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Idea avoidance: reflections on a conference and its language

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Received 30 September 2012
Revised 12 February 2013
Accepted 7 October 2013

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to offer a personal reflection on the 2012 joint conference of the American Society for Cybernetics and the Bateson Idea Group, "An Ecology of Ideas". The intent is to raise awareness, through examples, of ideas – and their associated ways of thinking – that the author tends to take for granted in the work as systems theorists as well as in everyday life, yet ideas that confound the very social issues the conferees were trying to address.

Design/methodology/approach – The thoughts expressed arose after five days of listening to presentations and discussions, both formal and informal. The approach is conversational, with a desire to stimulate further conversation.

Findings – Certain versions of systems theory – whole systems, purposeful systems, systems theory as ideology – rely on ideas that although written about extensively in philosophical and socio-political works go unchallenged in everyday life. Three of these ideas – hierarchy, purpose, belief – are embedded in the way of talking about, and the language used to formulate, solutions to social problems. The suggestion is to avoid or suspend these ideas so that alternatives can be considered.

Originality/value – Idea avoidance offers those who study social change and/or those who participate in making it happen a way to escape the stuckness of ideas so ingrained in the everyday ways of thinking that they go unnoticed.

Keywords Systems theory, Social change, Purpose, Hierarchy, Paradigm, Belief

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section offers a personal statement, a manifesto of sorts that provides a context for the reflections on ideas I suggest avoiding or suspending. The second section presents three examples of ideas that were observed/heard often at the conference on "An Ecology of Ideas" and that we might consider avoiding: hierarchy, purpose and belief. The third section is a reflection on anticipated responses to the suggestions of the second section and to the form of the paper itself – a reflection on the reflections, so to speak.

A manifesto

I regard it as desirable to stimulate conversation (and thinking) about language, ideas and social change in my everyday life, as well as in academic and scientific discourse. Cybernetics, as a way of thinking about ways of thinking (of which, of course, it is one), offers a basis for academic and scientific discourse. The following statement attempts to connect the two: everyday life with the role of the public intellectual. In this formulation, the public intellectual relies more on the arts as an agent of change than on science. While science may be useful for generating changes in a system, it must, of necessity, rely on the current thinking of that system, which may then perpetuate a system deemed undesirable. The arts offer a way to break the hegemony – that is,

Kybernetes
Vol. 42 No. 9/10, 2013
pp. 1464-1469

0368-492X
DOI 10.1108/K-09-2012-0060

to realize a change of system, a new order of things. Perhaps a new order of things could include a merging of art and science. Hence:

> I seek to overturn the assumption, widely held, that the only way the world can "work" is through the control of resources by the few, with the rest toiling (and dying) to support them or going hungry (and worse). That many of the rest (often including me) seem satisfied with their place in the world is not sufficient reason to maintain the status quo or to accept the current human predicament as necessarily inevitable. It is precisely us, the temporarily satisfied, yet outraged, middle-class, who possess the greatest opportunity to stir the pot, to rock the boat, to unsettle the status quo.
>
> I would, therefore, like to raise the ante on the role and responsibilities of the public intellectual in global social change. I see the arts as a (maybe THE) key avenue for raising the ante – not any old art, art with social intentions. This, I claim, requires a new (different than the mainstream) approach to the uniquely human quality we have come to call consciousness. Despite the evidence – a history of unspeakable cruelty by humans to other humans, I retain "faith" that the creative human spirit can and will prevail, and that this can (in fact, must) happen without violence (but not without us and our desires).

Reflections on a conference

In the interest of a conference on an ecology of ideas and as motivated by my statement above, I would like to suggest that there are some ideas that we should consider avoiding or suspending, or to which we should at least create alternatives so that they become a choice rather than the default idea. I refer, in particular, to ideas that we, including me, speak and write without thinking, as their use is so pervasive and accepted that alternatives are not even considered; they are embedded in our everyday language. These ideas bring to mind the concept of paradigm, a habit of thought that goes unquestioned even though it may have consequences that no one wants, consequences that can prove devastating and not even noticed until it may be too late.

