Singularity of Vision might stifle Innovation

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ABSTRACT: *Dialectical interplay between various world views and visions embedded in a socio-cultural system is essential for continual and sustained innovation by such a system. The view that a system must necessarily operate on the basis of a single commonly shared vision is too strong a requirement for systems to sustain innovation. Such a view is based on an analytic conception of socio-cultural systems rather than on a dialectical conception. Dialectical conceptions of systems recognize the creative value of dynamics that emanate from simultaneous entertainment of varying perspectives and perceptions of what a system can or ought to be.*

Keywords: systems thinking, innovation, multiple visions, dialectics, sense-seeking.

INTRODUCTION

Dialectical processes play an essential role in organisational development and innovation. This holds for socio-cultural systems in general. This role is so essential, I wish to argue, that it mitigates against a generally held view that only single, well-formulated, sometimes publicly displayed and artistically decorated, even venerated formulations of an organisation's singular mission and its singular vision is essential for organisational innovation and development.

Each individual person who becomes a member of a system brings along his/her own world view to that system. It seems possible that a consistent, coherent and integrated world view of that system can indeed arise amongst members of the system, one entailing a clear vision of how the future of that system can be and ought to be. Although this might be possible, it seems that there might be a popular belief that for an organisation to innovate and develop it must not only be possible, but that it is an essential precondition for innovation and development – that there needs to be one and only one clear vision and mission, and that these are essential to animate people towards innovation and development.

In present day society it is hardly likely, though, that such commonality of world views and visions can readily arise. It seems more likely that disparate world views interact to form subsystems, with any such subsystem entertaining a more or less consistent world view, and with such subsystems vying with each other for supremacy within the greater whole.

I wish to suggest and advocate that dialectical interplay between various world views and visions embedded in a socio-cultural system is essential for systemic development and sustained innovation. This viewpoint differs from the commonly advocated belief that only one unitary vision must attain for a system to develop or to innovate.

POINTS OF DEPARTURE AND MODEL OF INNOVATIVE SYSTEMS

We are considering, here, notions of system, organisation, world view, vision, innovation and development. I need to clarify the meanings I attach to these terms and how I relate them. In fact, I need to clarify my points of departure and a particular systems model that serve as basis for my argumentation.

Important points of departure include the following considerations. Firstly, philosophically I take a postmodernist perspective, yet one that requires a certain coherence in assumptions, a systems perspective, and an orientation that disdains extremist positions in issues of voluntarism versus determinism. Secondly, taking a systems perspective means for me that one takes a holistic view of a situation, places a focus on relations rather than entities, and views situations from multiple perspectives. Thirdly, I use the term "system" to designate a collection of elements that are relatable in some way, and I consider the latter to be subjectively determined by situation and purposes. I use it in the context of socio-cultural systems to entail any level of such systems and any degree of connectedness of elements, thereby designating any of the notions off, for example, group, organisation, nation, community, society, *et cetera*. Fourthly, I take innovation, simply, as change in systems that results from change in knowledge, with change in knowledge entailing at least three aspects: generation of knowledge, diffusion of knowledge, and benefit resulting from such knowledge. This conception is reflected in

the following memory aide:

INNOVATION ≥ CHANGE from (GENERATION+DIFFUSION+BENEFIT) of KNOWLEDGE

Taking this view of innovation leads to viewing development as sustained innovation (Coetzee, 1999).

Taking these as points of departure and considering how to characterise innovation in term of necessary and essential principles, although not necessarily necessary and sufficient principles, leads to the following scheme of principles or characteristics of innovating systems, with these principles embedded in a foundational systems model that I label the *Sense-seeking Systems Model* (see Exhibit 1).

