

any commandments, I do not, in fact, recommend anything, neither love nor indifference, neither friendliness nor hate, but I say: if there is no love, there are no social phenomena, no social relations, and no social life. The emotion constituting social life is not hate, not self-interest and greed, not competition and aggression, but love.

POERKSEN: But it is evident, no doubt, that human social life is not only shaped by love.

MATURANA: Of course, anger, hatred, envy, and various other emotions shape the actions and relations of our social life. Of course, there are diverse variants of communal existence that are not based on love. Just think of a monarchy, of some ideologically or religiously determined sect, or of an army; their constitutive hierarchies always lead to the disappearance of individuals. My claim is that there are no social relations in an army – if we disregard the friendly personal relations between soldiers or generals. Sometimes small islands of social relations may form within such wholes that are organised along different lines. Social life, however, I insist, is based on love.

### SOCIAL SYSTEMS

POERKSEN: Can you see no contradiction between the individual and the social? Those who speak of the individual and emphasise individuality presuppose, as a rule, that the individual is autonomous, a monad, and inaccessible to external impressions. Those who, in contrast, foreground the formative power of the social, usually insist on the permeability of the individual: Individuals, the assumption is, observe the world through the eyes of their group and against the backdrop of their history. Both views clearly contradict each other.

MATURANA: This is not my view. I think there is no contradiction between the individual and the social: a society is a collection of individuals living together on the basis of a fundamental emotion. The member of a social community is and remains unavoidably an individual. When individuals speak with each other, make appointments and do things together, they surely do not lose their individuality; they may change their views and may be transformed

through their encounters but they continue to exist as individuals in their autonomous dynamics. In their interactions they create something new that cannot simply be attributed or even reduced to merely one of the involved persons. Should their individuality actually be diminished or lost completely, e.g. due to an illness, they will no longer be fully responsible members of a social community. In an army, on the other hand, which is undoubtedly not a social system, individuals are clearly unwelcome. An army can only use agents, executors of planned actions, people who carry out orders without reflection. Persons who cannot conform to army rules will be thrown out.

POERKSEN: You are one of the few sociologically interested scientists who do not use biology to devalue the individual. In the history of social Darwinism, we can find many contrary positions: biology supplies the arguments supporting the dominance of collectives and the degradation of individuals.

MATURANA: Such patterns of argumentation and procedures of justification are, however, not grounded in an adequate understanding of biological processes. These explanations and ideas are intended to serve particular purposes and are actually invented: they are then projected onto biology and nature and, in a second step, referred back to the human domain in order to lend support to the original presuppositions. Charles Darwin borrowed the idea of competition from the economists of his time in England. Some time later, the economists adopted the idea of competition from biology in order to validate their own economic paradigms. – Let us assume that we would very much like to create a theory of society proving the dispensability of the individual and the overarching importance of the collective. We would invent a frame of reference in which the collective is given the highest value. At the same time, we would have to turn a blind eye on the fact that the components of collectives are undeniably individuals whose autonomous dynamics are preserved in the interactions with others. And only as far as they are and remain individuals, and therefore contribute to the maintenance and the progress of the well-being of the collective, can we speak of a social system at all – and not, for example, of an army, a monarchy, or a dictatorship. Therefore, I claim that individuals are not dispensable.

POERKSEN: A point of conceptual clarification: What form of living together do you actually designate as a *social system*? The term is generally used in a comprehensive sense to refer to the entire set of structures made up of human relations.

MATURANA: If you listen carefully to the characterisation of a certain kind of behaviour as unsocial you will notice that it revolves around the lack of respect for the other. We complain about people's unsocial behaviour when they act without respect, when they, for instance, simply throw their rubbish across the garden fence on the neighbour's property. The complaints we usually hear in such cases always indicate an emotion. With this conceptual specification I definitely do not intend to give a definition of what is social, I just consider the conditions that lead us to describe certain behaviours in our everyday life as unsocial or as social. One of the customary self-defining characteristics of sociology is that all human relations are social relations – this is a view I do not agree with at all. What gives a human relation its particular character is its special emotional foundation. Once this is understood it is no longer difficult to grasp that all those relations, which we call social relations in our ordinary language, are based on love.

POERKSEN: If social systems can only be categorised as such when they satisfy particular demands – acceptance and appreciation of the other –, the question arises as to what the actual tasks of sociologists, the professional observers of society, might be. What are their topics? What forms of living together remain legitimate objects of sociological analysis?

MATURANA: Sociologists should deal with the emotions underlying human relations. Their task should be to show how these emotions mould and style the ways and modes of communal life. I once suggested distinguishing *homo sapiens amans* from *homo sapiens aggressans*, and the latter from *homo sapiens arrogans*. All these concepts have to do with fundamental emotions like love, aggression and arrogance, which have influenced the patterns in which relations were established during the course of human evolution and formed the existence of *homo sapiens sapiens* – the human being living in language.

POERKSEN: You seem to consider emotions, and not rational arguments, as the essential determining forces.

MATURANA: Emotions guide us. People, who transform their relationship with other persons in an all-encompassing way, realise on closer inspection that they have, in effect, fundamentally changed their underlying emotion. Emotions are, in my view, dispositions for action; they seem to me to be something completely elementary that also determines the acceptance or rejection of a rational system. All rational systems and discussions rest on a foundation that is non-rational in kind, and that is accepted owing to personal predilections. It may, therefore, easily happen that we rationalise our actions resulting from such predilections so as to justify them after the event: rationality is then plainly a method and an instrument of justification. For me, humans are emotional animals that use their minds and their rationality for the purpose of denying or justifying emotions.

