

Varieties of Objectivity; a Conversation

Humberto R. Maturana and Bernhard Poerksen

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Poerksen: Your plea for circular thinking somehow seems deeply disturbing, even threatening. The world dissolves; beginning and end become arbitrary fixations no longer offering a safe grip; all firm ground is pulled from under our feet. One would like to rush to the door and out of the room, but one has become uncertain that that door is still there. You reported somewhere that, having started to think in this way, you were quite scared for some time that you might go mad. Why did that alarm finally fade away?

Maturana: There came a moment at which I realised that circular thinking did not endanger the soundness of my mind but that it expanded my understanding. The decision, in particular, to proceed from my own experience and not from an external reality can have a profoundly liberating and comforting effect. The experiences we make are no longer doubted, no longer denigrated as unreal and illusory; they are no longer a problem, they no longer produce emotional conflicts; they are simply accepted for what they are. – Suppose, I claim to have heard the voice of Jesus speaking to me last night. What do you think would happen when I told other people of such an experience? Somebody might explain to me that I suffered from hallucinations because Jesus was dead and could therefore not possibly speak to me. Someone else might think me very vain and suspect that I wanted to present myself as an elect person: it is, after all, Jesus who was been speaking to me. A third person might say that during that night the devil had led me into temptation. All these considerations have one thing in common: they reject the explanation with which I am trying to make sense of my experience but they do not negate the experience itself; they do not call into question that I heard a voice.

Poerksen: In what way does this example contribute to answering my question concerning your fear of madness? I assume that your decision to start out from your own experience allayed your fears, calmed your mind, and set you at ease. One accepts what one experiences. Therefore, the fear of madness might be a sort of clandestine attempt to defend oneself against one's own experiences.

Maturana: Exactly. To call something *mad* means to explain one's perceptions and experiences in such a way as to devalue oneself. It is not my intention to reject or devalue experiences. Experiences are not the problem. What I want to explain is the operations through which experiences arise.

Poerksen: Do you believe that such a view, which so forcefully argues in favour of the legitimacy of any kind of experience, offers ethical advantages?

Maturana: Yes, I do. We must not forget that the notion of a reality existing independently from us corresponds with the belief that it is possible to achieve authoritative, universally valid statements. These may be used to discredit certain kinds of experience. It is the reference to this reality that is held to make a statement objective and universally valid; in a culture based on power, domination and

control, it provides the justification for forcing other people to subject themselves to one's own view of things. However, as soon as one has realised that there is no single privileged access to reality, and that perception and illusion are indistinguishable in the actual process of an experience, then the question arises what criteria can be used by a human being to claim that something is the case. The very possibility of posing this question opens up a space of common reflection, a sphere of cooperation. The other person becomes a legitimate other with whom I am able to talk. Friendship, mutual respect, and cooperation emerge. It is no longer possible to demand submission; the universe changes into a multiverse within which numerous realities are valid by reference to different criteria of validity. The only thing one may now do is to invite the other person to think about what one believes and holds to be valid oneself.

Poerksen: This means that we have two fundamentally different positions. One claims that all knowledge is observer-dependent, the other, that an observer-independent reality can be perceived. Both positions have their different consequences and lead to specific approaches to the environment and to other people.

Maturana: There are two distinct attitudes, two paths of thinking and explaining. The first path I call objectivity without parentheses. It takes for granted the observer-independent existence of objects that - it is claimed - can be known; it believes in the possibility of an external validation of statements. Such a validation would lend authority and unconditional legitimacy to what is claimed and would, therefore, aim at subjection. It entails the negation of all those who are not prepared to agree with the "objective" facts. One does not want to listen to them or try to understand them. The fundamental emotion reigning here is powered by the authority of universally valid knowledge. One lives in the domain of mutually exclusive transcendental ontologies: each ontology supposedly grasps objective reality; what exists seems independent from one's personality and one's actions. The other attitude I call objectivity in parentheses; its emotional basis is the enjoyment of the company of other human beings. The question of the observer is accepted fully, and every attempt is made to answer it. The distinction between objects and the experience of existence is, according to this path, not denied but the reference to objects is not the basis of explanations, it is the coherence of experiences with other experiences that constitutes the foundation of all explanation. In this view, the observer becomes the origin of all realities; all realities are created through the observer's operations of distinction. We have entered the domain of constitutive ontologies: all Being is constituted through the Doing of observers. If we follow this path of explanation, we become aware that we can in no way claim to be in possession of the truth but that there are numerous possible realities. Each of them is fully legitimate and valid although, of course, not equally desirable. If we follow this path of explanation, we cannot demand the subjection of our fellow human beings but will listen to them, seek cooperation and communication, and will try to find out under what circumstances we would consider valid what they are saying. Consequently, some claim will be true if it satisfies the criteria of validation of the relevant domain of reality.

