

MIND / BODY DUALISM CONFERENCE

Position Papers

Organized by Gregory Bateson and myself, a conference addressing the pathology of Cartesian mind/body dualism was held at the Wheelwright Center in Marin County, California, July 27th to 30th, 1976. Participants were Gregory Bateson, Francisco Varela, Heinz Von Foerster, Richard Baker-roshi, Ramon Margalef, Gordon Pask, Alan Kay, Terry Winograd, Mary Catherine Bateson, Steve Baer, Stewart Brand, Robert Edgar, and Carol Proudfoot. Below is Gregory's invitational paper.

Stewart Brand
CoEvolution Quarterly, Fall 1976.

Invitational Paper by Gregory Bateson

1. The human species, perhaps since the evolution of language, has attached strange importance to "spiritual," "mental," "moral," and even "supernatural" aspects or components of life and death.

2. It seems today, from the growth of scientific knowledge, that special concern with these matters is justified. Man's very nature, his relations with other men, and his "adaptation" to the biosphere of which he is a part are all affected and even determined by his deeply-held opinions regarding these matters. Even the most materialistic persons are influenced, by their very materialism, to treat others and the natural environment and themselves in special and peculiar ways.

3. Many branches of human knowledge and speculation combine to build up different facets of this problem. I have given the name "Mind-Body" to the aggregate of matters which I hope we shall discuss. But I hope that our deliberations will be shaped by an agreement at the start that at least the following list of topics is only a listing of synonyms, names or other ways of approaching the same central concern.

"Evolutionary Theory" and "epistemology," "Mind-Body," "cybernetics," "ecology"; and, indeed, "theology" and "ethics" are labels for different paths which all lead to the same problematic mountain.

4. I hope also that we may agree at the start that the problematic nature of what we are to discuss has been grossly increased by those philosophies and religions which divide the mind from the body.

Equally to blame in this respect are those who would separate the Creator from the products of creation and those who would deny mental and spiritual characteristics to components of the biosphere other than man. Each of these positions proposes the same dualism, and I hope that the conference members will be able to agree at the start that the old compromises between "supernatural" religion and "materialist" science are artefacts of a false division and by-products

of the meeting between unsophisticated theology and equally unsophisticated science.

5. I further hope that we may be agreed at the start upon certain characteristics of our subject of discourse:

a. That phenomena (percepts, events, data, injunctions, descriptions, etc.) are commonly linked together in recursive systems and/or subsystems.

b. That "energy" (a quantity, having dimensions MV^2 , not itself patterned or differentiated) is commonly available in such systems to be "triggered" by events ("stimuli," "information, causes," etc.) whose energetic content may be large or small, zero or negative.

c. That it is characteristic of the biosphere that the triggering events or variables are commonly differences. "Zero" differs from "positive" and therefore may trigger the freeing of stored energy. The epistemology - the way of knowing - which is characteristic of the sense organs of organisms is the way of sensing differences. By scanning (i.e., by moving the sense organ), comparisons are achieved, to create within the organism events in time, to stand for static differences existing outside it.

d. That "differences" of whatever sort (ratios, contrasts of shape, subtractive or additive differences, differences between external phenomena, differences between self and the outside, etc.) are always "at one remove" from the paired or multiple events in which they are immanent (but not localized). Differences thus precipitate "news of difference" and this "news" or information may be of various "levels" or "logical types." The map is not the territory and the rules of coding by which the map is made and by which it is "read" are not the map, etc.

e. Finally, the above four characteristics of our subject and sub-subjects of discourse apply both to that which we would investigate and to ourselves as investigators. A description of the behavior or anatomy of a living thing (say a starfish) should relate - be a bridge between - our way of knowing and the way of the system which we are describing. It is partly false to say that the starfish has "five" "arms," if there be no components to represent "five" and "arms" in that communication system which governs the morphogenesis of the beast - nor yet in that other which governs its behavior.

6. I suggest that these four fundamental points determine a ground from which we could start - I do not believe that these can be seriously doubted - though with a restructuring of such basic notions as "time," "space," and "causality," it is possible that the four points above will also require basic rephrasing.

