

October 24, 2006

Don McNeil  
P.O. Box 312  
Wyalusing, PA 18853  
570-746-1646

Phil Henshaw  
680 Ft. Washington Avenue - #1A  
New York, NY 10040

Dear Phil,

Thanks for keeping in touch. As the US population surpasses  $300 \times 10^6$  and the stock market reaches new highs and my net worth trends toward new lows, there can be little doubt that someone benefits from widespread positive feedback ... else it wouldn't go on. H.T. Odum's idea of "Systems Thinking for the Way Down" would not play well in Peoria or in Washington nowadays, just as it didn't when he proposed it as an ISSS conference theme in 1991 and nobody responded. Out here in the wilderness it is possible to ignore some of the rapacity of growth-ism, but even here one can see trouble on the horizon. I doubt that anyone can appreciate *enoughness* until after they have survived serious dearth. I am certain that the prevailing educational and cultural traditions make matters much worse than ordinary "human nature" would if excess were not so stridently promoted as the norm by a vociferous few. Willard Fey's videos about ecocosm dynamics offer a powerful countervailing message which carries vivid reminders of some of the consequences of accelerations beyond the limit, but he — like every other prophet — is naïve about what it would take to alter individual and societal behavior. That is another reason to study William Powers' approach to cybernation so as to consider what unconventional remediation might be feasible short of disaster ... the control of perception indeed. Maybe his own suggestion that people aggrandize in order to become rich enough to extract themselves from a socio-economic system which they do not trust to provide for their well-being, equanimity, and eudemony (Stafford Beer) tells us that individual reference levels can be expected to remain far from perceived resultants indefinitely, or at least until the collapse.

I have not tried to engage myself with the "Control Systems Group" or others who seek to advance Powers' "Perceptual Control Theory," but I have reread his books with a critical eye. I don't think I would have been very impressed by his "Making Sense ..." book if I had not first read the larger development of his ideas in his "Behavior ..." book. As for the latter, something important has been missing, namely an explicit model of heterarchy to complement the neuronal hierarchy. That such a thing would be needed could be asserted by a rote reference to von Foerster, but since Powers builds his hierarchy so carefully, it is easy to suppose that it must be the whole story and that, perhaps, his "reorganizing system" implicitly provides the necessary heterarchical complement. The second edition of "Behavior ..." carries one noteworthy update, however: a new chapter on "Emotion" which suggests a secondary hierarchy of "biochemical" control loops, thus a preliminary view of what von Foerster would have recognized as a neuronal-hormonal complement three decades ago when Powers was focusing only on the neuronal in early days. Whether or not we bemoan in retrospect that the Forrester group and the von Foerster group and the Odum group and Powers, etc., worked separately and without mutual synergy, we can see clearly how a failure to adhere to a guiding topological principle can undermine the value of any work. In the case of Powers, even a layman innocent of technical matters can see that his machine model of circuits for perception and behavior ignores — prior to the second edition — a whole world of inner experience, its inducements, and its consequences. Some of us may see the new chapter on "Emotion" as little more than an undeveloped hint and realize that the book would have to double in size if it were to treat biochemical suffusion as fully as it does neuronal reticulation. Still that would not be enough, unless (toroidal) heterarchy were to be offered as an organizing principle for the whole. As revolutionary as a cybernetic model of the relatively "hard-wired" neuronal aspect of human nature can be, it will remain unpersuasive unless it can be expanded to account for the diffuse, intermittent, ambiguous, richly intermediated, and highly idiosyncratic controls effected by vital juices. Add to this the fact that any nine or eleven or other number of levels of control within a human individual are embedded in some other number of external social and semiotic levels and the Powers story is partial at best, albeit in a profoundly different direction than has been the conventional wisdom, e.g., of behaviorism and personality profiling.

So in balancing on the high precarious ridges of power brought you can slip some of the steps without knowing gaps by slipping up side down and coasting along them like hanging from a wire.

© pffh

Mr. The barrier is all the screens people make up for themselves for not going further. If you search off with your search of it to open. waiting for it to open. wife. likely not being able to answer a question. I don't know.

but we've got to learn!

but we've got to learn of it. on all out of control. There are other ways of collaborating with them.

