;
- it doesn't aim at seeking an absolute truth but at catching an evolution to anticipate it;
- ...

When we learn by experience, we learn to be able to be part of the «great dance of life» (Edward Hall), to be able to react in the most appropriate way to all the incitements which come from inside and outside ourselves all the time, we learn to surf on the ever changing waves of life. We become more familiar with what the Chinese call *The Process*, able to catch its internal coherence in order to better anticipate it.

This process of learning takes place in the eternal present of experience. It is triggered by interaction. If it is not activated by interaction, by the exchange of information, by the communication process, it stays silent.

### **Reflexive knowledge**

But the matter gets more complicated with humans because, as Bateson pointed out, the human being is also coupled to his environment by consciousness. Man has the capacity to know that he knows.

I don't know how this reflexive consciousness appeared (maybe it is because once, in the garden of Eden, Eve *ate* an apple...) nor if the two types of knowledge have once worked together in harmony, but it seems that, since, we are longing for this lost unity.

This matter is still very obscure. Is it a type of knowledge derived from the processive one? Anyway, it seems that the way it derives from experience is mostly dependant on our cultural premises, especially our language. We know that language *digitalizes* the continuous process of experience. It isolates things and actions; it also defines classes of actions and objects, abstracted from similar aspects from different elements. Language allows us to take a distance from experience — *the words are put for the things* it creates a virtual world which has qualities, characteristics different from the processive world. It creates a world parallel to the processive world. The way of doing it, is different from one

culture to the other but it is important because it orients our way of understanding the world and even of looking at it. It is the domain of our epistemologies with a small e, as Bateson put it, that is our personal theories of the world. Because we also learn to link the different elements of language, to establish causality sequences, *a* leads to *b*, we invent different types of logic, as Giorgio Nardone says, to seek a meaning, to understand the way things go, the way life goes.

Like I said before, our culture and our languages don't take relations into account and are based mostly upon linear logic to explain the world. They cut off the observer from the observed, invent a «me subject» who is the observer cut from the interactional circularity: language only take into account one term of the interaction.

Of course, this reflexive consciousness is also fabulous: it allows us to talk about things or people who are not there, to exchange about our experiences, remember the past, prepare the future. It is a magical phenomenon that we can make people cry or laugh with words. *Words are put for things*, of course, and we have to remember that the map is not the territory, but everybody knows that we don't always follow this advice. We can invent «abstract realities» like happiness, good and bad, objectivity, mental illness, total security, and so on, and then we try to find them in the processive world. We can construct personal ideals to which we try to correspond, we can construct a vision of man as independent of his context, a man capable of controlling completely himself and his environment. We construct an ego, a virtual entity with which we identify our self. «I think, thus I am» as Descartes put it.

When the two types of knowledge correspond to each other, man is at peace with himself. Bateson suggested that we reconsider our premises — the basis of our reflexive knowledge — in order to make them closer to the way nature regulates itself. But frequently it is not the case. We experience things, we feel things that don't match with our reflexive constructions, so we decide to control ourselves, to correct the experience, to fill the gap between what we feel and what we should be feeling. And then we observe and analyze ourselves: one tries to put oneself to sleep, one tries not to be afraid, one tries to have an erection, or an orgasm, one forces oneself to look at the bright side of life, and so on... Examples are many, especially in the therapy rooms, but everybody is concerned. Dualism is well established in our culture.

### **The interest of this double vision of man**

Now, I will tell you how this distinction helped me to formalize my work as a therapist. Especially the way of conducting the strategic interview.

Generally, a problem is the result of a struggle between the reflexive goal and the processive incitation. I will try to point out some other characteristics of this processive world that I hope may be of some help to do your therapeutic job, especially reframings:

— time is different from our conception of it: process is a form of eternal present, without past or future: there is only what is;

— nothing is permanent, transformation, change is continuous. Life is a flow and *to adapt it is better be flexible*.

— there cannot be «problems» in the process, only evolutions more or less important, more or less painful for the living creatures. Even death is necessary because it leaves place for *innovation*.

— the behavior of a part of the process is controlled by the whole; so, one individual cannot control the functioning of the whole (and it is impossible to predict with certainty the evolution of a relationship, for example);

— every structure resists to internal and external pressures by means of homeostatic regulation; far from their balance point, systems can create more complex structures;

— in the process, everything is assertion; we cannot negate what is, except if we are ready to alienate a part of our experience, a part of ourselves.

— ...

