

The Praxis of Thinking: Deliberate vs. Improvised

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ABSTRACT

I sometimes describe cybernetics as "a way of thinking about ways of thinking, of which it is one." This paper explores the practical consequences of treating as a choice our ways of thinking. I use the word thinking when I wish to speak of my awareness of an unfolding, in some language, of a set of connected ideas or concepts. That the way of unfolding can be deliberate, selected from a repertoire of ways of thinking, clashes with the notion that thinking just happens naturally, i.e., improvised in the moment and determined only by the biology and/or social history of the individual. The practical consequences of deliberate thinking include increased facility in conversation and greater opportunities to make a difference when participating in social change, a difference that would not happen without the thinker. When the way of thinking becomes a choice, we can take responsibility not only for our own thinking but also for that of others. What could be any more practical than that? Now, how can I do this, given that I can avoid neither my biology nor my social history?

PREMISES

Cybernetics: a way of thinking about ways of thinking (of which it is one). I could also talk about a way of looking, a way of explaining, a way of observing, a way of understanding, etc., although these are not the same. I wish to conserve the idea of thinking, as it describes something I experience in a way that no other word does. And, I like myself as a thinker.

Thinking: an awareness of an unfolding, in a language, of a set of connected ideas or concepts. Thought is not synonymous with rationality. There are many forms of connection and many ways of unfolding. Questions serve as one type of stimuli for thinking. I am particularly interested in the thinking that responds to "legitimate" questions, questions for which there are no current answers, and to undecidable questions, questions which only we can decide (questions of desirability).

A way of thinking: a particular pattern of unfolding and connections. Logic is but one aspect of these patterns, and there are many possible logics.

Improvised thinking: an explanation of my way of thinking as emerging from my biology and/or social history (with no awareness of alternatives or consequences).

Deliberate thinking: an explanation of my way of thinking as a choice from a set of alternative ways of thinking (with awareness of my desires with respect to the consequences of my choice). I use the word "choice" here, not as a requirement for the rationalization of my actions, but simply as an awareness of multiple possibilities with respect to my actions and their outcomes.

Conversation (dialogic): a particular dynamics of interaction of actors, in a language, in which an asynchronicity in that dynamics moves toward synchronicity. A mutual preference by the actors for recurrent interaction initiates a conversation, and sustains it until synchronicity (agreement) is reached or the actors lose interest.

Synchronicity: the dynamics of interaction that would occur naturally, irrespective of the particular actors (you and I).

Asynchronicity: an anomaly in the dynamics of interaction experienced as an inconsistency, a contradiction, a friction, a "being on different planes", i.e., being "out of sync". Asynchronicity does not occur naturally; it must be recognized by an actor and responded to as such, or composed. (See Appendix for an elaboration.)

Composition: that which without the composer and human intent would not occur. Composed asynchronicity has as its intent, conversation, and arises from self-awareness and thought.

Social transformation: a consequence of the dynamics of interaction of actors. Every conversation offers the opportunity for social activism.

Social responsibility: an awareness of my desires with respect to the consequences of my thinking and action in conversation, AND the thinking and action of others.

PRAXIS I: POWER AND PARTICIPATION

[inspired on the occasion of a vision quest at the School for Designing a Society, April 17-20, 1999]

I participate when I make a difference AND when I am aware that I make a difference. The first condition is sufficient for someone else to attribute participation to me. The second condition is necessary for me to attribute participation to myself.

If I think of making a difference in terms of the ability to cause something to happen, I need power. For participation to occur under this formulation, either power must be equally distributed to all (egalitarianism), or those who have power get to participate while those without it do not.

An alternative formulation suggests thinking in terms of my presence and actions in a dynamics of interaction (rather than in a network of causal relations). Any dynamics of interaction in which I am present would be different without my presence and actions. This dynamics of interaction occurs in conversation. For awareness of making a difference, I need the participation of others. That is, only if I say that the presence and actions of others in a dynamics of interaction makes a difference can I say that mine does.

To elicit (invite, encourage) the participation of others, I need skill in the language of conversation and in the use of that language in the dynamics of interaction.

Human misery interferes with participation. It removes the space for conversation, replacing it with the search for a cure to that misery. Therefore, every project in which I participate is directed at the elimination of human misery, the encouragement of participation, and the appreciation of conversation.

Social transformation happens through (1) changing thinking and (2) transforming history. The thinking needed for the appreciation of conversation is the addition, at least, of dynamics as an alternative to causality when looking at the systems of our world. This thinking transforms the history of celebrity (those granted the power to make things happen) to a new history of participation.

The elements of a conversation include:

1. Humans (participants)
2. Language (all types)
3. Self-consciousness (self-description in time)
4. Composition (creation of asynchronicity)
5. Desire for recurrent interaction (love)

The first and fifth elements are given by our biology. The other three elements require skill and thought. These provide substance for a school for designing a society.

Each project in which these skills and thoughts get translated to action presents occasions for learning about current human misery and the dynamics of conversation. Participation in projects generates new language, new self-descriptions, new concepts of time, new moments for art, and new appreciation of each other as humans.