A multitude of worlds

Poerksen: Your conceptual differentiation seems to me to be a little too complicated. Why not simply distinguish between *objectivity* and *subjectivity* in order to separate these two positions?

Maturana: 'Subjectivity' is one of the expressions that we use to devalue a statement from the path of *objectivity without parentheses*. 'Purely subjective' we call a statement, which does not correspond with reality. By speaking of *objectivity in parentheses*, I want to keep everybody aware of the fact that it is impossible to establish an observer-independent point of reference. At the same time, I want to conceptualise our experience that there seem to be objects independent from us. The parentheses are meant to signal a certain state of awareness. My question is: How can it be that we experience objects as distinct from us although we know that everything said is said by us and cannot be separated from us?

Poerksen: Hearing you speak like that about conceptual distinctions, I am beginning to get a clearer idea of a principle guiding your use of language: your terminology with all its newly formed expressions is firmly based on the experiences of human observers but at the same time suggests a different view of those experiences.

Maturana: That is the idea, precisely. From time to time, I have been criticised for still talking about ontology and existence; I was reproached for not replacing ontological considerations by an ontogenetic perspective because people thought it was essential to focus on processes of becoming. Such a demand appeals to me, of course, but the concomitant rejection of reality and of the objects that unquestionably manifest themselves in the actions of observers, negates the ordinary experiences we human beings make every day. It cannot, therefore, serve as a reliable basis for my argumentation.

Poerksen: If we remain aware that everything said unavoidably refers back to an observer, our universally valid reality breaks up into innumerable different realities. More than six billion people live on this earth; would you say that there are more than six billion realities?

Maturana: It is a theoretical possibility but factually quite improbable. If we assume that about five billion out of the six billion people follow the path of objectivity without parentheses, they live more or less in the same domain of reality: some of them believe in Allah, others in Jehovah or Jesus, still others are agnostics. Some of them consider consciousness as the unconditionally valid reality, others matter, or energy, still others are in favour of ideas and notions as the ultimate points of reference for their claims. However, they are all united by one fundamental certainty: *they do not believe that they are believing but they believe that they know because they do not know that they are believing.*

Poerksen: What about the remaining billion people? How would you characterise their attitude?

Maturana: They might - possibly - follow the path of objectivity in parentheses and, therefore, be capable of reflection: They would respect differences, would not claim to be the sole possessors of truth, and would enjoy the company of others. In the process of living together, they would produce different cultures. Consequently, the number of possible realities may seem potentially infinite but their diversity is constrained by communal living, by cultures and histories created together, by shared interests and predilections. Every human being is certainly different but not entirely different.

Poerksen: Can I live in the awareness that there is a potentially infinite number of different realities? I would suspect that any attempt to exhaust the infinite multitude of possible worlds must unavoidably lead to breakdown and the complete loss of orientation.

Maturana: Of course, we need to reduce complexity; we need to narrow down our focus and rely on specific expectations to be capable of acting at all. However, the problem is not sticking to certain expectations, reducing complexity, or categorising a multitude of phenomena under one, or even only one, concept. The central problem for me is whether one is prepared to give up one's certainties when something unexpected develops. Disappointing experiences need not necessarily lead to deep frustration and anger but may, quite undramatically, open up new perspectives. One realises that one's expectations are not fulfilled and, without great excitement, decides on a new orientation.