I offer below three examples of ideas that we might consider avoiding. These ideas often arise in conversations in systems theory; in fact, some versions of systems theory take these ideas as central to the proposals offered to address issues of worldwide concern. I claim that these ideas often contribute to the intractability of the very issues being addressed, and they were evident throughout the conference in presentations and discussions. Without alternatives, we have no choice. I am not proposing that these ideas be completely avoided, only that they not be used without consideration of alternative ideas.

Example 1: hierarchy

The first example of an idea that I suggest avoiding or suspending is the idea of hierarchy – in models, in theories, in social structures, etc. The idea of whole systems – systems within systems within systems – has origins in hierarchical thinking. In its place, or at least as an alternative, I would offer dialectical thinking – for every idea, generate incompatible and opposing ideas, so that new ideas are brought forth, and then their incompatible and opposing ideas, and so on and so on [...]. Dialectical thinking generates processes as opposed to whole systems. I offer this not in the interest of progress or achievement, concepts deeply embedded in hierarchical thinking; I offer it in the interest of an ongoing process of conversation and in the joy

of learning, creating new alternatives and interacting with others that conversations engender. The societal task, then, is to create the conditions in which conversations flourish and every individual can make their unique contributions, and to avoid the violence that so often accompanies hierarchical structures. The difficulty is that hierarchy pervades almost everything we think and do in the current society.

Example 2: purpose

The second example of an idea that I suggest avoiding or suspending is the idea of purpose. The idea of teleological systems – that systems have a purpose first, with structure following – implies that systems are created or evolve to achieve a goal or objective. In its place, or at least as an alternative, I would offer the idea of presence. Rather than focusing on success or the achievement of a goal or objective, presence focuses on what I wish to conserve, here and now, as a set of constraints that guide what I do. In the biological domain, for example, I wish to conserve the idea of love; in the social domain, I wish to conserve conversation; in the economic domain, I wish to conserve the satisfaction of all basic human needs; in the political domain, I wish to conserve participation; in the domain of ecology, I wish to conserve integrity – the connectedness of all things; and so on. Even the wish to conserve gets construed as a purpose, the word being used so often in everyday conversation that the ideas goal and desire, purpose and intention, are inseparable – that is, treated as synonyms. The societal task is to separate and distinguish them, with the idea of intention arising from the idea of desires as constraints.

Example 3: belief

The third example of an idea that I suggest avoiding or suspending is the idea of belief. Systems theory is often presented as an ideology, the grand solution to all our problems if only people would believe. This ideology points to scientific explanation as the path toward a desirable society. In its place, or at least as an alternative, I would offer the idea of passion. I accept descriptions and explanations temporarily so that I can do what I do. What I do, however, can be guided by certain desires about which I feel strongly – my passions; I do not have to believe in anything to do what I do. Beliefs, as calls to an external truth, stifle conversation and the generation of new ideas, and they are just not necessary. In fact, the ideas of hierarchy, purpose and belief create a formidable triumvirate that works to rigidify the status quo and resist change. Belief is the one we can avoid now, without delay.

Further reflections

I intend this paper to serve as a provocation: a prompt for considering the language and thinking implicit in academic and scientific discourse, whether in presentations at a systems/cybernetics conference or in a journal on cybernetics, as well as in our everyday conversations. The paper is not intended as criticism. To the contrary, we are dealt the language we are dealt and, without alternatives, this is what we use. I would like to think that bringing awareness of those ideas that our language embeds, and that we use by default, might stimulate thinking on alternative ideas and their associated ways of thinking, as well as their possible consequences. A potential value of the paper is as a tool for readers of papers on systems theory and cybernetics with connections to the societal predicament in which we find ourselves. If it prompts readers to ask about

the implicit ways of thinking in the papers and to consider how alternative ways of thinking might change the results, the approach or the applications, it will have done what I wanted. Gregory Bateson was clear, and it was referenced often at the conference: we need new ways of thinking.

I also intend for the form of the paper to complement its content in support of the provocation. The use of the first person, for example, reinforces that this is a personal reflection; this is appropriate, I contend, not only for this paper but in the context of second order cybernetics. The second order is also apparent in the paper's observations on the observational approaches of systems theories. A second order cybernetics approach implies that we take personal responsibility for our actions, including our language and ideas, irrespective of our profession or position in society. Use of the first person in academic and scientific papers may provide a mechanism to help make that responsibility explicit.

