



## Peripheral Vision

### Understanding Process From Within: An Argument for 'Witness'-Thinking

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#### Abstract

If our task is simply that of theorizing process, then there are many brilliant writers and thinkers in the recent past to turn to. But as I see it, these writers are mostly oriented toward helping us think about process 'from the outside', about processes that we merely observe as happening 'over there'. But if we are to rethink appropriate styles of empirical research, then we need a different form of engaged, responsive thinking, acting, and talking, that allows us to affect the flow of processes from within our living involvement with them. Crucially, this kind of responsive understanding only becomes available to us in our relations with living forms when we enter into dialogically structured relations with them. It remains utterly unavailable to us as external observers. I will call this kind of thinking, 'thinking-from-within' or 'witness-thinking', to contrast it with the 'aboutness-thinking' that is more familiar to us. What we can gain in our understandings-from-within, is a *subsidiary awareness* (Polanyi) of certain 'action guiding feelings' that can play a role in giving us an anticipatory sense of at least the style or the grammar of what is to come next in the ongoing process in which we happen to be involved, feelings which are lost in descriptions 'from the outside'.

**Keywords:** dialogue, awareness, process, tacit knowledge, responsiveness, constructionism

*'When we speak of the classical picture of physical reality, we are indicating by the very choice of the word its most significant character: its pictorial nature.'* (Capek 1961: 3)

*'It seems then that, parallel to this physics, a second kind of knowledge ought to have grown up, which could have retained what physics allowed to escape ... This second kind of knowledge would have set the cinematographical method aside ... it is the flow of time, it is the very flux of the real that we should be trying to follow ... by accustoming it to install itself within the moving, but by developing also another faculty, complementary to the intellect, we may open a perspective on the other half of the real ... a life of the real.'* (Bergson 1911: 343–344)

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### Introduction: Against Explanatory Theory (as a Single 'Pictorial' Order of Connectedness)

The central theme of the First *Organization Studies* Summer Workshop was 'Theorizing Process in Organizational Research'. But it was also to theorize *process* with the overall aim in mind of 'rethinking appropriate styles of empirical research'.

If the task was simply the former of these two aims, then, in my estimation, we could, I think, simply turn to the already existing, brilliant work of many writers and thinkers in the recent past: William James, Bergson, and Bateson among many others — and I will certainly be drawing on aspects of their work. But in a moment, in my initial explorations, I will turn to the work of such writers as Bakhtin and Wittgenstein, along with references to Vygotsky, Merleau-Ponty, and Polanyi, because — at least as I see it — they can more immediately help us gain an understanding 'from within' those processes in which we ourselves are, or can be, involved, and which, because of our involvement, we can affect. In other words, that is, in Bergson's (2002/1946) words, 'instead of trying to rise above our perception of things [they can much more directly help us] to plunge into it for the purpose of deepening and widening it' (p.134). While there are many other writers who are oriented toward helping us think *about* process 'from the outside', so to speak — that is, about processes that we merely observe as happening *over there* — there is another way of engaged, responsive thinking that becomes available to us in our relations with living forms, when we can enter into *dynamic or dialogical relations* with them. I will call this thinking-from-within, or *witness-thinking*. In Polanyi's (1958) terms, we might say that instead of thinking with a *focal awareness* of the structure of a process in mind, we think along with a *subsidiary awareness* of certain felt experiences as they occur to us from within our engaged involvement in a particular unfolding process, and that these *inner feelings* play a crucial role in guiding<sup>1</sup> our actions. It is this 'action guiding' function of subsidiary awareness in providing us with an anticipatory sense of at least the *style* of what is to come next that is crucial in all that follows, if we are to rethink appropriate styles of empirical research. So I will return to it in more detail below.

Now I make this distinction right from the start — between thinking 'from within' and 'from the outside', or between 'witness'- and 'aboutness'-thinking — as I am troubled by the very notion of 'theorizing' something. For (at least it seems to me), such a term carries with it an enormous amount of implicit conceptual baggage (Shotter 1999 2000). Besides requiring us to *address* the subject(s) of our inquiries as if we were disembodied, disinterested creatures able to adopt a God's eye view (Haraway 1991) — and to treat our subjects as if they were not subjects but objects — we also find ourselves committed to searching for something *radically hidden*, something that can only be arrived at as an 'interpretation', a 'reading', or a 'representation', of something that, seemingly, is utterly unavailable to us in the events that are unfolding around us: a *something* that has only become so completely unavailable to us as a result of our cutting ourselves off from our access to it — namely, from 'the inner becoming of things' (Bergson 1911: 322).

In other words, in following ‘the way of theory’ (as I shall call it), rather than seeking to understand the unsystematic events that are unfolding in plain view before us, we do just the opposite: we seek a hidden, ideal, orderly state of affairs existing in reality, in itself, *independently* of any relations that we might have to it. But in doing this, as Wittgenstein (1953) points out, we ‘represent the matter as if there is something one *couldn’t* do. As if there really were an object [a mental state or process, a set of rules or norms, or a social structure], from which I derive its description, but I were unable to show it to anyone’ (Wittgenstein 1953, no. 374, my additions). But, as we shall see, in our inquiries into human affairs, this is not the case. As Wittgenstein (1953) puts it, ‘nothing is hidden’ (no. 435). Everything we need — at least, in understanding how to ‘go on’ with the others and othernesses around us in our practical affairs — is available to us out in the activities occurring between us and them. I will return to this issue of accessibility in just a moment.