Poerksen: How does one learn to move in the world in this way? How does one acquire the awareness that - although one has already chosen a particular variant from the multitude of possible ways of life - everything could be quite different?

Maturana: Certain events in one's life bring about insights of this kind. For example, it happens often enough that one has a certain belief and then encounters a person that one would have to reject according to that belief. One should not, in fact, like the person but one simply does, and so one realises that one's beliefs and the sympathetic view of the person do not fit and cannot both be upheld any longer. If one's beliefs are given priority, then the person in question will disappear as a likeable human being from one's field of vision. However, if one chooses to give in to the attraction, then one begins to reflect one's judgments and their effects and bids them farewell. In such ways, we learn how crippling the effects of beliefs and certainties of all kinds may be; they impose a kind of perception that we ourselves on reflection find inadequate.

Poerksen: Certainties are, therefore, essentially dangerous as far as their consequences are concerned: they render alternative ways of feeling, thinking and acting invisible.

Maturana: If they do not just surface as transitory certainties of the moment, they are something extremely powerful. They make us blind and make all further reflection seem a waste of time: We believe we already know in advance the only possible result of any renewed reflection effort. What, in fact, do we really mean when we say we are absolutely sure of something? We say: There is no point in entertaining doubts; our beliefs are so overwhelming that it must appear completely absurd to think about the conditions of their origins. Immediate action seems required. And should we, in addition, want to free others of their supposed ignorance and their false perception of the world, we would become a real danger: the authority of reality will then serve as an instrument to justify exploitation and subjugation, wars and crusades.

Poerksen: Would you say that certainties and a belief in absolute truth necessarily lead to the suppression of other ways of thinking?

Maturana: Sometimes I think that we live in a culture where the belief to be in the possession of truth is understood as an invitation to imperialism. Why should we, who definitely know what is correct, allow the others to go on living in ignorance? Would it not be better, appropriate and, in fact, indispensable, people ask in this culture, to put that allegedly false view of the world right and replace it by the true and correct one? At some stage, everything unfamiliar and extraordinary will, consequently, appear as an unacceptable and insupportable threat and its correction and elimination will be deemed appropriate. Everybody knows what the facts are; everybody knows the right answers, the right ways of living, the true God. The possible consequence of such an attitude is that people feel justified to use violence because they claim to have privileged access to *the truth* or to fight for a

great ideal. This attitude, so they believe, justifies their behaviour and sets them apart from common criminals.

Poerksen: Who is the target of this criticism of an idea of truth turned totalitarian? Where do you see such forms of conflict?

Maturana: They are ubiquitous although they need not always end in physical terror. In political and polemical debates, which are often similar to fights or even wars, we reject other people and their views. We attack them without listening, we, in fact, refuse to listen because we are sure that they hold views that are false. Political terrorism rests on the idea that certain people are wrong and must, therefore, be killed.

Tolerance and respect

Poerksen: Is there not a less dangerous and less fanatical way of handling the view that one has discovered the reality of the world as it is?

Maturana: It all depends on the emotions of the people related to each other. If they respect each other, then the fact that they hold different views may offer the opportunity of a fruitful conversation and a productive exchange. If people, however, demand subservience, then the differing views will provide motives for negation.

Poerksen: If we train ourselves, as you suggest, to recognise the abundance of life forms and to feel at home in a multiverse, we still face the necessity of choice: We cannot accept everything, we have to choose, to decide on some kind of existence, and to reduce the infinity of possibilities. This is easy for ordinary realists: They simply insist that it is the objective necessities that dictate what they decide. You would no doubt reject such an argument. Therefore: What is your criterion for taking the necessary decisions?

Maturana: We do what is good for us, what sustains and improves our well-being. Take the man, for example, who wants to train as a cook. Why a cook? „Well,“ he says, „cooks are needed – so I shall have work and a comfortable way of supporting myself; and I love cooking!“ If you listen carefully, you will realise that the reasons he gives all have to do with sustaining and improving his well-being. This is not a plea for hedonism, not at all; it is simply my suggestion to listen carefully to people telling you about their life decisions. The cook to be will certainly add that one can make a lot of money in his trade; but this only means that for him well-being seems to depend on income.

