

Adelaide Workshop Notes (including the song Cybernetical people in Adelaide)

Co-Drifting: The Biology of Living Together

by Lloyd Fell and David Russell

Presented to the South Australian Thinking Workshop

Co-Drifting is short for co-ontogenic structural drift - a fundamental natural process which we strive to explain in our conversations and practise in our lives and our work. The term was coined from the language of the pioneering biologist and thinker, Humberto Maturana, whose work has been our primary inspiration and the related work of the leading cybernetician, Francisco Varela, and others of like mind in philosophy, science and art.

In this Workshop we claim to be doing something which is both coherent and satisfying for us in our living together. We make no other claim about the validity of what we are saying here or its applicability to anyone else. Enthusiastically, we invite you to join our conversation. It is possible that you may also find some satisfaction and coherence in this form of interaction.

Co-Drifting has a certain meaning for each of us which we would say arises in our doing together. The scientific and artistic coherence of this we will explore in the Workshop. But we will not give Co-Drifting the status of a scientific term; we will not provide it with a formal definition. We hold that to do this would only be a limitation because we prefer to believe that meaning is something which unfolds within the conversation itself. We don't say that a universal meaning could not exist - in fact that would be the complement of individual meaning. It is just that we prefer to act as if meaning is something formed within, by each of us individually, in the course of our conversation.

In this sense we see ourselves as scientists rather than philosophers, willing to try to interpret our experience with an openness and respect toward each other's meanings. Getting together to form agreements about meanings may also have utilitarian value, but we do not wish to be a party to the imposing of that meaning on anyone else. We make no criticism of any biological explanation (of cognition or anything else). We often try to incorporate different explanatory models simultaneously in our work, applying our preferred tools of scientific refutability wherever we can, but not claiming any 'truth'.

A senior physicist told us recently that he can claim that physics has a precise definition which immediately makes its nature clear to all, whereas our work lacks this necessary rigour. Our reply is that we make no such claim because we find it more satisfying to say that meaning is not transferable. We enjoy the space which this seems to provide for us to work and live together, in mutual respect, creating our lives and learning as we go..

In this Workshop (and the accompanying script) we choose to split the scientific and imaginative process as a means of trying to marry them together. We make a distinction between scientific meaning and imaginative meaning in order to explore the nature of meaning itself.

The nature of poetry and its resemblance to the generative mechanism in a scientific explanation is a theme which is developed - through quite a few variations. The use of scientific "laws" as metaphors of human existence by people like Gary Zukav, Robert Jahn and Brenda Dunne leads towards the following quote from Jonas Salk from his *Survival of the Wisest*: "By using the processes of nature as metaphor, to describe the forces by which it operates upon and within Man, we come as close to describing reality as we can within the limits of our comprehension. In this way, Man's imagination and intellect play vital roles in his survival and evolution."

We say that our drift is not adaptational, but is a natural drift - it is not a reaction to representations, but a forming with whatever is at hand. Cyberneticians have pointed out that the complement of autonomy is the need to manage with whatever is available. An organism selects behaviours according to what it knows at the time. The solution may not be optimal - whatever works will do for the moment. The organism and the medium mutually specify each other - saying this is how you are at this moment. It is an active selection of that which is relevant - that which is connectable. It is not passive. Some kind of coincidence of structures determines which changes of state will occur, but it is not a logic of correspondence, it's a logic of coherence - some property of in-forming itself. We create the next stage of our world as we create the next stage of ourselves. It is a continual mutual selection of respective structural changes which leads to co-emergence of unities and their worlds.

We will speak about the intent of our drifting - the possibility that we simply choose to grasp more or less of life as it happens - parallels between the connectivity within and the connectivity without - structural plasticity and the most intriguing question of freedom of choice.

