

**FROM KNOWLEDGE TO UNDERSTANDING:
NAVIGATIONS AND RETURNS.**

By

Manfred A. Max-Neef

**Southern University
Valdivia, Chile.**

¿WHY ARE WE WHERE WE ARE?

Life is an unending sequence of bifurcations. The decision I take, implies all the decisions I did not take. The route I choose, is part of all the routes I did not choose. Our life is inevitably a permanent choice of one among an infinity of ontological possibilities. The fact that I was at a given place, at a very precise moment in time, when a given situation occurred or a given person appeared, may have had a decisive effect on the rest of my life. A few minutes earlier or later, or a few metres away in any direction, might well have determined a different bifurcation and, hence, a completely different life. As the great Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset pointed out: "I am myself and my circumstance".

What holds for individual lives, holds for communities and whole societies as well. Our so called Western Civilization is the result of its own bifurcations. We are what we are, but we could also have been something we are not. Let us then revise some of our decisive bifurcations.

Sometime during the XIIth Century, in Italy, a young man, named Giovanni Bernardone, while still very young and very rich, decided to radically change his life. As a result of his transformation, we remember him today under a different name: Francis of Assisi. Francis, when he referred to the world, spoke of brother Sun and sister Moon, of brother wolf, and of water, fire and trees, and people as brothers and sisters as well. The world he described and felt was a world where love was not only possible but made sense and had a universal meaning.

Sometime later, also in Italy, we hear the resounding voice of brilliant and astute Machiavelli, warning us that: "It is much safer to be feared than to be loved". He also describes a world, but in addition he creates a world.

The world we have today is not that of Francis. It is the world of Machiavelli. Francis was the route not navigated. The navigation we chose was that of Machiavelli, and inspired by it we have constructed our social, political and economic conceptions.

In 1487, another very young man, just 23 years of age, Francesco Pico della Mirandola, prepares himself for the public defense of his 900 theses about the concord between the different religions and philosophies. He refuses to enclose himself within the narrowness of just one doctrine. Convinced that Truths are multiple, and never just one, he longs for a spiritual renovation that can reconcile humanity.

Some years later, fervent believer in absolute truth and in the possibilities of certainty, Francis Bacon invites us to torture Nature so that through the delivery of her secrets, we can extract the Truth .

Again two worlds. One representing the route we navigated, and the other the route we navigated not. We did not follow the way suggested by Pico della Mirandola. We opted for accepting Bacon's invitation, and, thus, we continue applying his recipe with efficiency and enthusiasm. We continue torturing Nature in order to extract from her what we believe to be the truth.

In the year 1600, Giordano Bruno burns at the stake, victim of his pantheism, since he believed that the Earth is life and has a soul. Everything, for him, are manifestations of life. Everything is life.

Three decades later, Descartes whispers in his *Metaphysical Reflexions*: "Through my window, what I see, are hats and coats covering automatic machines".

We did not navigate the route of Giordano Bruno. We chose that of Descartes, and, in that manner, we have witnessed the triumph of mechanism and reductionism.

For Galileo and Newton, the language of Nature is mathematics. Nothing is important in science that cannot be measured. We and Nature, the observer and the observed, are separate entities. Science is the supreme manifestation of reason, and reason is the supreme attribute of the human being.

Goethe, whose scientific contributions have been (unjustly) overshadowed because of his colossal achievements in literature and the arts, felt upset with what he believed to be the limitations of Newtonian physics. For Goethe, "science is as much an inner path of spiritual development as it is a discipline aimed at accumulating knowledge of the physical world. It involves not only a rigorous training of our faculties of observation and thinking, but also of other human faculties which can attune us to the spiritual dimension that underlies and interpenetrates the physical: faculties such as feeling, imagination and intuition. Science, as Goethe conceived and practiced it, has as its highest goal the arousal of the feeling of wonder through *contemplative looking* (*Anschauung*), in which the scientist would come to see God in nature and nature in God"¹

Two worlds once more. Another bifurcation. We are still under the spell of the overpowering luster of Galileo and Newton, and have chosen not to navigate the route of a Goethen science. Feeling, intuition, consciousness and spirituality are still banished from the realm of science, some new enlightenment arising from the

¹ Jeremy Naydler, *Goethe on Science*, pg. 23. Floris Books, England, 2000.

field of quantum physics notwithstanding. The teaching of conventional economics, which, as incredible as it may sound, claims to be “value free”, is a conspicuous case in point. A discipline where mathematics has become an end in itself instead of a tool, and where only that which can be measured is important, has generated models and interpretations that are theoretically attractive, but totally divorced from reality.