Here, I want to pursue just a little further another consequence of our following the way of theory in our (western) culture at the moment. Along with the claim that the ‘real’ sources of influence shaping our conduct are radically hidden, goes the concomitant claim that they can nonetheless be wholly represented (mirrored or pictured) within the logical structure of a systematic theory — or at least, they can be if what is represented by a theory of what ‘might be’ can be *warranted* by ‘evidence’. Indeed, crucial to the power of ‘pure theory-talk’, at least in the recent past, is the way in which we have all been institutionalized into accepting it — if it is appropriately warranted — as *true* of reality,<sup>2</sup> irrespective of who utters it or the context in which it is uttered.

But in making this move, we ignore what can be directly heard or seen as occurring out in the world between us and the others and othernesses around us, and we seek instead the events influencing the shape of our actions within a decontextualized logical schematism of some kind or other. It is to *this* move especially that I want to draw attention. For, as I see it, in making it — as I will describe more fully in a moment — we *un-relate* ourselves to the very events occurring around us that, if we were to *relate* ourselves appropriately to them, can in fact issue us with the very ‘action guiding calls’ we need if we are to ‘go on’ to respond to them appropriately.

### **The Unceasing Flow of Spontaneous Expressive-Responsive Activity: Understanding Living Wholes/Unities**

In Chapter 5 of his ‘Discourse ...’, Descartes (1637/1968) sets out his *picture* of a ‘new world, [created by God] somewhere in imaginary space’, which he first filled with particles of matter that he then ‘agitate[d] diversely and confusedly ... and afterwards did no more than to lend his usual preserving action to nature, and to let her act according to his established laws’ (p. 62). It is only in such a world as this, that his geometric methods of inquiry can be applied, and in which, moreover, they can be applied with the aim of ‘thereby making ourselves, as it were, masters and possessors of nature’ (p. 78). This

vision of Descartes — of a world of separate particles in motion according to laws — leads on to Heinrich Hertz's (1894) account of the role of theories in our thinking. He states it thus:

'In endeavouring ... to draw inferences as to the future from the past, we always adopt the following process. We form for ourselves images or symbols of external objects; and the form that we give them is such that the necessary consequents of the images in thought are always the images of the necessary consequents in nature of the things pictured. In order that this requirement may be satisfied, there must be a certain conformity between nature and our thought.' (1954: 1)

But he then goes on to note a disquiet concerning this state of affairs:

'As a matter of fact, we do not know, nor have we any means of knowing, whether our conceptions of things are in conformity with [reality itself] in any other than this one fundamental respect. The images we may form of things are not determined without ambiguity by the requirement that the consequents of the images be the images of the consequents.' (p. 2)

In other words, there is still a degree of 'loose jointedness or play' in this, as I shall call it, Hertzian-cinematographical (H-C) way of *relating ourselves* to our surroundings; or, to put it another way, in *this* form of relation, we are, so to speak, standing *over against* our surroundings as uninvolved or disengaged observers of them. We are not, as living bodies, spontaneously responsive to them in any way. Thus, it is not at all surprising to find Descartes (1968) remarking that: 'If I look out of the window and see men crossing the square, as I just happen to have done, I normally say that I see the men themselves ... Yet do I see any more than hats and coats which could conceal automatons? I *judge* that they are men. And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgment which is in my mind' (p. 21)<sup>3</sup> — but this, of course, leaves the fact that we 'normally say that [we] see the men themselves' unaccounted for. How is it that in fact we do see people as having 'inner lives' in their outer movements? Even if it is a 'mistake', how are we led into making such a mistake so easily, so spontaneously?

Well, the fact is, I want to claim, that there is, 'parallel to this physics, a second kind of knowledge', which (to rephrase Bergson a little) *does retain* what physics has allowed to escape, a second kind of knowledge that sets the cinematographical method aside and does actually follow the very flux of the real by installing itself *within* its movement, within the *life* of the real (Bergson 1911: 343–344). And in adopting it, instead of thinking *about* changes in a living, indivisible state of affairs *from the outside* in terms of them going through a sequence of separate immobile spatial configurations, we can begin to think in accord *with* their changing nature *from within* our living relations with them. For, if we can allow ourselves to be spontaneously responsive to the temporal unfolding of their expressive movements, then we can, of course, find that same unfolding movement within our own bodily-felt experience.

Central in what follows, then, will be a focus on the *responsivity* of growing and living forms, both to each other and to the othernesses in their surroundings,

and on *their* own particular and unique ways of coming-into-Being. Each requires understanding in its own way. While we have been used to understanding a dead form in terms of objective, explanatory theories representing the sequence of events supposed to have caused it, a quite different form of engaged, responsive understanding becomes available to us with a living form. It can call out spontaneous reactions from us in way that is quite impossible for a dead form. As Wittgenstein (1953) puts it: ‘Our attitude to what is alive and to what is dead, is not the same. All our reactions are different’ (no. 284). It is this switch in starting point, from the deliberate and self-conscious thoughts of an individual theorist, to people’s spontaneously occurring bodily reactions to events happening in their meetings with the others and othernesses around them, that is the deep and crucial departure from the Cartesianism still implicit in much of our current thinking.

But how can we ‘complete the intellect ... by accustoming it to install itself within the moving’? The best way, it seems to me, is to start by bringing exemplars to our attention in which are already, in fact, doing it.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, this *is* the power of Wittgenstein’s (1953) methods of inquiry, for in them, he is *not* concerned ‘to hunt out new facts; it is, rather, of the essence of our investigation that we do not seek to learn anything *new* by it. We want to *understand* something that is already in plain view. For this is what we seem in some senses not to understand’ (no. 89). We are like St Augustine, who raises in the *Confessions* the problem of time: ‘What then is time? If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain to one that asketh, I know not ...’ (*Confessions*, Book XI). About this strange circumstance — in which we are only aware of something in a *subsidiary, tacit*, or ‘background’ fashion (Polanyi 1958) — Wittgenstein (1953) remarks: ‘Something that we know when no one asks us, but no longer know when we are supposed to give an account of it, is something that we need to *remind* ourselves of. (And it is obviously something of which for some reason it is difficult to remind oneself.)’ (no. 89). In other words, it is not a matter of acquiring some new information or data, but of redirecting or reorienting our attention, to noticing things which ‘no one has doubted, but which have escaped remark only because they are always before our eyes’ (no. 415), things which, in Garfinkel’s (1967) words, are continually ‘seen but unnoticed’ (p.36) — indeed, it is in our very ‘seeing’ of them, in our spontaneous reactions to our seeing of them that a kind of responsive understanding becomes available to us with living forms that is much less readily available with dead forms.<sup>5</sup>