Ontogenic drift is the term we are using for the trajectory (or course) of structural changes which occur throughout our lives (i.e. while our particular organisation is conserved). We are choosing to see it as our movement through our world - even though we acknowledge that they are moving together. There may be many viable trajectories, but they all have this characteristic of being co-implicative - and we follow just one. This workshop consists of our drifting together. Sometimes it feels scary, sometimes it feels liberating and empowering, to know that we are making our history of structural coupling together. We are bringing forth, conjointly, the relevant details (or the meaning - or the reality) of our existence. We are co-creators of each new moment in our living together. This conversation is a biological ballet - a living choreograph - our dance of life.

Some years ago we said to ourselves (and each other): if this really adds up

like we say it does, we should be able to apply it in our respective work projects and also in our daily living - and see the benefits of it there. In the workshop we want to discuss various ways in which we've tried to do this - to incorporate Co-Drifting biology in our contract research projects and our manners of living.

Acrostic

Acrostics may be old-fashioned, but I couldn't resist creating this one to accompany our handout manuscript at this workshop in Adelaide in 1993.

"Are you blind, Father William!" the first man said,
"Did you notice my deep furrowed brow?
"Excuse me for pointing! It's here on my head
"Like a paddock gone under the plough!
"A message we carry to places afar
"It might not be perfectly so
"Do you think they might misunderstand who we are
"Endeavour to claim that we know?"

"For God's sake, my colleague," the second man cried
Reflecting quite pithily thus:
"I say that we leave them this book we have tried
"Entitled Co-Drifting by us
"No persons who read it with wide open mind
"Digest and interpret whatever they find
"Shall say, anyway, that we lied."

In honour of a wonderful nineteenth century "cybernetician" by the name of Dodgson.

Cybernetical People in Adelaide

Biological Cybernetics A Scientific Revue

1. Cybernetical people in Adelaide
Are people who live in a song
With melody fine, an
Occasional rhyme and a
Feeling strong (feeling strong)
That whatever should happen in Adelaide
And whether its right or its wrong
We'll sing a polemic on
Matters systemical
All day long!
(We'll sing a polemic on

Matters systemical
All day long!)

2. Cybernetical people in Adelaide
Are in the political fray
They study autonomy
In the economy
Have their say (have their say)
And the true believers in Adelaide
Believe that it is okay
To practise reflexion and
Make a connection in
Every way!
(To practise reflexion and
Make a connection in
Every way!)

3. Cybernetical people in Adelaide
They speak for me and for you
Proactive cognition with
Some repetition we
All can do (all can do)
So that people from all over Adelaide
Will want to verbalise too
An heuristic fiction
Without contradiction as
If it's true!
(An heuristic fiction
Without contradiction as
If it's true!)

4. Cybernetical people in Adelaide
Are never reluctant to say
Objectively rigorous
Accurate figures have
Had their day (had their day)
And the steersmen and women of Adelaide
Are so dynamic they may
Dispense with the actual
Forego the factual
And let's play!
(Dispense with the actual
Forego the factual
And let's play!)

5. Cybernetical people in Adelaide
Are tautologically free
And interrelated
Holistically stated is
How to be (how to be)

And we speak this riddle in Adelaide
That to believe is to see
And here is a thesis on
Autopoiesis from
A to Z!
(And here is a thesis on
Autopoiesis from
A to Z!)

6. Cybernetical people in Adelaide
Are people who know how to choose
The paradox lurking
There in the working of
Words we use (words we use)
So we can in the suburbs of Adelaide
Epistemologically
Construct a reality
Free of banality
That's good news!
(Construct a reality
Free of banality
That's good news!)

7. Cybernetical people in Adelaide
Occasionally run into strife
With sudden saltatory
Self-regulatory
Ways of life (ways of life)
By developing language in Adelaide
So neologisms are rife
Is that in the dictionary?
Or is it fictionary?
Ah! that's life!
(Is that in the dictionary?
Or is it fictionary?
Ah! that's life!)

8. Cybernetical people in Adelaide
Have something important to say
On being adaptive and
Most interactive at
Work and play (work and play)
And we join with the people in Adelaide
In showing each other the way
We haven't a clue if it
Benefits you but it
Feels okay!
(We haven't a clue if it
Benefits you but it
Feels okay!)