You know that in brief therapy we are looking for the patients' attempted solutions, that is, the part of the process that the patient cannot regulate properly because the way he handles it generates pain, suffering. And we look also for the constructed reality that maintains and reinforces his attempted solutions.

The strategic therapist will ask questions about how the patient deals with the situation in his everyday life, in the process. He won't talk much about the internal conflicts or the existential dilemma of his patient — which result from his reflexive activity. The goal is to help his patient to go on with his life, to be able to handle the interactions between him and the environment more than give him analytic tools.

### **A new approach of the determinants of human behavior**

What does determine man's behavior? Is man capable of deciding what he wants to do, is he able to make conscious choices and how? Is he capable of deciding to change when something goes wrong in his life?

In the Western tradition, the ultimate cause of behavior lies only inside the individual, following the religious point of view — God is pictured as an individual—: so, you can choose to be good or bad. Throughout the western philosophy, one finds the idea that man can understand what goes on and decide to react voluntarily in «the best manner». *Willpower* helps one to take action. I want to move, so I move!

But if we can decide to get up, for example, or to take a glass of water, it is not so easy to decide to be happy, or to get rid of phobias, or to quit smoking or taking drugs. By the way, a few years ago, while I was in Palo Alto, I remember that Nancy Reagan had found the solution to the problem of drug addiction, she said: «just say NO!» So I urge you to do the same: say *no* to unhappiness, say *no* to fear, say *no* to phobias, to paranoia, to schizophrenia,...

Of course, Marxists or Freudians have noticed that it wasn't that easy and they invented other intrapsychic entities to try to solve the problem. Freud invented an «ego» which is a kind of referee capable of controlling the impulses of the «id» and the moral pressure of the «superego» — a kind of internal father.

Individual psychology doesn't take into account the relational aspects of behavior. As Bateson and others have shown, every message has 2 aspects: the contents of the message, the informative report, and also, the command aspect of it, the incitation to react, the injunctive aspect of every message. Most of the traditional therapies focalize on *the verbal contents of the messages*, on the *meaning*.

When one adopts an interactional epistemology, one is interested by: what, in the environment, induces the trouble? And, as therapists: what context can induce another way

of behaving, what context can lead the patient to live another type of experience, a «corrective emotional experience», for example?

### **The wise man is a strategist**

But it is time to conclude and I would like to say a word about strategy and the use of strategy by the therapist. The use of strategy is very different from an individual or a relational point of view. In our cultural tradition, the one who doesn't say what he really thinks is a manipulator, a liar. It doesn't matter if the consequences are positive or not for the others, one is supposed to say the truth, nothing but the truth!

But in China, «The wise man is a strategist!» The strategic therapist must use the best means to make the patient get better. And *inciting* someone to change can be very different from just *telling* him or her to do so.

The Chinese way of winning the battles is to win them before they begin... In order to do that, one must be able to evaluate what they call the «potential of the situation», which means to become impregnated with the logic of the process, its internal coherence, to be able to direct it along the easiest paths.

In China, the concept of the «potential of the situation» consists of knowing:

- the topology of the battle field. For example, if there are swamps, or canyons to know where to place soldiers in the most strategic way;
- the moral of the enemy, its habits, its weaknesses and its forces, the best time to start the battle, and so on.

We can transpose that in our field where the battle is against the patient's problem.

It's interesting to know:

— the different protagonists and the dynamics of their relations. Who's concerned by the problem, who is trying to solve it? This allows the therapist to attack the problem from different angles. This can be of much help to solve complex problems such as anorexia, double binds situations, depressions when the rest of the family tries to «help» the patient.

— Patient's language and his reflexive logic which maintains the problem through the attempted solutions.

— The blocked positions like «anything but that», «anything but a divorce — because I suffered too much because of my parents divorce», «anything but a conflict...»

— The rigid positions, such as ideological or religious principles, and so on.

— Patient's position like they call it in M.R.I....

— Patient's motivation to change, to respect and to use his own rhythm ;

Etc.

The more one is present to the experience, the more he is in the process, the more one is in contact with the world which surrounds him. This position is very different from the usual western approach following which man must turn inside himself to try to find ultimate and absolute truths to make the good choices. On the contrary, a strategic interview will lead the patient to turn to the outside, to see what is going on around him, to be aware of the different aspects of the situation in order to react adequately. The Chinese say: «the wise man passes all his life caring about the world, so he's never got a day of worries.» When one is aware of the coherence of the process, of its tendencies, one is fully in the present and can react properly when it is required, and he doesn't have to worry later.

I hope these 4 days will help us all to be more fully aware of the process of life and to be able to better help our patients.

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