Poerksen: This criterion of well-being seems to suggest that we should simply accept any imaginable decision people take with regard to their course of life. Are you advocating absolute tolerance?

Maturana: For me, the plea for tolerance has an extremely unpleasant flavour; it is an expression of an inclination towards the path of *objectivity without parentheses*. People who demand tolerance are actually only proposing to delay and suspend for a little while the rejection and debasement of other people, which they have already decided to be justified. People who merely tolerate other people will leave them alone for some time but always have the knife ready hidden behind their backs. They do not listen to the other people, do not really give them their attention; their own ideas and beliefs remain in the foreground. The others are in the wrong but their destruction is postponed for a little while: that is tolerance. Following the path of *objectivity in parentheses*, however, we meet other people's

worldviews with respect, we are prepared to listen to them, to acknowledge their realities and accept them as fundamentally legitimate.

Poerksen: When do realities definitely become unacceptable – even for those who believe in *objectivity in parentheses*? Under what conditions must fundamental respect end?

Maturana: Respect never ends. If we realise, of course, that certain people are creating a world that we consider dangerous and highly unpleasant, then we will certainly act and stand up to them because we do not want to live in their world. I think that this kind of justification of one's actions is crucial: We do no longer appeal to a transcendental reality or truth in order to provide grounds for our actions but we act in full awareness of our own responsibility. We do not like nor want the world we see and, therefore, we become active and reject people in a responsible way, or bring about a separation in mutual respect.

Poerksen: Could you be a little more specific with regard to the somewhat unusual distinction between tolerance and respect that you are proposing here? These two concepts are normally thought to be identical and used as synonyms.

Maturana: Right, but that is a colossal mistake. Perhaps an example can enlighten us here: Churchill had great respect for Hitler – and therefore understood Hitler's real intentions, which made him oppose National Socialism. Chamberlain, however, showed enormous tolerance towards Hitler and, therefore, proved incapable of assessing the man properly, which made him negotiate completely foolish contracts with him.

Poerksen: Consequently, such an attitude of respect might very well make us decide one day - in full awareness of our responsibility - to make use of a gun?

Maturana: Certainly. People might read *Mein Kampf* and realise immediately that, in this book, Hitler quite openly reveals his intentions and goals. They will then have to decide whether they really want to support the world described there and the programme laid before them. It is the respect for other persons' realities, which enables us to assess them properly and to take mindful action: We listen to them in order to decide. – People who tolerate their enemies do not see them because their own beliefs obscure their perception; respecting the enemies, however, makes it possible to understand them – and to stand up to them if necessary.

Poerksen: For me, the question is now how we might promote and practise this very fundamental kind of respect in a manner that does not in any way involve domination. If you want to remain consistent, you surely cannot force other people to agree to your thoughts. How are we to proceed, then, if dominance and manipulation are inadmissible? How do you convince people?

Maturana: I never attempt to convince anyone. Some people become annoyed when they are confronted with my considerations. That is perfectly okay. I would never try to correct their views and then force my own ideas upon them. Other people, however, are touched by what I have published during the last few decades because they find it affects their own life. They do not merely read what I have written but come to my lectures, which are invitations to follow my reflections. – The only thing left for me to do is to converse with those people who seek and wish to converse with me. I give lectures if people want to listen to me; I write articles and books and work with my students. And one day perhaps a young man comes to Chile from Germany to visit me and asks for more precise details.

Poerksen: You say that you invite people to listen to you. An invitation, however, has a great disadvantage if quick action is required: it may by definition be rightfully declined. Those, however, who proclaim laws and formulate imperatives have the enormous benefit of speed; given the necessary power, they may gain quick control over people and rapidly align them with regard to their own goals and purposes. Perhaps invitations may sometimes simply take too long.