I could write a substantial monograph on each of the three ideas – hierarchy, purpose and belief – providing what would probably be hundreds of references each as evidence of prior scholarly work on their linguistic origins and social meanings. However, I am not offering a scholarly piece of work in the usual sense. To the contrary, the paper can be seen as a challenge to academic scholarship in its usual, standard form. I want it to be obvious that this is my reflection on a conference and its language, and to suggest that readers look for these three ideas – hierarchy, purpose, belief – in the papers they read, and then to ask if the results or conclusions are desirable (rather than if they are true). If the author is asking the reader to accept the results or conclusions as "true": does that acceptance also require accepting a way of thinking that we can associate with undesirable consequences (e.g. poverty, racism, militarism)? If so, what alternative way of thinking might generate desirable consequences, even if it requires accepting currently "untrue" results or conclusions?

Rather than extensive references, I offer a Bibliography of some papers for further reading that I have found particularly useful (as well as some of my own) and that might be of interest to those so inclined to follow up. This is not to say that my thinking has not been influenced by many mentors, speakers and writers. Gregory Bateson's writing on conscious purpose was one of the great influences of my life, going back over 35 years. I met him once and asked: why do you consider the practice of planning dysfunctional? He responded that he could walk outside that evening, and someone could come up to him from behind, put a gun to his head and pull the trigger – so much for planning! I have thought often about why he responded that way. Perhaps he was trying to point to the cybernetic idea of restraint (or constraint), as offered in his "cybernetic explanation", as an alternative to the idea of goal (or achievement) as embedded in the notion of planning. That is, why do not we spend our time and energy preventing what we do not want in the here and now, rather than on what we might want (even though we do not really know what that will be) in the future?

Finally, there are certainly other cybernetic ideas that might serve as alternatives to the ideas discussed in this paper. For example, what about synergy, self-organization, networks, homeostasis and equilibrium? For sure, cybernetics has origins in a desire to seek alternatives to the analytical way of thinking that dominated science at the time and, for the most part, still does. In particular, cybernetics sought, and continues to seek, alternatives to hierarchy and causality as ways to explain and model the world. Indeed, the ideas of circularity, recursion and, more recently, reflexivity are aimed

directly at hierarchy and its reductionist and autocratic consequences; and, the limits of causal thinking were initially addressed by adding the idea of purpose (and goal-directedness) to a system, with purpose corresponding to the equilibrium states arising from the recursive relations implicit in concepts like self-regulation, self-organization and homeostasis. Yet, the ideas of goal, achievement and reward still persist as the way to think about succeeding in the world – moving up the ladder, both in the scientific world where funding of research by government agencies, foundations or industry drives thinking, as well as in most of the rest of our everyday world where basic necessities are treated as rewards. That is, the world is taken as a game, with things and people used as the pieces to play in our efforts to win (or survive).

A thought: the cybernetic ideas in the paragraph above can be associated with what is now called first order cybernetics. The introduction of second order cybernetics was a recognition that the observer, and the observer's language and logic, had not been explicitly accounted for in first order descriptions, a problem apparent especially when cybernetics is applied to social systems, and when the observer, who is a part of such systems, takes responsibility and does something about the human misery those systems sustain. To include the observer (and the observer's language and logic) requires embracing (rather than ignoring or disallowing) contradiction and paradox. First order concepts described systems in terms of recursions in relational structures, requiring the selection of an external clock (and its associated concept of time) upon which observational sampling could be conducted. The second order has added and focused on recursions in the dynamics of operations of systems, where the idea of time (and its associated clock) is embedded in the system being observed (which includes accounting for the observer). Second order ideas of autonomy, organizational closure and conversation arise from a back-and-forth (dialectic) between dynamics and relations; they generate processes rather than whole systems and do indeed represent alternatives to hierarchical thinking and the goal-oriented (purposeful) and belief-oriented (ideological) systems that way of thinking engenders. The implicit contradictions and paradoxes are not resolved: they play out in the processes and need to be celebrated rather than dismissed.

I am not naïve; avoiding, or even suspending, ideas that are an integral part of our everyday language and thinking is not a trivial undertaking. However, now more than ever, conditions demand that we not give up.

Conclusion

Avoiding ideas implies a change of language, and with change of language comes change of thinking. And, a change of thinking is needed now!

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