### Approaching ‘the Dialogical’

It is at this point that I want to turn to Bakhtin’s (1981 1984 1986) writings on the dialogical nature of our relations to each other, particularly as they are manifested in our everyday understandings of each other’s utterances. In the recent past (and still among many cognitive scientists), the main function of language is thought to be that of conveying our thoughts to another person in the form of a ‘mental representation’, a *picture* as it were. And, to *understand*

the other person's utterance, we must 'get the picture'! Hence, we study sentence *forms* to try to understand how they manage to *represent* their *content*. Bakhtin's (1986) approach could not be more different.

Rather than seeking meaning in terms of *patterns of already spoken words*, i.e., in what is said, he seeks it in our very *words in their speaking*, i.e., in our embodied uttering of them, as we utter them. Thus for him: 'All real and integral understanding', he says,

'is actively responsive, and constitutes nothing more than the initial preparatory stage of a response (in what ever form it may be actualized). And the speaker himself is oriented precisely toward such an actively responsive understanding. He does not expect passive understanding that, so to speak, *only duplicates his or her own idea in someone else's mind*. Rather, he expects response, agreement, sympathy, objection, execution, and so forth (with various speech genres presupposing various integral orientations and speech plans on the part of speakers or writers).' (p. 69, my emphasis)

I will call the active, spontaneously responsive kind of understanding he outlines here — the kind of understanding we take for granted, in fact, in our daily lives — a *relationally-responsive* form of understanding (or a *witness-understanding*) to contrast it with the *representational-referential* (or *aboutness-*) understandings more familiar to us in our academic and intellectual dealings with each other.

And crucial among many other distinctions between these two forms of understanding is, as we shall see, the orientation of relationally-responsive or witness-talk toward the future. Let me emphasize that with another of his remarks (Bakhtin 1981):

'The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word; it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction. Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by *that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word*. Such is the situation of any living dialogue.' (p. 280, my emphasis)

To appreciate what is at stake here, consider reading an article on 'Theorizing process', and coming across a sentence expressing the following rather complex rhetorical question: 'What are the differences between Bateson's and Bergson's versions of process, considering that Bateson developed his version in America in a cybernetic context mostly in response to issues in psychiatry, while Bergson developed his in France in a philosophical context mostly in objection to the mechanistic view of nature?' We must hold the question 'in mind', so to speak, as a 'point of orientation' while we mentally assemble the landscape within which we are going to attempt to answer it. In doing so, we must continually tack back and forth between 'listening to the questioner's voice', so to speak, and 'answering to' its calls. The action guiding influences we thus find at work here, in this back and forth movement, work both as a provocation and a guide.

In other words, what Bakhtin brings to our attention here in describing the nature of our active, responsive understandings, is what almost everyone who has written on the activities of living beings that grow in irreversible time has

brought to our attention: that it is not their spatial arrangement at different instants in time, but the *sequential ordering*, or the *time-ordering*, of events as they unfold, that is of crucial importance in all such processes — along with the fact that all such living and growing sequences are always *incomplete*, and thus as such, in their unfolding movement, they always inevitably ‘point toward’ future possibilities in some way. For, to repeat, what is special about all such living processes, is that they *are not* — as in Descartes’ ‘new world’ — simply arrangements or configurations of otherwise independently existing, separate parts, which simply, at each instant in time, can be found to have taken up another configuration according to a now absent God’s externally imposed laws. They are indivisible, unitary, self-structurizing wholes, and as such they endure through a whole continuous, sequential process of, first, their initial *conception* (in a two-being interaction); *birth* (as an individual being); *growth to maturity* (as an autonomous being); and then *death* — a process of growth and development that we will find it relevant to adopt when we turn to a discussion of forms of life with their associated language-games (Wittgenstein 1953), which can also be thought of as beginning and developing through a similar such cycle.

So, while dead assemblages can be constructed piece by piece from objective parts — that is, from parts that retain their character irrespective of whether they are a part of the assemblage or not — living, indivisible wholes cannot. On the contrary, they grow. And in the course of exchanges with their surroundings, they transform themselves, internally, from simple individuals into richly structured ones. In this growth, their ‘parts’ are in a constant state of change.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, at any one moment, their ‘parts’ owe their very existence, not only to their relations to each other, but also to their relations to their own ‘parts’ at some earlier point in time, as well as to their relations to the many different larger wholes within which they are from time to time embedded. So, while existing in space, they are all qualitatively transforming each other through time, and thus the history of their structural transformations is of more consequence than the logic of their momentary structure.

In other words, not only is there always a kind of *developmental continuity* involved in the unfolding of all living activities, but all living entities imply their surroundings, so to speak; in their very nature, they come into existence ready to *grow into* their own appropriate environment, or *Umwelt* (von Uexkull 1957). There is thus a distinctive ‘inner dynamic’ to living wholes not manifested in dead, mechanical assemblages, such that the earlier phases of the activity are indicative of at least the *style* of what is to come later — thus we can respond to their activities in an *anticipatory* fashion. In always giving rise to what we might call *identity preserving* changes, they and their ‘parts’ are always ‘on the way’ to becoming more than they already are. This is why their special, living nature cannot be captured in a timeless, ‘everything-present-together’, spatial structure. Their special nature is known to us only in the distinctive ways in which they unfold in time. They thus require a special kind of understanding which takes their temporal ‘movement’ into account, a *historical* understanding, an understanding that entails, not an instantaneous ‘getting the picture’, but an understanding that consists in an

unfolding movement — like a piece of music — that has a unique temporal ‘shape’ or ‘identity’ to it.

