

Gregory Bateson - 17th July 1967.

Laing - introductionVery briefly, to me the remarkable thing, or one of the remarkable things about Gregory Bateson is his range, the way he has traversed the whole domain from Cambridge to Headhunters, Balinese dancing to mothers of schizophrenics, dolphins, porpoises and William Blake; and out of all that lifetime, he has chosen to speak to us today on the subject of

Consciousness versus Nature

Bateson:

I've had a chance over the last two days, first of all to hear our Saturday afternoon deliberations here, and to hear a lot of conversation among the participants in this conference, and it's beginning to be a little clear that there are two major themes with which we are concerned. It is perhaps a good idea to approach these themes with a historical perspective.

Our civilisation, which is one of the things that is on the block here for investigation and evaluation, has its roots in three main ancient civilisations: the Roman, the Hebrew and the Greek. And it would seem that one half of our problems are related to the fact that we have an imperialist civilisation leavened, yeasted, by a downtrodden, exploited colony in Palestine; and that we are still, in this conference, going to be fighting out the war between the Romans and the Palestinians. You will remember that St Paul boasted, quote "I was born free". What he meant was, he was born Roman, and this had certain legal advantages.

That battle can be resolved either by backing the downtrodden or by backing the imperialists. And if you are going to fight that battle, you have to take sides in it. It's that simple. On the other hand, of course, St. Paul's ambition, and the ambition of the downtrodden, is always to get on the side of the imperialists and to become middle-class imperialists themselves, and it is doubtful whether creating more members of the civilisation which we are here criticising is a very great creative success. There is, therefore, another problem involved, which is the problem of the pathologies and peculiarities of the whole Romano-Palestinian system. And it is this, really, that I am interested in talking about rather than defending the Romans or defending the

Palestinians - I mean either the upper dogs or the underdogs - but to consider the dynamics of the whole traditional pathology which we have maintained and propose to continue to maintain, in so far as we fight within the terms of that battle. We just go round and round in terms of that battle. And fortunately our civilisation has a third root - in Greece. Now of course Greece got caught up in the rather ~~similar~~ mess, but still there was a lot of rather clean, cool thinking of a quite surprising kind which was rather different. And what I want to talk about is the bigger problem, rather than the tactics within the smaller problem.

Let me again approach the bigger problem historically. From St. Thomas, I suppose, to mid-eighteenth century our religious structure - shall I say up to the Renaissance, because we threw out a lot of sophistication with the Reformation; we threw out, on the whole, the Greek contribution to our religion, so far as we could. In mid-eighteenth century the biological world looked like this. There was a supreme mind at the top of the ladder, which was the basic explanation of everything downwards from that - the supreme mind being, in Christianity, God; being various things at various philosophic stages. And the ladder of explanation went downwards deductively from the supreme to man to apes, so on and so on and so on, down to the protozoa, if you were enough of a zoologist at that time to know that there were protozoa, which they were just about beginning to get on to. This hierarchy was a deductive step, a set of deductive steps from the most general to the most simple. And it was rigid. It was assumed that the species was steady. Lamarque(?), probably the greatest biologist in history, turned that ladder upside down. He is the man who said it starts with the infusoria ~~(or)~~ and the protozoa, and there were changes leading up to man. And turning the taxonomy upside down is one of the most astonishing feats that has ever occurred. The logical outcome of turning the taxonomy upside down was that the study of evolution might provide an explanation of mind. You see, up to Lamarque mind was the explanation of the biological world. But, hey presto, the question now arose: is the biological world the explanation of mind? That which was the explanation now becomes that which was to be explained. And in 1809 Lamarque's Philosophie Zoologique is,

psychology; and a lot of very simple ideas already developed into that. He got the idea that you could not attribute to any creature psychological capacities for which it had no organs. He got the idea of a physical representation of mental process. He got an idea that the complexity of the nervous system was related to the complexity of mind.