Johannes Brahms composed two concerts for piano and orchestra. Regardless of which of the two may be more to one’s liking, the fascination is with the first. In fact, it is a splendid exposition of the route Brahms finally decided not to navigate. We have been left forever with the curiosity of knowing how the *other* Brahms might have been.

That’s the way it is. A route not navigated remembered only by “library worms”, and a navigated route to which we attribute spectacular successes and achievements. The University in particular has chosen the routes of Machiavelli, Bacon, Descartes, Galileo and Newton. As far as Francis, Pico, Giordano Bruno and Goethe (the scientist) are concerned, they have remained as historical footnotes.

As a result of the navigated route, we have managed to construct a world in which – as suggested by the Catalan philosopher Jordi Pigem,² the Christian virtues such as: faith, hope and charity, manifest themselves today metamorphosed as schizophrenia, depression and narcissism. The navigation, no doubt, has been fascinating and spectacular. There is much in it to be admired. However, if schizophrenia, depression and narcissism are now the mirror of our existential reality, it is because all of a sudden we find ourselves in a world of confusion. In a world of disenchantment, where progress becomes paradoxical and absurd, and reality becomes so incomprehensible, that we desperately seek refuge in a technology that offers us an escape into *virtual realities*.

¿WHERE HAVE WE ARRIVED?

We have arrived at a point in our human evolution, the characteristic of which is that we **know** a lot, but we **understand** very little. Our chosen navigation has been piloted by reason, and leading into the port of knowledge. As such it has been an overwhelmingly successful navigation. We have never in all of our existence, accumulated more knowledge than during the last one hundred years. We are celebrating the apotheosis of reason, but in the midst of such a splendid celebration we suddenly have the feeling that something is missing.

² Jordi Pigem, *La Odisea de Occidente*, Editorial Kairós, Barcelona, Spain, 1993.

Yes, we can achieve knowledge about almost anything we want. We can, for instance, guided by our beloved scientific method, study everything there is, from theological, anthropological, sociological, psychological and even biochemical perspectives, about a human phenomenon called **love**. The result will be that we will **know** everything that can be known about love. But once we achieve that complete knowledge, we will sooner or later discover that that we will never **understand** love, unless we fall in love. We will realize that knowledge is not the road that leads to understanding, because the port of understanding is on another shore, and requires a different navigation. We will then be aware that we can only attempt to understand that of which we become a part. That understanding is the result of integration, while knowledge has been the result of detachment. That understanding is holistic, while knowledge is fragmented.

At least we have reached a point in which we are finally becoming aware that knowledge is not enough, and that we have to learn how to attain understanding in order to achieve the completeness of our being.

We are, perhaps, beginning to realize that knowledge without understanding is hollow, and understanding without knowledge is incomplete. We therefore need to undertake, at last, the navigation we have so far postponed. But in order to do so, we must face the great challenge of a language shift.

José Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish philosopher already mentioned, used to say that “every generation has its theme”. We might add that, in addition, every generation, or historical period, is dominated by, or falls under the spell, of some language. That is the way it is, and there is nothing wrong with it, as long as the dominant language of a given period is coherent with the challenges of that period. The important thing to keep in mind is that language influences our perceptions and, hence shapes our actions. Let us go through some examples.