In what does our sense of this ‘shape’ consist, and how is it *lost* in our adoption of the H-C way of relating ourselves to our surroundings? Strangely, an important aspect of its ‘shape’ is its open, unfinished nature; and it is this, of course, that gives rise to the anticipations of ‘*that which has not yet been said*’, that influence how we ‘shape’ our utterances in our everyday talk with each other (as Bakhtin indicated above). And it is this that is lost in H-C accounts. For solely spatial (or pictorial) configurations (mis)lead us into forgetting (in Bergson’s terms), not only the essential differences between dead assemblages of externally related parts, but also the essential difference between succession and juxtaposition they imply. We then only too easily reduce the differences between the past, present, and future merely to *differences of position*, with ‘past’ events being thought of as lying to the left of a point representing the ‘present’, and ‘future’ events on the right. Thus solely spatial arrays, wrongly, suggest that successive moments do not have to struggle to come into existence; the fact that *unique, irreversible, creative* changes with their own *unique character* are taking place is lost. Instead, we act as if the observed differences of position are merely movements into positions that were in fact already in existence, and thus any pastness or futurity attached to them is merely accidental, and not crucial to their very nature.

But it is not just our anticipations of ‘*that which has not yet been said*’ that we lose in H-C accounts of change, we also lose our sense of other people (and things) as having an ‘inner life’ of their own! Bergson (1911) puts it thus:

‘Such is the contrivance of the cinematograph. And such is also that of our knowledge. Instead of attaching ourselves to the inner becoming of things, we place ourselves outside them in order to recompose their becoming artificially.’ (p. 322)

The ‘inner becoming of [indivisible] things [including our surrounding circumstances]’ is lost to us. For, for as I indicated above, in H-C accounts, all movement is treated merely as observed differences in position (to and from positions that are in fact already in existence). But to do this, to see people’s movements as merely tracing out a line or trajectory through a sequence of points, we have, so to speak, ‘stay outside’ the movement. As Bergson (1911) puts it:

‘... the possibility of applying the movement *to* the line traversed exists only for an observer who, keeping outside the movement and seeing at every instant the possibility of a stop, tries to reconstruct the real movement with these possible immobilities. The absurdity vanishes as soon as we adopt by thought the continuity of the real movement, a continuity of which every one of us is conscious whenever he lifts an arm or advances a step.’ (p. 327)

After our years and years of training in our everyday world of practical activities, in which so much of our talk is oriented towards dealing with visibly describable and manually tangible entities existing in a ‘picturable’ world, i.e., in the ‘zone of middle dimensions’ (Reichenbach), it is terribly difficult for us to undo (*deconstruct*) these habits of thought within ourselves.

As Wittgenstein (1980b) puts it: 'The *facts* of human history that throw light on our problem, are difficult for us to find out, for our talk *passes them by*, it is occupied with other things' (I, no. 78). Or, at least, *in the past* it has been occupied by other things. How can we now reorient ourselves to focus our attention, and our talk, on what previously we have ignored as unremarkable in the *background* to our everyday dealings with each other and with our surroundings?

### Coming To Be 'in the Dialogical'

As I now see it, then, this is the major feature shift in focus that we need: (1) to shift from attending to the deliberate thought of individual theorists, toward attending to events happening out in the world between us and the others and othernesses around us,<sup>7</sup> and (2) to attend to such events as aspects or as embedded in larger indivisible wholes. Where our goal in doing this is, so to speak, to *re-relate* ourselves intellectually to the actual events that are spontaneously influencing the shape of our actions, to re-relate ourselves in fact to the events that can issue us with the very 'action guiding calls' we need if we are to 'go on' appropriately in response to them. This can only be done if, in Bakhtin's (1984) view, we enter into dialogically-structured relations with the others and othernesses around us, and literally treat them as beings 'who' can issue such 'calls' to us. He describes the dialogic nature of consciousness, the dialogic nature of human life itself, thus:

'The single adequate form for *verbally expressing* authentic human existence is the *open-ended dialogue*. Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium ... A person enters into dialogue as an integral voice. He participates in it not only with his thoughts, but with his fate and with his entire individuality.' (Bergson 1984: 293)

But if we refuse to meet the other in a situation of open-ended dialogue, if we for instance insist on following a check-list questionnaire in sequencing our utterances *rather than in response to our dialogue partner's utterances*, then we not only reduce and humiliate our dialogue partner, we make the creation of the appropriate, dynamically unfolding inter-activity from within which the relevant 'action guiding calls' can emerge, impossible.

Bakhtin (1984) calls this a *monological* way of relating to those around us:

'Monologism, at its extreme, denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities, another *I* with equal rights (*thou*). With a monologic approach (in its extreme pure form) *another person* remains wholly and merely an *object* of consciousness, and not another consciousness ... Monologue is finalized and deaf to the other's response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any force. Monologue manages without the other, and therefore to some degree materializes all reality.' (pp. 292–293)

It is precisely because it is 'finalized and deaf' to another's responses that the relevant action guiding 'calls' fail to emerge in such monological relations: they fail to emerge because, as we have seen, representational-referential or aboutness forms of understanding work only in terms of *finished* or *completed* forms, i.e., in terms of 'immobilities' (Bergson). They thus pay no attention to the unfolding development of the unique living movements, i.e., to *expressions*, that a unique form of life has so far manifested itself to us, the expressions that engender anticipations within us of at least the *style* of what further is to come.