KNOWLEDGE GENERATION	KNOWLEDGE DIFFUSION	BENEFIT RENDERING	META-NOTIONS
Generating knowledge	Discourse	Eco-centrism	Deutero-level
- Enthinkment	- Maieutics	Norm-positivation	Triple-loop level
- Dialectics	- Rhetoric	Democracy	Multi-level
- Technical logics	- Poetics	Modal equity	applicability
- Intuition	-Technical discourse	Empowerment	Context dependence
- Ideal-seeking	Engagement		Complementarity logic
- Visioning	- Cooperation		Differentiation
- Systemics	- Collaboration		and
- Analogics	- Competition		integration
- Enactment	- Conflict		(Sense-seeking)
- Sensing	- Loosely		
- Self-production	coupled links		
- Loosely	- Tightly		
coupled enactment	coupled links		
- Conformity			
Enabling generation			
- Reflexivity			
- Variety/Diversity			
- Uniformity/Unanimity			
- Inherent tension			

Exhibit 1: Principles/characteristics of innovating systems as Sense-seeking Systems

The Sense-seeking Systems Model and these principles are derived from consideration of what philosophers throughout the ages considered to be essential principles concerning the following: effecting change (ontology), the nature of knowledge (epistemology), and the use of knowledge (ethics); but these philosophical notions are complemented or corroborated by views of scholars in organisational socio-psychology. These principles are explained in Coetzee (1999, 2000). Here I assume that the connotations of these principles can, for the most part, be sensed intuitively, and I therefore do not attempt to explain them in any detail here. Relevant detail, though, I do explain.