The all accounts accept the model of evolution coming from the outside, when all beginning finding/come from inside



If GST had fulfilled its potential, e.g., with more and deeper philosophical work in the spirit of G.M. Weinberg and Heinz von Foerster, the natural tendencies of cyberneticians and others to technologize could have been guided in principled ways. At the same time a lot of ignorant and anecdotal systemism ("system-antics") would have been debunked. The question remains, however: How would a competent systemology matter and to whom? In its early days, the SGSR was taken to be a sinister commie-red-pinko aberration. As late as the 1980s, hecklers invaded ISGSR meetings to hound "radicals" like Kenneth Boulding when they spoke. How much more subversive would critical discourse about viable systems be today? Who could get elected now on a platform of "onward and downward" or "less for all" or "flatter is better"? Who ever could have? And in the alternative lifestyle known as totalitarianism, no dictator is going to deprive himself or his cronies, even if the general population starves.

In the days long ago when I was writing a lot for "systems" conferences and publications, I was ridiculed for my approach to systemicity. During those same years, men much better than I were driven out of the systems club when they resisted reductionism, "hyper-mathematiasis," and other extreme artifices which were encroaching. In those days it was surprising to me to find among the rationalistic positivists dominating the ISSS an explicit doctrinaire fundamentalism, e.g., about pronouncements from Ludwig von Bertalanffy such as that "hierarchy," "interdisciplinarity," etc., are required beliefs for all who would be welcome as members of that club. Come to think of it, von Bertalanffy used "etc." a lot in his writing, so maybe *et cetera* should be the highest (in the hierarchy) of their beliefs. I find it difficult nowadays to find energy or incentive to pull together a definitive "construing systemicity" document which compiles and interprets the good materials which have fallen to me. Nonetheless, I know it should be done, perhaps in the spirit of the monks who transcribed ancient wisdom so as to carry it through a dark age. Every time one sees strong, thoughtful works about systemic subject matter which lack only a few key principles to be transformed into something dramatically better (as in the case of William Powers), it is a reminder that if well-construed systemicity were imparted along with mothers' milk and the prevailing anti-systemic doctrines were supplanted altogether, discourse would be very different. Whether or not it would be humane in the spirit of Weinberg's notion of "gentle systems theory" could only be found out by trying it for a long time.

One thing is certain, however, namely that any general theory of systems (or physics or biology or personality or society or organization generally) has to be of cybernetic order if the things it studies are to go on. This is where the "theoretical biology" sought by Rosen and Kauffman and Salthe will have to be found and where any "theoretical ecology" or competent psychonomy or socionomy will too. The universe is surely neither deterministic nor stochastic but rather (meta-)cybernetic at its core. From that principle, much could be derived.

In the matter of what metaphors and models best represent the organization of natural systems, I think we agree on a minority opinion that the gross topology of individuals and of groups thereof is toroidal, e.g., as for the tree and the forest, wholly, holey, holy:



&



This is enough of a departure from the conventional notions that individuals are "spheres of influence" knocking against one another like billiard balls to constitute a paradigmatic revolution without further ado. Details are important for various reasons and in due time, but for today it is enough to appreciate this much and how it relates to the topology of cybernation. It allows many a classical assertion about "systems" to be seen as inadequate or nonsensical merely by inspection. It also suggests how some better assertions can be derived if one starts with a good enough concept of what constitutes organization per se. The perception of entities as relatively rare eddies in a general turbulence is at once a reasonable and a radical re-thing-ing whose development is a prerequisite for changing the prevailing worldviews and trajectories. Teaching it is a task beyond me, but something nonetheless worthy of consideration.

I had read  
after understanding  
the form of forms  
if we watched  
them explode  
into being  
a little more.  
Instead  
all seem to  
ask what  
form is  
being  
made into  
to stop them  
from happening  
to think, -

almost like  
a self-correcting  
mechanism.

Now that we can cancel all thought  
to become original just by observing  
it is so, isn't it?

© pfh

Don

how little  
people use  
reason to  
discover what  
must be there  
to find if you  
were to look.  
That is a  
very productive  
in doing things.  
- good  
or sounds  
in an uncertain  
silence, i.e.  
arises only when  
there is  
a great  
quiet