Maturana: What would the alternative be? Should we put people in prison and chains in order to demonstrate to them the wonderful advantages of freedom? Can we force people to reject violence? Such an approach will never work. My view is that even so-called ethical laws and imperatives destroy the possibility of reflection: They remove the foundations of personally responsible action and demand submission; they are, at closer inspection, just another expression for tyranny. You can show people what will happen if a certain worldview or way of life is chosen; you can present them with the consequences implicit in their beliefs and actions but that is entirely different from forcing them to do something and pressuring them, more or less violently, into accepting a particular view of things.

Aesthetic seduction

Poerksen: You too plead for a new kind of thinking, for a more respectful form of living together, and you try, at the same time, to show unconditional respect to those people who do not want this change at all.

Maturana: Of decisive importance is a change in awareness, which cannot, however, be brought about by force in any way; it must emerge through the insight of every human individual. There is no point in denying that I would definitely want a different kind of world even though the simple thought of wishing to change not only oneself but also other people inevitably confronts one with the temptation of tyranny. Of course, I long for a world made up of democratic communities with cooperative individuals respecting one another. I would like to contribute to such a form of living together, which can only come about without pressure and violence, and all I can do is to act as a democratically inspired individual in order to support and keep democracy alive. This means: the journey is the destination; the means I have available are an immediate expression of the goal I wish to reach. Nobody can be forced to accept democracy, nobody.

Poerksen: You are in the fortunate position that people in the academies and universities of the world are willing to listen to you. What would happen if people no longer wanted to listen to you? What would you do then?

Maturana: What would happen then? That is all perfectly legitimate. In some of my lectures I mention that I have added three further rights to the United Nations catalogue of human rights: the right to make mistakes; the right to change one's view; and the right to leave the room at any moment. If people are allowed to make mistakes, they can correct them. People who are entitled to change their views can reflect. If people have the right to get up and leave at any moment, they will stay only if they wish to.

Poerksen: In the last passages of your paper *Biology of Cognition* you outline the concept of *aesthetic seduction*. What does this mean? How can one use beauty and aesthetics to persuade and convince in an appealing manner?

Maturana: The idea of aesthetic seduction is based on the insight that people enjoy beauty. We call something *beautiful* when the circumstances we find ourselves in make us feel well. Judging something as *ugly* and *unpleasant*, on the other hand,

indicates displeasure because we are aware of the difference to our views of what is agreeable and pleasant. The aesthetic is harmony and pleasure, the enjoyment of what is given to us. An attractive view transforms us. A beautiful picture makes us look at it again and again, enjoy its colour scheme, photograph it, perhaps even buy it. The relationship with a picture may transform the life of people because the picture has become a source of aesthetic experience.

Poerksen: It would interest me to know what this idea of aesthetic seduction means to you when you write, give lectures or interviews. Although this sounds like probing for rhetorical tricks and manipulation, I would like to know what you are, in fact, doing when you try to seduce people.

Maturana: I certainly never intend to seduce or persuade people in a manipulative way. Beauty would vanish if I tried to seduce in this way. Any attempt to persuade applies pressure and destroys the possibility of listening. *Pressure creates resentment.* Wanting to manipulate people stimulates resistance. Manipulation means to exploit our relation with other people in such a way as to give them the impression that whatever happens is beneficial and advantageous to them. But the resulting actions of the manipulated person are, in fact, useful for the manipulator. Manipulation, therefore, really means cheating people.

Poerksen: What should we do then?

Maturana: The only thing left to me in the way of aesthetic seduction is just to be what I am, wholly and entirely, and to admit no discrepancy whatsoever between what I am saying and what I am doing. Of course, this does not at all exclude some jumping about and playacting during a lecture. But not in order to persuade or to seduce but in order to generate the experiences that produce and make manifest what I am talking about. The persons becoming acquainted with me in this way can then decide for themselves whether they want to accept what they see before them. Only when there is no discrepancy between what is said and what is done, when there is no pretence and no pressure, aesthetic seduction may unfold. In such a situation, the people listening and debating will feel accepted in such measure as to be able to present themselves in an uninhibited and pleasurable manner. They are not attacked, they are not forced to do things, and they can show themselves as they are, because someone else is presenting himself naked and unprotected. Such behaviour is always seductive in a respectful way because all questions and fears suddenly become legitimate and completely new possibilities of encountering one another emerge.