I need to note that the label "Sense-seeking" derives from consideration of the Russell Ackoff (e.g., Ackoff and Emery, 1972) notion of human striving being aimed at ideal-seeking, the Herman Dooyeweerd (1968, 1979) notion of sense-disclosure, that is of the ends of striving being directed at disclosure of meaning or sense, and the Karl Weick (1995) notion of organisations essentially being sense-making entities. By using this term I also wish to convey something of Martin Heidegger's notion that "man is a thinking, that is, a mediating being", who is not only a "calculative thinker, a person who 'computes' … possibilities, benefits, and outcomes" but also tends to "contemplate the meaning which reigns in everything that is" (Fisher, 1987, p. 94). The foundational model itself is derived through a quasi-transcendental or social-metaphysical interpretation of Dooyeweerd, emulating thereby the method of Werner Ulrich (1983) who founds his model essentially upon consideration of Immanuel Kant and the Kantian scheme of knowledge, and upon Hegel and the Hegelian rather than the Kantian notion of dialectics. This foundational model, in its application to systems, appears diagrammatically in Exhibit 2.
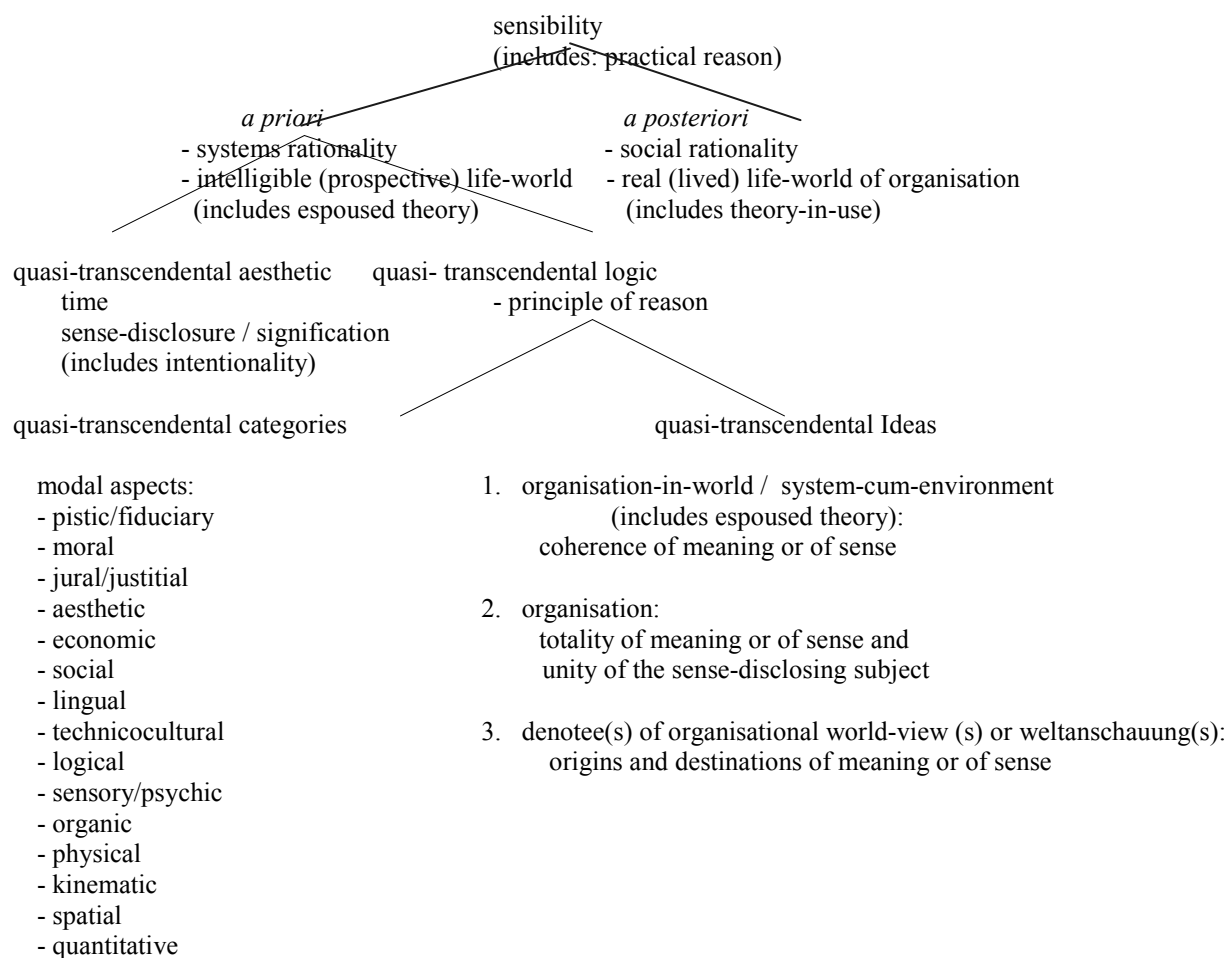
sensibility
(includes: practical reason)