Our turn to a focus of the dialogical is, as we have already seen, a turn away from the isolated ideas, actions, and the spoken and written sentences of individuals that are only externally related to the circumstances of their utterance, and a turn toward events occurring within the *meetings* between ourselves and the others and othernesses around us, events *internally* related to such meetings. From now on, then, we will take such events-within-meetings as the focal units of our inquiries. Although as an event, a meeting consists in an indivisible, unitary, self-structuring whole, and as such endures through a whole continuous, sequential process of an initial conception (in a two-being interaction); birth (as an individual being); growth to maturity (as an autonomous being); and then death, I want also to emphasize the nature of our *initial approach* to such meetings. For these 'set the scene', so to speak, for how participants will react to everything occurring within *the event of their meeting*. It clearly makes an enormous difference if we approach another person on meeting them with a clenched fist ready to strike, or with an open hand ready to shake theirs. Without an appropriate initial approach, that beginning moment of shared conception will not take place.

But, if it does, then, as we have already seen, many special things can begin to happen in those moments when living bodies interact with their surroundings, things that we have not previously taken (explicit) account of in any of our current 'official' styles of thought or institutional practices. To take our exploration of their unfolding nature further, let us begin by considering the simple activity of looking over, visually, the scene before us — with the aim in mind of readying ourselves to move about within it. As our eyes 'flick' from one fixation point to the next, looking at a 'distant' point to the right, then at a 'near' point to the left, we nonetheless get a sense of a seamless whole, an indivisible 'something' that is not just 'there' before us as a picture is there, but is there for us as a set of 'invitations' and 'resistances', as a set of openings and barriers to our actions — 'given' in relation to our present 'position' within 'it'. And furthermore, in such involvements as these, we will *all* — more or less — see the same whole, the same landscape, the same face, etc. So that, although I might look from the door to the left to see the window, and you might look from the window to the right to see the door, from within the overall time-space we share everything is similarly ordered. Thus if there are some disagreements over exactly what it is before us, we can make use of what we do agree on to discuss the features we see differently.

In other words, here, and in many other such temporally unfolding circumstances, there is something special in the sequencing of our activities — not

so much in how *we* order them, as in how the ‘something’ out there requires us to order them. It is as if the separate elements we encounter seem to unfold in a special way, not just haphazardly but according to a certain *style*. They give rise in all who encounter them, *spontaneously*, i.e., prior to any thought or deliberation on their part, a *shared* (or at least *shareable*) sense of the *shared surrounding circumstances* in which all our individual actions can be seen as playing a part, as making ‘a difference that makes a difference’ (Bateson 1979). They are, we might say, ‘participant parts’ in a larger, living and growing whole, and it is as such that they can have meanings intelligible to others who are able to ‘look over’ them in the same way.

### Attending to Grammar and Style in the Chiasmic Structure of Temporally Unfolding Indivisible Wholes

This claim, then, that *the sequencing* of our human activities is not just formless, that not just anything can follow or be connected with anything, is clearly connected with Wittgenstein’s (1953, 1974) claim that most of our activities on investigation seem to have a ‘grammar’ to them. And that, as he sees it, it is their *shared* grammar that we *must* observe if our expressions and utterances are to be intelligible to those around us. It is this — not the constraints imposed on us externally by a physical reality — that makes it impossible for us to talk just as we please.

‘Grammar is not accountable to any reality,’ he claims, ‘it is grammatical rules that determine meaning (constitute it) and so they are not answerable to any meaning and to that extent are arbitrary.’ (Wittgenstein 1974, no. 133, p. 184).

Now to many, this may seem as outrageous as the claim that there is no prior, already fixed and categorized physical reality to which to appeal in adjudicating the worth of our claims to truth. But it has at least the implication that, prior to any of the claims as to the nature of things and events in our surroundings that we might as individuals address to those around us, all such claims must be couched in a certain *shared style*. If they are not, then they will not be properly understood by those to whom they are addressed; they will be confusing or misleading. In other words, although there may be no prior criteria to which to appeal in judging *the truth* of a person’s claims — for their truth must be investigated in terms of their entailments — there are criteria immediately available as to *their intelligibility* in the context of their utterance. These criteria arise out of the fact that all the elements involved are mutually determining, interwoven, or inter-related with each other in a certain way, according to a certain style or grammar.

Now Wittgenstein (1953), of course, is calling our sense of what can follow from what, our sense of sequencing in our talk, ‘grammar’, as his concern is with problems in the philosophy of language and with our sense of sequencing in our speech. If we return, however, simply to the activity of looking over the visual landscape before us, besides finding ourselves with a sense of up and down, left and right, and near and far, as we already noted, if we begin

to move about in it, we find ourselves experiencing a *shaped and vectored sense*, given our current position in the landscape, of where we have come from and where we might go next. In other words, as we move around in such a landscape, *in the orchestrated interplay* occurring between our own outgoing, anticipation-shaped movements (toward the ‘invitations’ offered us by our surroundings) and the incoming ‘resistances’-shaped responses arising from them as a result, we experience a continuously updated practical understanding of an ‘action guiding’ kind of how to ‘go on’ in our movements. William James (1890) described our inner (subsidiary) awareness of these action guiding influences (when they are at work in our speech) thus:

‘The truth is that large tracts of human speech are nothing but *signs of direction* in thought, of which direction we have nevertheless an acutely discriminative sense, though no definite sensorial image plays any part in it whatsoever ... If we try to hold fast to the feeling of direction, the full presence comes and the feeling of direction is lost ... Now what I contend for, and accumulate examples to show, is that “tendencies” are not only descriptions from without, but they are among the *objects* of the stream, which is thus aware of them from within, and must be described as in very large measure constituted of *feelings of tendency*, often so vague that we are unable to name them at all’ (James, 1890, pp253–254).

