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Introdcution, "Metalogue : Is there a Conspiracy"

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INTRODUCTION, "METALOGUE: IS THERE A CONSPIRACY"

I am again going to use the opportunity provided me by the Polish Bateson Research Group to introduce an unpublished work by Gregory Bateson, and comment on it. The piece I am introducing is an unpublished draft metalogue, and I don't take lightly the fact that he did not choose to publish it in 1971 when it was drafted. Nevertheless it seems to be very topical today. It is entitled, "Is there a conspiracy?"

The answer, which is the one I would have expected from Bateson, is no, our human problems of ecology and war and poverty have deeper roots than conspiracy thinking is capable of understanding. Perhaps conspiracy theory is a common distortion of systems understanding, or symmathesy. Perhaps it is an inevitable outgrowth of our intuitive half-glimpsing of the hidden connections of events. But at the same time it is what Bateson used to call a "vulgar error" – a fatal oversimplification which leads us to a fallacious analysis. (Which is not to say that there are never conspiracies. Our knowledge beginning in childhood of social dynamics leads us of course to understand that people act covertly and with hidden intentions all the time. However, Bateson is after bigger game, a deeper understanding of our wider contexts.)

Bateson tells his fictional Daughter in this metalogue that he does not believe conspiracy or nonconspiracy makes much difference in the kinds of things that happen. Bad intentions of bad actors may exist, but we need to look at a wider frame. Nor will having things come to a necessarily help. Bateson opines that a slow allows for habituation, in the manner of the frog and the saucepan. A quick fast might be the best. Yet crises do not normally resolve things, but instead speed up the pace of destruction. Many of the solutions, Bateson argues, to the posed by Hitler, involved adopting his ideas, even in order to defeat them. The Hitler "left us all more ready to distrust each other, more ready to damage the world and with better tools to do damage with – from atom bombs to electronic machinery." Daughter demurs. She argues that the discovery of nuclear power might be a net good because of its possible use

as energy, and when Bateson points up the problem of nuclear waste, Daughter suggests that someone will invent a way of dealing with the waste.

However Bateson believes there is here something akin to a double bind; either nuclear waste itself is ecologically destructive, or the technology developed to deal with the waste is likely to increase (directly or indirectly) our destructive capacity. The problems of insect-caused disease and crop failure prompted the invention of insecticides such as DDT. Daughter suggests that the dangers of DDT were not known when it was invented; but Bateson maintains that in such cases "they knew what they knew and didn't care what they didn't know." And when it is a matter of people who don't care what they don't know, people who maintain ignorance of the possible effects of the changes they promote, it does not matter if there is a conspiracy. "The point is that there is regularity in the way things work towards the destruction of the world ecology." Daughter demurs that there cannot be regularity in mistakes; but Bateson notes, "we are not talking about mistakes but about systematic and directional error in what people do when faced with'."

Instead of, or perhaps beyond or above, the human propensity for conspiracy, Gregory Bateson prefers to focus on the human conundrum of conscious purpose. Years ago Nora Bateson talked about "the problems of problem solving." In the spirit of her father she wanted to direct our attention to the ways that the solving of problems always poses new ones, even more urgent. The error Gregory Bateson saw in people's response to is very much about the problems of problem solving.

Based on his suspicions of conscious purpose, Gregory Bateson in this metalogue took a hard line against invention. By invention he meant a specific type of problem solving. It is a type which Nora Bateson alluded to in a short chapter in her own book, where she writes, "I am baffled by our habit of issuing endless 'direct correctives' to our children, ecology, and economy… We must re-think the notion of fixing things." (Nora Bateson, p. 149)

In critiquing invention, Gregory Bateson made use of a particular figure of speech or thought which is termed "chiasmus." Chiasmus is defined in its narrower sense as a figure of speech which is divided into two halves in which the second half inverts the first.[1] In a wider sense it involves talking in a way that inverts our usual sense of causation or agency, posing what would normally be seen as the result, as the cause. (I am indebted to the great anthropologist

[1] R. Norrman (1986). *Samuel Butler and the Meaning of Chiasmus*. Hampshire and London: The Macmillan Press, p. 1.