a priori
- systems rationality
- intelligible (prospective) life-world
(includes espoused theory)

a posteriori
- social rationality
- real (lived) life-world of organisation
(includes theory-in-use)

quasi-transcendental aesthetic
    time
    sense-disclosure / signification
    (includes intentionality)

quasi- transcendental logic
- principle of reason

quasi-transcendental categories

quasi-transcendental Ideas

modal aspects:
- pistic/fiduciary
- moral
- jural/justitial
- aesthetic
- economic
- social
- lingual
- technicocultural
- logical
- sensory/psychic
- organic
- physical
- kinematic
- spatial
- quantitative

1. organisation-in-world / system-cum-environment
    (includes espoused theory):
    coherence of meaning or of sense

2. organisation:
    totality of meaning or of sense and
    unity of the sense-disclosing subject

3. denotee(s) of organisational world-view (s) or weltanschauung(s):
    origins and destinations of meaning or of sense

Exhibit 2: Quasi-transcendental Constitutive Scheme of Sense-disclosure as applied to an Organisation

Kantŝ scheme is a scheme of knowledge. Ulrich's scheme is a scheme of practical reason. This Sense -seeking Model scheme is a scheme of sensibility, but one that retains essential elements of Ulrich's scheme while also differing from it. It includes the notion of practical reason as embedded in sensibility. It also includes the notions of systems rationality and social rationality, and includes them in their dialectical opposition as *a priori* and *a posteriori* aspects of sensibility. Associated with systems rationality and social rationality in their dialectical opposition, are the respective notions of intelligible and prospective life-world (which includes espoused theory) and that of real and lived life-world (which includes theory-in-use), a duality which also implies the reason-practice dialectic (Ulrich, 1983). The Argyris and Schön (1978) concepts of *espoused theory* and *theory-in-use* are to be interpreted in terms of occurring in multiples in an organisation rather than as if there is only one of each. Again, this implies *dialectical relations* amongst those of each kind: *amongst espoused theories* and *amongst theories-in-use*. This scheme also includes the notion of the principle of reason and that of intentionality (as embedded in sense-disclosure). The notions of quasi-transcendental categories and quasi-transcendental Ideas are also retained, but with differing connotations, namely with the so-called modal aspects or modalities of Dooyeweerd as categories (Kalsbeek, 1975) and with the Ideas as indicated in the diagram. Note that the first and second Ideas refer to coherence of meaning (or of sense) and unity of the sense-disclosing subject respectively. These can hardly be attained in an organisation or socio-cultural system. Therefore the third Idea, that of denotee(s) of organisational world view(s), which takes on the role of origin and destination of meaning/sense, refers to world views or *weltanschauungs* (as plurals).

    Three particularly prominent characteristics of this Sense-seeking Systems Model are pertinent and need to be accentuated here.

    The first is that sense-disclosure by persons and by socio-cultural systems is done through lenses coloured by

world views. World views are, furthermore, taken to be essential determinants of how the world is viewed in terms of what is and what should be, that is, in terms of 'is' views and 'ought' visions. World views are taken, in fact, to be constituted of 'is' views and 'ought' visions. And note the plurals: view_s, vision_s. Systems, constituted of more than one and often a multitude of members, are not, in this Sense-seeking Systems Model, taken to have only one, single world view, but they entertain nearly as many world views as there are members — *quot homines, tot sententiae*.

Secondly, dialectical processes animate this model. This is shown by the prominence of dialectical principles in the model: the *principle of dialectics* under the *enthinkment* category of principles for *generating knowledge* (see, e.g., Ulrich, 1983), the *principle of inherent tension* as a principle that *enables generation of knowledge* (see, e.g., Buckley, 1968), the *principle of complementarity logic* which places primacy on one of the two polarities that are in tension (see, e.g., Varela and Dupuy, 1992), the *principle of differentiation and integration* that asserts and recognises sets of pairs of polar opposites amongst the principles in the model (see, e.g., Gharajedaghi, 1985), and the *principle of the triple-loop level* which reminds us of the Flood and Romm (1996) notion of *triple loop learning* with all its dialectical connotations. I need to emphasise that all of these dialectical processes occur in the context of the *reason-practice dialectic*, as explicated in Ulrich (1983). This implies a dialectic that turns and centres on the polarities of *a priori* and *a posteriori* concepts or judgements, and thus on *systems rationality* versus *social rationality*, and on *espoused theories* versus *theories-in-use*. It is this dialectic that drives the process of unfolding as identified by Ulrich (1983) in respect of the Ulrich constitutive scheme of practical reason. It also drives this process in this constitutive scheme of sense-disclosure. Although the term "unfolding" acquires somewhat different connotations from what it has in the Ulrich and Dooyeweerd schemes, I assign to it the dual connotation of being driven by organisational world views, and particularly visions, within the context of being driven by this essential *reason-practice dialectic*.

The third notion is that of maintaining and nurturing multiple world views and, therefore, multiple visions for effecting innovation. This is the point I wish to suggest and that I will soon argue.

Note that the concept of organisation embedded in this Model, is dialectic and dynamic. It stands to reason that the phenomena and processes described here are accompanied by shifting senses of sense and of coherence of meaning. The espoused theories of the organization change as world views and visions change. This means that the experienced sense of the *organization-in-the-world* is dynamic. The boundaries of the organization as system are experienced as changing. The roles, functions, goals, purposes, and ideals of the organization are certainly experienced as volatile.