7. There may be - perhaps must be - other points as basic as these. Perhaps our meeting will disclose one or more such points.

8. The nature of human epistemology is obscured - made difficult to describe - by the differentiation of mental functions within the brain. It is today fashionably (and I guess correctly) believed that at the level of the hemispheres there is a division of function such that it would be true perhaps to say that the R-hemisphere has typically a different epistemology from that of the L-hemisphere. I suppose that a human individual doing his / her best to integrate these differences must be expected to display different and perhaps idiosyncratic epistemologies according to how he/she achieves an integration. It is sometimes asserted that men and women achieve integration in different patterns of R/L integration.

Be that as it may, the R/L contrast has become woven into occidental notions about religion. Protestantism insists upon logical sense and asserts that the bread and wine stand for the Body and Blood. In Catholicism the Eucharist is the Body and the Blood. The matter is more than semantic; the Protestants have, in fact, excluded from their church that hemisphere which is the more concerned with the stuff of religious feeling and concept.

This matter of hemispheric differences is, in many ways, relevant to our conference, but I hope we can avoid the fallacy which could equate R/L contrast with the dualisms of mind and body.

There is, however, one caveat which must be mentioned. I remarked above that to describe the starfish as "having five arms" may misrepresent the epistemology and coding of the message systems governing the morphogenesis and behavior of the animal. A similar caution is necessary when we try to translate from the coding of one hemisphere into the coding of the other. The interpretation of dreams is not a simple matter for the left hemisphere (supposing that dreams are preponderantly coined in the right brain).

There must be shared methods of coding and methods of integrating R and L. But crude translation of the thoughts of one hemisphere into thoughts appropriate to the other is not likely to coincide with the natural history of that particular brain.

9. About "miracles" - insofar as telling stories of "little things to be wondered at" tends to divide epistemology, splitting "mind" or "spirit" from "body," such stories will be regarded as irrelevant interruptions. Insofar as such stories enrich or modify a synthesis, they will be welcome.

10. Agenda: Very broadly, I hope that we shall do one or more of the following:

a. Add to the partial and tentative list of basic notions about the epistemological universe, especially that part of it called variously "creatura," "biosphere," etc.

b. Increase our understanding of what it means for aesthetics, ethics, action, philosophy, etc., to live in a world characterised by these basic generalisations and to be aware of these generalisations as they apply to the world and to ourselves.

c. Consider some of the peculiarities of process and relationship which accompany various epistemological views. We should consider both those experiences of culture, character formation and the like which promote particular sorts of epistemology and how the results of any particular epistemology are reflected in human relation, action, art, religion, humor, politics, exploitation, and the like.

d. Consider the self-validating character of all epistemologies. To what extent, by adopting a given epistemology, do we make that system "true" or "true for us"?

If we adopt a false epistemology, will we create, quickly or slowly, those circumstances which by their horror disprove our premises? Can horror disprove any proposition? Can truth generate horror? Can falsehood generate happiness and beauty?

Is sanity possible in a culture based on false premises? Is epistemological conflict a species of double bind?

e. Consider the epistemological position of our culture in this Bicentenary Year of Our Lord.

f. Consider the means and processes of epistemological change. The defenses of the old and conventional epistemology and the weapons of the new. Epistemological leadership? Psychotherapy? Religious conversion? Paradigmatic change in Kuhn's sense.

The creative aspects of the double bind?

Procedure:

- 1. No papers will be delivered at the conference. Each participant will, however, circulate a position paper, as brief as possible. Not more than two thousand words. This may be accompanied by printed material - e.g., published essays which the participant hopes the other participants will read before the conference.**
- 2. Do read the position papers of your fellow participants. PLEASE.**
- 3. The chair will see to it that every participant has his/her chance to open discussion of his/her views. (Those who write no position papers may be out of luck.)**
- 4. The chair will be responsible for choosing the order in which matters are to be brought up and will try to aid each opener of discussion in maintaining the relevance of discussion while that opener has the floor.**

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