And it is the unique, detailed structure of these subsidiary (background) awarenesses that Wittgenstein (1953) is bringing into the foreground of our attention in the special methods of inquiry he has devised.

But, as I was intimating above, it would be a mistake to focus all our attention here on what happens in purely linguistic settings; our use of ‘feelings of tendency’, of felt ‘signs of direction’ occurring in the course of our already ongoing actions enabling us to anticipate our own next movement, clearly occurs in all our bodily activities. Nowhere, perhaps, is it more apparent than when in walking down stairs we expect one more, or one less, step than there actually is; the anticipatory nature of the action guiding influences at work in our movements become readily apparent to us either in our falling forward when we expected the ground earlier, or banging our foot down hard when expecting a longer travel for our foot. And as Bergson (2004/1912) suggests, both over the long and the short term:

‘Thus is gradually formed an experience ... which accumulates within the body, a series of mechanisms wound up and ready, with reactions to external stimuli ever more numerous and more varied, and answers ready prepared to an ever growing number of possible solicitations ... a memory ... always bent upon action, seated in the present and looking only to the future ... it no longer *represents* our past to us, it *acts* it; and if it still deserves the name of memory, it is not because it conserves bygone images, but because it prolongs their useful effect into the present moment’ (pp. 92–93).

In other words, at any one moment in time, even though we cannot possibly describe its character in words — as it is still incomplete and open to yet further specification — we can find within ourselves an already, very precisely specified state of affairs, a state of affairs with some well-defined characteristics, and also with some very clearly limited openings for further specification.

But above, I claimed even more than this. I suggested that the criteria in terms of which we make our judgments as to the fittingness of our acts to the context of their performance, arise out of the fact that all the elements involved are mutually determining, interwoven, or inter-related with each other in a certain special way. What might that special way be?

We can now add to the complexity already outlined above, the fact that, visually, we are related to our surroundings, not with just one, but with our *two* eyes. As a result, a dynamically unfolding sense of our relations to our surroundings (as we move around in them) becomes available to us in more than just the orchestrated interplay between our outgoing actions and their incoming results. Such a sense also becomes available to us in the *chiasmic* intertwining of the two slightly different incoming results from the two outgoing acts of looking from the two eyes. What is this *sense*?

Gregory Bateson (1979) describes what occurs in binocular vision thus:

‘The binocular image, which appears to be undivided, is in fact a complex synthesis of information from the left front in the right brain and a corresponding synthesis of material from the right front in the left brain ... From this elaborate arrangement, two sorts of advantage accrue. The seer is able to improve resolution at edges and contrasts; and better able to read when the print is small or the illumination poor. More important, information about depth is created ... In principle, extra “depth” in some metaphoric sense is to be expected whenever the information for the two descriptions is differently collected or differently coded’ (pp. 68–70).

Clearly, much more is happening here than the mere blending or interweaving of separate constituents which remain identifiably separate even when complexly interwoven. In our looking over a visual scene (in accord with the demands of the scene), *something utterly new and novel is being created*, a new indivisible, ‘relational unity’ in which two points of view are combined, but not merged, in creating a unity that has a ‘depth’ to it — a unity, in other words, that allows us directly as we survey it, to ‘see’ how all the things within it are related.

This why Merleau-Ponty (1962) takes our two-eyed perception of an object, visually, as a paradigm for the inter-working of all our senses together: ‘The intersensory object is to the visual object what the visual object is to the monocular images of double vision, and the senses interact in perception as the two eyes collaborate in vision’ (pp. 233–234). In other words, there is even more to this than meets our eyes. For, when two or more of our channels of contact with the world (if ‘channels’ is the right word) come into communicative contact with each other, then they must orient us toward our surroundings ‘in concert’ with each other, in ways which do not confuse and bewilder us. A heard sound of movement should be sensed as coming from the same place as the seen movement that harmonizes with it; a felt hardness in our fingertips should be sensed as the hardness of the object we see our fingertips touching; and so on. Classically we have ignored these complexly interwoven contributions of our bodily capacities to our ways of making a unified sense of our surroundings. While being ‘focally aware<sup>8</sup>’ of the responsive whole resulting from us ‘looking over’ what is before us, we have ignored the background structure of anticipations (of which we are only

'subsidiarily aware') that guide us as we actively 'do' the relating of ourselves to our surroundings. As a result, not only has the amazing complexity of our perceptual processes, and their flexible adjustment to the situation of their functioning, been ignored, but also their orchestrated 'inter-workings' — how, for example, in watching a movie, or a ventriloquist's dummy, we 'see' people's voices as issuing from that place in our surroundings that is moving in synchrony with the tempo of the sound we hear.

Indeed, to give one last example of how, although we are in fact very familiar with such phenomena, their philosophical importance has been ignored, let me say a few words about stereophonic listening. Listening to current stereo recordings of an orchestra playing in a hall on a system with 'surround sound', it is not just that the violins sound as if they are coming from the left, where they were originally located, and the violas, cellos, and double basses as if from the right, but one hears much more. The recording sounds as if the orchestra is playing in a hall *in which the sounds bounce off the walls and ceiling*; there is a sense of space around the instruments. Rather than simply coming just from the left loudspeaker, the sound of the violins comes from both speakers, but in a subtly correlated way so that the phase differences between the sound waves meeting between the left and right speakers display complex interference patterns simulating, not just the violins coming from the left, but coming from the left *in a concert hall*.<sup>9</sup>

The hall, and its size and general volume, is of course invisible, but its spatial extent is nonetheless 'there' in our hearing of the music. Our seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling, and body orientation (or near-far, up-down, right-left, etc.) are all there complexly and dynamically intertwined in our sense of our relation to our surroundings. Indeed, as Merleau-Ponty (1968) notes with respect to the nature of our chiasmically organized perception of our surroundings:

'Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world. It is a marvel too little noticed that every movement of my eyes — even more, every displacement of my body — has its place in the same visible universe that I itemize and explore with them, as, conversely, every vision takes place somewhere in the tactile space. There is double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible; the two maps are complete, and yet they do not merge into one. The two parts are total parts and yet are not superposable.' (p. 134)

In other words, to repeat the point made above, that the complex dynamic realities which here we are calling chiasmically organized, are not constituted from causally related parts, nor from any rationally related parts, nor are they formed by any kind of mixing or blending or averaging we can imagine. Here, in the emergence of the new concept of chiasmic relations, is the very emergence of a uniquely novel quality into our thinking of a previously unencountered kind.