MULTIPLE RATHER THAN SINGULAR VISIONS FOR INNOVATION

Parikh et al. (1994) (pp.83-87) define and enumerate characteristics of visions within organisational contexts. In that view, good visions align people in an organisation, and are *shared* visions. This seems to imply that for any socio-cultural system a single vision that is shared by the members of the system and that aligns and inspires them is preferable to more than one vision being operative in the system. This conception seems to underpin the views also of Ackoff and Gharajedaghi, for their formulations also tend to emphasise the (single) purpose and the (single) mission (vision) of a system (Gharajedaghi, 1985, 1986). An underlying assumption in such a view is that multiple purposes/visions cannot align or inspire all members of a system.

We have seen that ('ought') visions are here taken to be part of world views. The perspective of entertaining more than one world view and, thus, more than one vision in a system does not deny that one vision emanating from a single world view in a system might induce innovation and development, but it does maintain that more than one world view and, thus, more than one vision held in dialectical interplay can be just as conducive to innovation and development, if not more so, than what is the case with one world view and vision. This view is based on the grounds that awareness of more than one world view — that diversity of world views — enables questioning of the central assumptions and values of each world view and provides a diversity of alternative possible world views, which, through "good" dialectic (Argyris and Schön, 1978), can result in changed world views that may be more apt to the prevailing circumstances, times and interests. If one world view attains, then critical self-reflection, as essential requirement for innovation, needs to be performed on that world view, and, thus, on both the "is" view and the "ought" vision. More than one world view can enhance the process of critical reflection on each one of those world views. But, an essential condition, so it would seem, is that the dialectic must be a "good" dialectic.

I am suggesting that if *multiple world views* are present in a system, these world views, to the extent that they are antagonistically contradictory and, thus, non-complementary, will vie for supremacy in the social system. I

also suggest that, to the extent that they are contrary (that is, contradictory, but in the non-antagonistic sense) they can both co-exist and complement each other in the sense of either the Varela complementarity logic or by being held in a state of dynamic tension. I suggest that in both cases dialectical interplay between contradictory elements will have considerable influence on the direction of development and, thus, on the nature of innovation. To the extent, also, that multiple world views are complementary, I suggest their commonalities will reinforce each other. I also suggest that if there is an identifiable single world view operative in a system, that world view will serve as a major determinant of the direction in which development unfolds.

I contend that the view that a system must necessarily operate on the basis of a single commonly shared vision only, is too strong a requirement for systems to innovate effectively — one which is based only on an analytic conception of socio-cultural systems, rather than being based also on a dialectical conception that recognizes the creative value of dynamics that emanate from simultaneous entertainment of varying perceptions of what a system can or ought to be. An underlying assumption of a view that advocates singular visions only might be that energy spent on reconciling or debating varying views is necessarily misdirected and detrimental to development.

I contend, as a necessary consequence of the principle of reflexivity as entertained in the Sense-seeking Systems Model, that there needs to be at least variations of visions operative in a system at any one time for a system to innovate and develop effectively. I contend, furthermore, as a consequence of the dialectical basis of this Model, that it can be beneficial for the development of a system to simultaneously hold apparently *different "ought" visions* of the system, especially if such visions are seen as *contrary* and, therefore, potentially *complementary*, rather than as contradictory and, therefore, as irreconcilable polar opposites.

Let me motivate these qualifications. It stands to reason that what would be without potency for development is a situation in which a single "ought" vision is generally accepted, but which corresponds precisely to a single, generally accepted "is" view. Such a "vision" could not serve as a vision for sustained innovation. It also stands to reason that disparate "ought" visions that simultaneously hold for substantive periods of time and that have apparent destructive consequences for the relevant system, threatening the viability of the system, cannot be taken as conducive to system development. If multiple visions are contradictory and antagonistic and cannot interact complementarily or with cross-pollination, then, I suggest, multiple purposes/visions cannot align or inspire the members of a system, and, on the contrary, can actually lead to destruction. But multiple views and visions need not be contradictory and antagonistic; they can be merely contrary and complementary.