POERKSEN: Such a description makes me feel somewhat uncomfortable. You might interpret this feeling of discomfort as the typical prejudice of a representative of the arts faculty. Anyway: Does not your characterisation amount to a devaluation of human beings as rational animals?

MATURANA: Not at all. It is a distinctive feature of our culture to devalue emotions as forces interfering with, and even threatening, rationality – here you have actual devaluation. What I am saying is, however, that love is the prime emotion that makes ethical behaviour possible, in the first place, a behaviour, which includes the responsible reflection of the consequences of actions. Ethical concern arises at the moment when self-awareness emerges and when, therefore, the possible consequences of one's actions for another human being of personal importance are consciously reflected. Ethics is, for me, a consequence of love; it occurs in language because only language enables us to reflect our chosen course of action.

## ETHICS WITHOUT MORALITY

POERKSEN: What happens when conflicts arise? Can there be no rationally controlled solution?

MATURANA: Any successful resolution of a conflict is of an emotional nature. This does not imply that I am pleading for stopping all discussion and giving up all conversation, not at all. What must be achieved is the creation of a common basis that permits reconciliation and relieves the parties in the conflict of their fears. When people speak with each other in order to resolve their conflicts, they must begin by first restoring mutual trust and respect. It may perhaps be advisable to admit mistakes, to apologise and to affirm the intelligence of the other person. When reciprocal trust has been restored, people will listen to each other in a way that grants validity to what is said in the relevant domain of reality. On such a basis a new common emotional dynamics may be developed, which can sustain the relationship. The old certainties are abandoned and a sort of behaviour is resumed that I call love.

POERKSEN: It seems to me that your reflections dealing with love and the power of emotions always involve an unwarranted jump: there is a leap from the facts and arguments of hard science to poetic descriptions applied to practical fields, from the characterisation of what there is to what should be, from epistemology to ethics. You are changing the discourse.

MATURANA: This is incorrect. Biology does not tell us what we must do, and as a biologist and therefore as a scientist I cannot tell anyone what to do – that would be a misunderstanding. In nature, nothing is good or bad. Things simply *are*. It is only in the human domain of the justification and rejection of a certain kind of behaviour – i.e. when our particular preferences are at stake – that evaluations and distinctions such as good or bad arise. Once again: I do not give any recommendation but I can, for instance, assert as a biologist that tampering with the genome will produce monsters. But that does not at all entail that I am arguing for or against the manipulation of the genome, it only means that I describe the consequences resulting from a particular course of action. People may then make their choice.

POERKSEN: Does not the specific mode of description contain a partisan view and an indirect plea?

MATURANA: No. Perhaps people's reception is influenced by their own values and preferences – but that is another matter. In such cases, it is obviously difficult to perceive simply what is happening and what is shown.

POERKSEN: But is the concept of love not already connected with a positive valuation? The word *love* sounds so good. Nobody in his right mind will openly promote exploitation and dictatorshipship.

MATURANA: If I want to keep valuation and description clearly separate, all I have to do is to argue as clearly and as precisely as possible and state exactly what I mean and what I want to say. Naturally, whenever I observe a behaviour that involves another person as a legitimate partner, I could use *Nimm*, – a new and unencumbered word. People would then probably ask me why I was using such an expression since as the word *love* was the common concept available for this kind of behaviour and this trace in the flow of relations. I would like to repeat once more: I have no intention whatever of promoting love but I do indeed insist that there can be no social phenomena without love.

POERKSEN: Nevertheless the idea suggests deriving an ethical imperative from your considerations. We might say: *Act always in such a way as to create or preserve love*.

MATURANA: We could say that, of course, but the formulation of an imperative turns ethics into morality. I would like to propose at this point of our conversation that we distinguish clearly between ethics and morality, even though such a distinction may at first sight appear somewhat arbitrary. The moralists stand for the adherence to rules, which they consider as the external reference lending authority to their statements and strange ideas. They lack awareness of their own responsibility. People acting as moralists do not see their fellow human beings because they are completely occupied by the upholding of rules and imperatives. They know with certainty what has to be done and how everybody else has to behave. People acting ethi-

cally, on the contrary, perceive others, consider them important, and see them. It is, of course, possible that persons argue like moralists but act in an ethical way. It is imaginable that persons are moralists without being ethical, or that they are generally held to be immoral while, in fact, acting ethically. In each of these cases, the possibility of ethics and of being touched arises only when the other human being is seen as a legitimate other, and when the possible consequences of one's actions for that other's well-being are reflected. Ethics is based on love.

POERKSEN: What do you say to those who – despite your determined refusal to formulate rules and imperatives – see some similarity here with the Christian commandment that we should love our neighbour as we love ourselves?

MATURANA: Jesus spoke of the love of the neighbour. The Christian churches, however, that have been involved in wars and devastations, have for 2000 years interpreted what Jesus said as a commandment. We might rather say that we should always have a gun ready and the finger on the trigger if we cannot trust our neighbour. The question is then: Do we really want that? Do we want to run around with a gun day and night and live in a world ruled by anxiety and mistrust? If this is what people want, then they must not love their neighbours and not trust them in any way because the neighbours will then be justified in mistrusting and fearing them as well. In this way, an apparent reason is created for carrying arms. Conversely: If you behave in a way that grants other people respect, you will in turn earn their respect. If you trust a child, the child will in turn trust you. This does not mean that I am now supporting the view that what we do not want to experience and suffer ourselves we should not do to others; that would only be opportunism, not love. All I am saying is: *We bring forth the world we live by living it.* Whatever we wish we should do.