Roy Wagner for pointing out to me that this was a technique Gregory Bateson used to significant effect. Gregory Bateson may have learned it from Samuel Butler, a 19th Century intellectual and evolutionary thinker, whose own use of chiasmus has been studied fascinatingly and in great detail by a literary scholar named Ralf Norrman.[2])

And so it comes about that Gregory Bateson begins to talk about machines as if the machines were telling human beings "what sort of thing an invention should be." Of course he does not mean that HAL from Stanley Kubrick's film "2001, A Space Odyssey" has been elected President and is issuing executive orders. Rather, in the spirit of chiasmus and inversion, Bateson in a figure of speech (or could it be more?) turns upside down our usual idea that machines are made by the agency of human beings for human purposes and are therefore controlled by the humans who made them. He begins to talk as if the machines are manipulating their human inventors. "Daughter" tries to reply with common sense, "But machines don't talk –."

Yet casting machines as the actors and human beings as the acted upon, is not merely satirical. By casting problem solving not as something people inevitably do, but as something people are "told to do" by the machines which are supposed to be the solutions, Gregory Bateson calls our attention to the wider pattern, the shape of the world which has been increasingly been bent in the direction of increasingly narrow human purposiveness. To say that problem solving creates for us new problems, is almost trivial. What is less trivial is to explore, as this metalogue does, the nature of how the world is changed towards increased intractability by our endless running ahead to invent a solution to the previous problem.

I could go on but I would rather that each reader discover how this metalogue brilliantly asks the following questions. Why is it that this sort of solution inventing is just the sort of thing that destroys ecologies? How is it unlike what is considered adaptation in the biological world? Could there be something wrong with "knowing exactly what I want and just going after it," the way that Daughter says she has been taught that she ought to be? And are there good inventions such as cheese, or poetry? Why are cheese and poetry exceptions from the problems of problem solving inventions?

I find myself rebelling against some of the implications of this metalogue's arguments, and I wonder why Gregory Bateson did not himself publish it. Did

[2] Ibidem.

he have hesitations? I suspect he did. But my own hesitations are I think ones that Bateson would not have shared.

Thinking of a world problem such as that of global climate change, I do not hesitate to apply Bateson's skepticism to such "solutions" as massive geoengineering. For example, some argue in favor of placing iron filings in the oceans, with unknowable consequences to the ocean ecology, in order to breed phytoplankton which could suck carbon dioxide from the air. I am happy to oppose solutions of that shape on what I would consider Batesonian grounds.

But I have grown used, over the decades, to certain other problem solving solutions. I have hoped for alternative energies from the sun and wind that could power something like the same level of technological consumption to which I have become, like the rest of the developed world, addicted. I have hoped for political solutions like the Paris Climate Agreement. I have voted according to whether particular politicians acknowledge the problem, even when these people I have voted for make the problem worse on one hand while they foster solutions with the other, according to the formula, one step forward, two steps back. For not to look for solutions, after all, would be to abandon hope – and our compulsory optimism, which may itself be a double bind, forbids such a thing.[3]

Hope of that kind was hardly Gregory Bateson's stock in trade. He was not a politician. He was not constrained by the competitive incentives for political survival in a democracy where, as Socrates noted so many centuries ago, it is always the seller of sweets who prevails over the doctor who prescribes bitter medicine. And Bateson did not even have a medicine to sell, an elevator pitch to give, a TED talk to make, an invention to promote. Instead he had a poem to write. (He claimed in the metalogue that the invention of poetry was one of the good kind of inventions, but he left the explanation of this to the reader.) This poem has been published many times, including in Angels Fear, jointly written after his death with his first daughter Mary Catherine Bateson.

The Manuscript
So there it is in words
Precise
And if you read between the lines

[3] See L. Berlant (2011). *Cruel Optimism.* Duke University Press. From the online Description: "A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing."

You will find nothing there
For that is the discipline I ask
Not more, not less

Not the world as it is
Nor ought to be – Only the precision
The skeleton of truth
I do not dabble in emotion
Hint at implications
Evoke the ghosts of long forgotten creeds

All that is for the preacher
The hypnotist, therapist and missionary
They will come after me
And use the little that I said
To bait more traps
For those who cannot bear
The lonely
Skeleton
Of Truth[4]

[4] G. Bateson and M. C. Bateson (1987), *Angels Fear: Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, p. 5–6.