During the first three centuries of the Second Millennium of Western civilization, the dominant language was of a teleological nature, meaning that human actions had to be justified in terms of a calling that was superior and beyond the needs of every day life. That made possible the construction of the great cathedrals and monasteries, where time was no issue. That the construction would take six hundred years? And so what! Nobody was in a hurry. After all, they were constructing for eternity, and eternity is not infinite time, but timelessness. Thank God that the language of “efficiency” had not yet been invented. The importance lay in the deed and not in the time it might take. It was a case of coherence between language and historical challenge.

The language dominating the Nineteenth Century was basically that of the consolidation of the nation-state. The great speeches of political leaders such as

Disraeli, Gladstone, Bismarck, are relevant examples. Without going into details, we may also say that the dominant language of the Century was coherent with the historical challenge of the times.

It is only in the Twentieth Century that the dominant language is that of economics, especially during the second half. A quick overview shows some interesting perspectives. The late Twenties and early Thirties, the time of the so called great depression, coincides with the emergence of Keynesian economics. The Keynesian language is in many ways the result of a crisis, having the capacity of both interpreting the crisis as well as overcoming it. It is, again, a language (or rather sub-language) coherent with its historical period.

The next sub-language shift occurs during the Fifties and Sixties, with the emergence of the so called developmental language. This was an optimistic, utopian and happy language. Economists writing in those days were mainly dominated by the feeling that, at last, we had discovered how to promote true development and overcome world poverty. For the purpose of our argumentation, it is unnecessary to reproduce the prescriptions here. However, what should be pointed out is that although the hoped-for goals were not fully achieved, many things during those decades changed in a positive manner. A language, at least partially coherent with its historical challenges.

And then came the last three decades of the Twentieth Century, with the emergence of the neoliberal discourse. A language that is still dominating over a period in which global poverty has increased dramatically, debt burden has crippled many national economies and generated brutal overexploitation of both people and natural resources, destruction of ecosystems and biodiversity has reached levels unknown in human history, and accumulation of financial wealth in ever fewer hands has reached obscene proportions. The disastrous effects of this language, absolutely incoherent with its historical challenges, is clear to be seen by everyone, although decision-makers and holders of power prefer to look in the opposite direction, and hold on to a pseudo-religious concoction.

¿WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

We are, thus far, successful beings, yet incomplete. And, most probably, it is that incompleteness which is responsible for the uneasiness and anxieties that permeate our existence in the world today. Perhaps the moment has arrived in which to rest and reflect. We have the opportunity now, to analyze with true honesty, the map of our navigation, with all its hazards and successes, with all its tragedies and glories. And then, it may be wise to unearth the alternative map of the route we navigated not, and see whether we can find in it orientations that can rescue us from our existential confusion.

Perhaps it would make sense that we start seeing brothers and sisters surrounding us. Perhaps it would be good to believe in the possibilities of harmony between many possible truths. Perhaps it may be to our advantage that we dare to imagine and believe that the earth has a soul and that everything is life. Perhaps it would be good to realize that there is no reason whatsoever to banish intuition, spirituality and consciousness from the realm of science. Or, to put it in Goethe's words: "If (we) would seek comfort in the whole, (we) must learn to discover the whole in the smallest part", because "nothing is more consonant with Nature than that she puts into operation in the smallest detail that which she intends as a whole".³

Our passionate pursuit of knowledge has postponed our navigation towards understanding. There should be nothing to impede the undertaking of such a navigation now, were it not for an economics which, as practiced under the spell of the neoliberal discourse, increasingly distorts reality, thus contributing to our confusion and to the falsification of knowledge itself.

No sustainability (which obviously requires understanding) will or can be achieved without a profound language shift. A new language that opens the door of understanding; that is, not a language of power and domination, but a language that may emerge from the depth of our self-discovery as an inseparable part of a whole that is the cradle of the miracle of life. If we manage to provoke such a shift, we may still experience the satisfaction of having brought about a new Century worth living in.

Let us hope for a safe voyage and a fulfilling navigation towards the shores that may turn us into complete beings capable of understanding the completeness of life.

³ Mentioned by Jeremy Naydler, in "Goethe on Science" pg. 92-93, Floris Books, Great Britain, 2000.