## Conclusions

The Cartesian world is a dead world, a world of mechanical movement, a world of forces and impacts in which change is thought of as changes in the spatial configuration of a set of separately existing parts. Many changes in the human world, however, are of a very different kind. Rather than changes taking place *within* an already fully realized reality, instead of changes of a quantitative and repeatable kind, i.e., *ordinary* changes, they are unique, irreversible, one-off changes, novel changes of a *qualitative* kind, i.e., *living* changes, changes *in and of reality* itself. And as living changes, such changes are creative, developmental changes, changes making something possible that before was impossible. Such changes — against a Cartesian background — strike us as changes that happen unpredictably, unexpectedly, not according to any laws or principles, but capriciously dependent on circumstances. Indeed, such changes can be surprising and can strike us with amazement or wonder, for they are *extraordinary* changes. And it is with such moments of wonder that — as both Aristotle and Plato thought — that we must begin our inquiries, as I will suggest below.

But, as I see it, such moments can only become available to us if we stay in living motion, not so much in locomotive movement, as in a dynamic interactive, expressive-responsive relation with the others and othernesses in our surroundings. For, as we have seen above, if we can enter into living, dialogically structured relations with the others around us, and allow them to call out spontaneous reactions from us, then an engaged, responsive understanding becomes available to us *from within* the unfolding dynamics of such relationships — a kind of understanding that is utterly unavailable to us if we adopt only a monological approach to them and treat them as dead forms.

In an effort to summarize and to reach some conclusions in this article, I will now try to briefly outline the distinctions between what we might call ‘aboutness-talk/thinking’ and ‘witness-talk/thinking’ as follows:

*Aboutness (monologic)-talk/thinking* is unresponsive to another’s expressions; it works simply in terms of an individual thinker’s ‘theoretical pictures’, which they must try to ‘get across’ to us in their talk — but, even when we ‘get the picture’, i.e., *their* picture, we still have to interpret it to suit *our* circumstances, and to decide, intellectually, on a right course of action. Thus, in aboutness-thinking, as Bakhtin (1984) puts it: ‘(in its extreme pure form) another person remains wholly and merely an object of consciousness, and not another consciousness ... Monologue is finalized and deaf to the other’s response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any *decisive* force’ (p.293). In other words, it works simply in terms of ‘pictures’, thus, even when we ‘get the picture’, we still have to decide, intellectually, on a right course of action — ‘The cat sat on the mat, the mat was red, the cat was black — get the picture?’ ‘Yes, so what?’ Such representational-referential talk does not engage us; it doesn’t spontaneously call out any distinctive responses from us; and consequently, no *action guiding* calls are aroused in us. Such talk leaves us ‘cold’, we say.

*Witness (dialogic)-talk/thinking* occurs in those reflective interactions that involve our coming into living, interactive contact with an other's living being, with their utterances, with their bodily expressions, with their words, their 'works'. It is a meeting of outsides, of surfaces, of two kinds of 'flesh' (Merleau-Ponty 1968), such that they come into 'touch' or 'contact' with each other. They both touch and are touched, and in the relations between their outgoing touching and resultant incoming, responsive touches of the other, the sense of a 'touching' or 'moving' *difference* emerges — a difference that makes a difference (that matters to us) (Bateson 1972). In the interplay of living movements intertwining with each other, new possibilities of relation are engendered, new interconnections are made, new 'shapes' of experience can emerge — third 'shapes', third forms of life, *conceived* when two or more forms of 'flesh' rub up against each other. The interplay involved gives rise, not to a visible seeing, for what is 'sensed' is invisible; nor does it give rise to an interpretation (a representation), for our responses occur spontaneously and directly in our living encounters with an other's expressions. Neither is it merely a feeling, for carries with it as it unfolds a bodily sense of the possibilities for responsive action in relation to one's momentary placement, position, or orientation in the present interaction. Instead, it gives rise to a *shaped* and *vectored* sense of our moment-by-moment changing placement in our current surroundings — engendering in us both unique anticipations as to what-next might happen along with, so to speak, 'action guiding advisories' as to what-next we might expect *in relation to* the actions we might take. In short, we can be spontaneously 'moved' toward specific possibilities for action in such thinking.

Here, then, we can begin to see another way in which what we call 'theory' — but I will call 'theory-talk' — can be an influence in our practical actions out in the world of our everyday, practical affairs. The voiced words of a theorist, i.e., his or her *utterances*, can 'instruct' us, can 'direct' our attention toward *this* or *that* aspect of events occurring around us in our surroundings. As Vygotsky (1978) remarks — 'The child begins to perceive the world not only through his [or her] eyes but also through his [or her] speech' (p. 32) — so we also as adults can come to see the world around us *through* our speech. Hence, instead of turning away from events occurring around us, and burying ourselves in thought in an attempt to *explain* them within an appropriate theoretical scheme (thus to respond to them in *our* terms), we can turn ourselves more responsively toward them to respond to (aspects of them) *in their own* terms. In other words, seeing *with another's words in mind* can itself be a thoughtful, feelingful, way of seeing, while thinking *with another's words in mind* can also be a feelingful, seeingful, way of thinking — a way of seeing and thinking that brings one into a close and personal, living contact with one's surroundings, with their subtle but mattering details. Hence, this is a style of seeingful and feelingful thought that can be of help to us in our practical daily affairs, and in further explorations of our own human lives together.