There the matter rested, mainly because evolutionary theory was taken over, not by a Catholic heresy but by a Protestant heresy, in the mid-nineteenth century. Darwin's opponents, you may remember, were not Aristotle, which had some sophistication, but fundamental Christianity whose sophistication stopped with the first chapter of Genesis, ~~approximately~~ ^{approximately}. The arguments were more or less trivial, and the matter of the nature of mind, which in mid-nineteenth century evolution was something they tried to exclude as an explanatory principle - the matter of the nature of mind did not come up again, really, for consideration until somewhere around World War II.

Maybe I'm doing some injustice to some people along the road, notably Samuel Butler and others. With World War II we discovered what sort of complexity is related to mind. And the moment you have discovered that, then anywhere in the Universe where you discover that sort of complexity, you are dealing essentially with mental phenomena. It's as materialistic as that.

Now I have to trouble you a little to define that order of complexity, which is in some degree a technical matter. Russell Wallace sent his famous essay to Darwin from Indonesia, with his discovery, which coincided with Darwin's, of natural selection, with the words in it that "it", quote, the struggle for existence, as he called it "is like".. I can't quote verbatim - is on the same principle as that of the steam engine with the governor. And he saw natural selection mainly as a stabilising problem. It kept the species steady. The steam engine with a governor is simply a circular train of causal events, causal events, with somewhere a link in that chain such that the more of something, the less of the next thing, in the circle. The wider the balls of the governor diverge, the less the fuel supply. If you have chains of that general characteristic and provide them with energy, you will get, if you're lucky and balance things out, you will get a self-corrective system.

Now, nowadays we deal with much more complex systems of this kind, and we know that when we talk about evaluating a civilisation, or evaluating human behaviour, human organisation, or any biological system, we are concerned with self-corrective systems. Dr. Laing on Saturday regretted - perhaps that isn't quite the word - that the obvious can be very difficult for people to see. That's because they're that sort of a system, you see. They are self-corrective against disturbance, and if the obvious is not of the particular kind that they can easily assimilate without internal disturbance, their self-corrective mechanisms come to work to side-track it, to hide it, even to the extent of shutting the eyes if necessary, but if not shutting the eyes, shutting various parts of the perception, or framing it like a pearl so that it doesn't make a nuisance of itself - according to the understanding of the system itself at that moment of what a nuisance would be. Because this too is something which is learned and then becomes perpetuated.

Now, we deal then at this conference fundamentally, with three of these enormously complex systems of loop arrangements. One is the human individual, physiologically and neurologically - your body temperature, your blood chemistry, the length and size and shape of your organs in your.. during your growth and embryology, and all the rest of you; any given descriptive statement that can be made about the human being, body or soul, is a statement whose truth and quantitative representation is a function of networks of loops of this kind. We know this better physiologically than we do psychologically but there is absolutely no reason to doubt it as a generality.

Second, we deal with the society in which that individual lives - and that society is again a system of the same general kind. And third, we deal with the eco-system, the natural biological surroundings of these animals.

Now there is a trap in this whole business. You see... let me start from the natural eco-system around man. An English oak wood, or a tropical forest, or a piece of desert is a community of creatures; in the oak wood maybe 500 species, perhaps more, in the tropical forest perhaps ten times

that number of species; in the desert, perhaps a tenth of that number of species, - no that's too small, anyway, a much reduced number. In any of these balanced natural systems - and I may say that very few of you here have ever seen such a system, there are not many of them left, they've mostly been messed up by homo sapiens who either exterminated some species or introduced others which became weeds and pests, or altered the water supply, etc. etc. We are rapidly, of course, destroying all the natural systems in the world, the balanced/natural systems, we simply make them unbalanced - still natural. Alright, now those creatures and plants live in a combination of competition and mutual dependency, and it is that combination that is the important thing to consider. You see every species has a Malthusian capacity. A species that does not, in the first instance, produce more young than the number of the population of the parental generation is out. They're gone. And it is absolutely necessary for every species and for every such system that its components have a positive gain in the population curve - potentially. Having given every species potential gain, given them the Malthusian characteristic, to achieve an equilibrium is then quite a trick and all sorts of interactive balances and dependencies come into play in that business; essentially these balances being based on the sort of circuit-structures that I have mentioned. Now