For learning to occur, mistakes must happen. Mistakes become mistakes when they are responded to as mistakes, by others or by ourselves. Treat these moments of mistake as opportunities to learn. Give these opportunities to others by responding to their mistakes. Do so, so that designing a society can continue to happen. With a continuous, worldwide process of designing a society, we might see the attenuation, if not the elimination, of human misery, violence and war.

Sidebar: As long as I describe our economic system as the engine that drives our society, and as long as I can say that the fuel for that engine is "people wanting more and more", stable hierarchies will persist and, with them, the concept of power as the prevailing way of describing relationships between people and between people and their environment. And, the thinking that this system generates continues to produce the system, creating a self-perpetuating system of thought. I am looking for ways out of this dilemma, and I welcome help in that respect.

PRAXIS II: THREE WISHES

[in response to an assignment given on March 27, 2000 at the School for Designing a Society]

Assignment: If you were granted three wishes, any three wishes, what would they be? A classic response to this assignment is a single wish: "All my wishes will come true." The assignment is to formulate three wishes that accomplish a similar result without being so obviously tautological.

1. Every human is unique, and that uniqueness is treated as a social asset with the potential for significant contribution. (i.e., "Everyone is a champion at some game, although some of the games have not yet been invented.")
2. Every human teaches, sharing what they have to contribute and acknowledging that their contributions make a difference. (i.e., "Everyone participates through conversation.")
3. Economic systems lie on the periphery of our society, there to serve us when needed, not there to serve as the central engine that drives our society. (i.e., "The concept of scarce resources ceases to be a useful concept." Not necessarily, "Resources cease to be scarce.")

The third wish is a necessary condition for the first two to be possible. An alternative engine is implied in a corollary to the first two wishes:

All human desires are subject for conversation, generating new desires and choices. (i.e., "Everyone works to invent the games at which others can be champions.")

Is this doable? Cybernetics, as a science of compatibility and doability, might inform us on this.

PRAXIS III: TECHNOLOGY, THE ARTS, AND SOCIAL CHANGE

[presented at the School for Designing a Society, January 14, 2001]

Technology: the means to solve problems, including problems not yet invented.

Moments of art (3 descriptions): (1) when the logics of two or more worlds (domains) collide, creating an anomaly, (2) as contrasted with the times of consistency (already-named times of "truth"), and (3) experienced in conversation or thought as frictions, tensions, disagreements, contradictions, being on different "planes", being "out of sync".

Participation in social change (3 steps): (1) generate a logical anomaly, (2) compose a provocation (perturbation) around that anomaly (a pivot), and (3) avoid (anticipate, prevent, neutralize, negate) the undesirable consequences of the dynamics triggered by that provocation (as opposed to seeking specific ends).

Technology adds alternatives to the solution of compositional problems.

All technology mediates, in one way or another, human interaction.

APPENDIX: ASYNCHRONICITY IN CONVERSATION

[in memory of Steve Sloan]

A conversation pits two or more participants in an interaction in language, such that the interactional dynamics moves toward synchronization. A "participant" demonstrates the quality of organizational closure–closure in its dynamics of operations. The current language of dynamic closure is the language of dialectics–product/process, structure/organization, relations/dynamics, i.e., any pair of descriptors that appear both opposing and compatible (they need each other). A participant can be as simple as a set of interacting concepts or as complex as an entire society. A "human" participant demonstrates the qualities of biological autonomy, self-consciousness, and a preference for recurring interaction with other humans.

Human participants can hold conversation with themselves, with other humans, or with social entities that meet the criteria for participant. Conversation with oneself describes the process of thinking; roles, perspectives, positions, and points of view (sets of interacting concepts) serve as the participants in these conversations. Conversation among humans ADDS to the dynamics of interaction those particular dynamics of body dispositions that characterize human biology–i.e., emotioning. Conversation with a social entity (or society) entails awareness on the part of the human participants that the interaction in which they are engaged possesses the quality of asynchronicity with the standard interactions of that social entity; in this case, the move toward synchronicity involves changes, current or anticipated, in those standards.

Human participants in a conversation experience asynchronicities as frictions, tensions, disagreements, contradictions, being "on different planes", i.e., being "out of sync" with the other. What qualifies to produce an asynchronicity is any action in a language that is non-standard, unexpected, not anticipated, experienced by a potential respondent as new. The respondent to such an action CREATES the asynchronicity by responding to it as such. For the interaction to turn into a conversation, each participant responds to the other in such a way as to support the continuation of the interaction (moving towards agreement, resolution, new alternatives, etc.). Asynchronicities are not natural; they are created. This creative process derives from self-consciousness and thinking. Either participant or the participants together compose these moments of asynchronicity.

The skills of participation, then, include the abilities to recognize potential asynchronicities, to respond to them as such, and to respond in ways that encourage recurrent interaction. Language, thinking, composition, and performance describe these skills. All people who engage in conversation with other people participate in social transformation. Those with skills participate in ways that those without cannot. In particular, skills help participants to orient conversation toward the creation of new alternatives and choices.