The specific words of another, if they are uttered at a timely moment as a 'reminder' as to the possible character of our next step within an ongoing

practical activity, can thus be a crucial influence in the development and refinement of that activity. The kind of knowledgeable inquiry involved here begins with our being ‘struck’, with our noticing of, to repeat Bateson’s (1979) phrase, ‘differences that make a difference’ (p. 453). Indeed, Arlene Katz and I (Katz and Shotter 1996a, b; Shotter and Katz 1996), making use of Wittgenstein’s remarks (along with remarks from many others), have begun to develop a set of methods that we call the methods of a ‘social poetics’.<sup>10</sup> Its overall aim is the development within a collaborating group of appropriate ‘ways of looking’, i.e., of paying attention, to subtle and fleeting once-occurrent events of importance in their shared practice, along with an appropriate vocabulary for not only creating and sustaining these ‘ways of looking’, those sensitivities, but also for sustaining the open, dialogical forms of relationship within which such forms of spontaneous responsiveness are possible. If they can be sustained, then, in such forms of cooperative, synergistic, or collaborative practices, it is possible to develop self-reflecting, self-critical, self-researching, and thus self-developing practices. But to say this is not to say anything very revolutionary, for such a form of ‘research’ is already a part of our everyday practices;<sup>11</sup> it is only revolutionary to recognize that fact.

We have here, then, a process of inquiry in which practitioners become co-researchers, and researchers become co-practitioners, as each articulates what they have been ‘struck by’ in the unfolding process. It is a process in which both researchers and practitioners alike are engaged in creating *with* each other an ‘action guiding’ sense *from within* their lived and living experience of their shared circumstances. But such an action guiding sense can emerge only in the collaborative dialogical activities occurring between them; once it ceases, such a guiding sense ceases to exist. While it is in existence, practice, teaching and research can all be enfolded within each other, while one informs and creates the other in a ever-evolving, generative fashion. Both inquiry and learning in this process thus becomes a matter of ‘practical authorship’ (Shotter 1993) in which teachers and students, managers and workers, researchers and practitioners, all co-construct that which they create and learn together. But in such a process, it is not only the participants’ shared circumstances that are refined and further developed, participants also change in their identities — for the changes within them are not only epistemological, they are also ontological (Shotter 1984). It is our spontaneous, embodied ways of seeing and acting in the world that we change — we change in who we ‘are’.

## Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented as a keynote address at the First *Organization Studies* Summer Workshop on ‘Theorizing Process in Organizational Research’, Santorini, Greece, 12–13 June 2005.

- 1 Polanyi (1958) introduces the notion of tacit knowledge as action guiding thus: ‘When we use a hammer to drive a nail, we attend to both nail and hammer, but in a *different way* ... When we bring down the hammer we do not feel that its handle has struck our palm but that its head has struck the nail. Yet in a sense we are certainly alert to the feelings in our palm and the fingers that hold the hammer. They guide us in handling it effectively, and

- the degree of attention that we give to the nail is given to the same extent but in a different way to these feelings ... They are not watched in themselves: we watch something else while keeping intensely aware of them. I have a *subsidiary awareness* of the feeling in the palm of my hand which is merged into my *focal awareness* of my driving in the nail' (p. 55). This, I suggest, is also how we might best *relate* ourselves to a theorist's utterances, not by making use of his/her representational meaning, i.e., what the theorist is supposedly talking *about*, but by our responding to and thinking *with* his/her relationally-responsive meaning in mind. For their utterances *in their speaking* can guide us in acting effectively; they can function as *action guiding advisories*.
- 2 As Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982: 48) say in discussing Foucault's exposure of the illusion of autonomous discourse: 'This exotic form of speech act flourished in especially pure form in Greece around 300 BC, when Plato became explicitly interested in the rules that enabled speakers to be taken seriously, and, by extrapolating the relative context independence of such speech acts to total independence, invented pure theory ... This systematic, institutionalized justification of the claim of certain speech acts to be true of reality takes place in a context in which truth and falsity has serious social consequences.'
  - 3 'But can't I imagine that the people around me are automata ...?' Says Wittgenstein (1953), 'Say to yourself, for example: "The children over there are mere automata; all their liveliness is mere automatism". And you will either find these words become quite meaningless; or, you will produce in yourself some kind of uncanny feeling, or something of the sort' (no. 420). Clearly, Descartes felt no such linguistic difficulties as these... having, presumably, discounted his inner feelings as in any way providing him with a 'discriminative sense' (see quote from William James 1890: 253, in text below).
  - 4 'Not only rules, but also examples are needed for establishing a practice. Our rules leave loop-holes open, and the practice has to speak for itself' (Wittgenstein 1969, no. 139).
  - 5 I am being to a degree circumspect here in not wholly ruling out this kind of *responsive* understanding with dead forms, as later, we will meet the issue of artistic forms, e.g. writing, paintings, and other such forms, which we can enter into *living relations* with.
  - 7 Hence the need to put the word 'parts' in scare quotes. While, perhaps, analytically separable, the 'parts' of a living, indivisible whole cannot be substantially separated.
  - 8 Here, we can follow Gadamer (1989: xvi; 2000: xxviii), who states: 'My real concern was and is philosophic: not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing.'
  - 9 Again, see Polanyi (1958, 1963).
  - 10 I owe this image to Peat (1990: 114–115).
  - 11 Ann Cunliffe (2001) has developed these methods extensively also in managerial settings.
  - 12 Tom Andersen (pers. comm.)

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