I submit, on the basis of these considerations, that to effect sustained innovation or development, it is more sensible to aim for contrary visions that embody differing perspectives or aspects aimed at complementary or even common ideals and thereby achieving commonality rather than identity in striving, than to aim for a single vision which can be displayed in corridors and offices and which is sometimes not much more than a compromise formulation agreed to in a managerial committee and scoffed at or ignored by members of the organisation. Such a situation, of course, would require sustained management to ensure alignment in striving, but this, precisely, is more sensible than believing, with a "vision" hanging on the wall, that coherence in striving has been achieved, once and for all, and basking in the belief that the latter is sensible for organisational development or innovation. The task of management is to manage, not to find rest in a false state of equilibrium.

If we propound visioning as a principle for systems innovation, then, so I contend, these suggestions embody the proper conditions and caveats that we ought to follow.

I wish, however, to also invoke two other bases in the Sense-seeking Systems Model in support of this notion of desirability of multiple world views and visions for innovative systems. The first is Weick, and the second is Flood and Romm.

The Weick *sense-making perspective* views even an individual person as entertaining multiple selves, referring to an individual, while referencing Mead, as "a parliament of selves" (Weick, 1995, p. 18), and advocating the desirability of having access to multiple selves for "flexibility, mutability, and adaptability" (Weick, 1995, p. 24). For organisational contexts Weick advocates shared action and shared experience rather than shared meaning and shared understanding (Weick, 1995, pp. 42-43, pp.188-189), a tenet that flows from his notion of sensemaking being retrospective rather than prospective. Importantly, Weick does not deny the sensibility of some shared meaning for viable organisation (e.g. Weick, 1995, p.73). Weick maintains that multiple frameworks of sensemaking need to be maintained, even though they lead to politicisation (e.g. Weick, 1995, pp.191-192), but that total fragmentation of frameworks is not desirable either, for some coherence is necessary for effective intentionality through political action (e.g. Weick, 1995, p. 118-121). Huber (1991) (p. 103),

referring to Weick, mentions that there seems to be some empirical indications that there are factors, other than common clarity in understanding, that can also serve to induce or to be conducive to commonality in striving. One of these, in fact, is vagueness or ambiguity. A single, clear vision, in this view then, is no absolute necessity for commonality in striving. There is accentuation of action and of enactment in Weick's views on sense-making, of efferent sensemaking that is also retrospective. Weick places high premium on the notion of equivocality, arguing for sensemaking as reduction of equivocality, while also arguing for some maintenance of equivocality. There is a disposition in Weick to alternatively accentuate variety of meanings and coherence in shared meanings within organisations.

The typification of the "*postmodern organisation*" by Flood and Romm (1996, pp. 106-108), is very close to the kind of organisational image that is to be associated with the Sense-seeking Systems model. I suggest that this Sense-seeking Model can be taken as a (further) particular theoretical instantiation, characterization, or qualification of the Flood and Romm postmodern organisation. Such postmodern organisations, I maintain, are not characterised by singular visions embedded in singular world views. Such organisations flourish on variety and diversity, and variety/diversity is an essential principle for enabling generation of knowledge in the Sense-seeking Model..

CONCLUSION

A *dynamic interpretation of organisation* requires that we take care not to *reify* the concept of organisation, i.e., not to consider it to be a thing — and the same concerning the concept of environment. We need, in fact, to explicitly consider an organisation to be composed of various groupings that each interact with the outside world — better even: with many *outside worlds*. Such organisational groupings can be long-lived or ephemeral, can be stable or shifting in terms of the membership of each, and can have overlapping or mutually exclusive memberships. Each grouping can interact with particular segments of the outside world, and for any segment of the outside world a particular grouping of organisational members can be experienced by that segment as the organisation in its entirety. But any segment of the outside world can also interact with various organisational groupings. This applies from considering organisations and environments, and their interaction, objectively. But the same applies from considering them subjectively: every person sees a different organisation and a different environment.

For an organisation to be innovational and developmental it must, rather than striving to be just one organisation in one particular environment, with one world view and one vision, strive to be a multiplicity of organisations that interacts with a multiplicity of environments, in both objective and subjective senses. These conditions apply at any rate in any normal organisation, but I suggest they ought to apply explicitly and intentionally for organisations that strive to be innovational.

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