Now, the Malthusian curve, as you know, goes up like that, an exponential curve. We all see it in the streets and perhaps especially in the suburbs and in the spread of the suburbs into the oak woods, and if you go to Hawaii you will see it beautifully. It is called the population explosion, not inappropriately - it's a chain-reaction sort of phenomenon. We are the atom bombs, you see. That you've got to have. You may regret that organisms have this characteristic, but you may as well settle for it. The ones that don't are out. On the other hand, if you have a balanced system whose underpinnings are of this nature, then it is very clear that if you start monkeying with that system and throwing monkey-wrenches into it, what you are going to do is to disrupt the equilibrium, and always that curve will start to appear. Something will become a weed, other things will be

exterminated, and the system as a system is likely to fall to pieces.

The same truth that I have stated of the species that live together in a wood, in a forest, the same truth applies to the groupings and sorts of people in a society, who are similarly in an uneasy balance of dependency and competition; and applies right inside you, to the physiology of your body, where there is an uneasy competition and mutual dependency among the organs, tissues, cells and so on, without which you would not be, because you can't do without any of them. If any of them did not have the expansive characteristic they would go out, and you would go out too. So that in the body you have a liability, with improper disturbance of the system, to go off on one of those curves somehow. In society you go off on one of those curves somehow, similarly. And I think you have to assume that all important physiological or social change is in some degree a slipping of the system at some point along a curve of that kind. It may not go very far, or it may go to disaster. But in principle, if you kill the thrushes in a wood, certain of the balance will run along its exponential curve to a new stopping place, if there is one. And the question is, is there one? If so, we can risk exterminating the thrushes in this wood. Or is the stopping place way down the curve? Shall we also lose the redwoods, because the thrushes ate the beetles that..... no, I've got this backwards. Will some other plant flood, insects because the thrushes were eating the ~~beetles~~ that were eating that plant?

Now let me begin to talk about the mind, which is - if you consider the total mind, which is perhaps only a reflection of the total body, you again have a system of this kind. But the system is segmented in various ways, so that the effects of something in your food-life, shall we say, do not totally alter your sex-life, and things in your sex-life do not totally change your economic life, and so on - there's a certain amount of compartmentalisation, which is a necessary economy no doubt. And there is a compartmentalisation, of which the most conspicuous dichotomy that we're familiar with is the dichotomy between what we are aware of and the rest of the mind - between consciousness and mind. The total thing has the sort of circuit structure that I've been talking about, network circuit structure. Out of this, a

certain amount of information about what's happening in this part of the mind would seem to be relayed to what we may call the screen of consciousness. And that part of the mind - here - and so on. If you think of the total circuit network, what gets to consciousness is a selected and systematic sampling of the rest - not all, probably no more than a rather small percentage of the rest, for quite good reasons: the circuitry has to be increased, every time you increase consciousness you've got to increase circuitry enormously, and to make everything conscious you would have to have more circuitry than exists in the total thing, in order to make that which is there conscious. You're on an infinite regress in which the circuitry problems get more and more difficult, more and more rapidly. You see, a TV camera, a telly screen gives you a selected reporting on the input; if there's something wrong in the machinery of the telly itself, this is only reported on the screen of consciousness as some sort of gross distortion or pathology. You could build tellies which would give signals on the screen for various sorts of pathology and would inform you what was happening in the machine itself. But this would increase the size of your machine, and then next you'd need a set to report on the pathologies of the reporting system. So, organisms being sensibly constructed, we are only conscious of - 1%? I don't know whether it's meaningful to put the matter in percentages - anyway, a very small fraction.

The question arises, how is the selecting done? ^{On} / What principles do you select that which you will be aware of? And, while not much is known of those principles, something is known. First of all, most of the input is scanned, as it were - a large part of the input is fairly consciously scanned. I mean, I see 2% of what's in front of me, at least. I, conscious I, sees at least 2% of what's in front of me, maybe 5. But even in that I am guided in my perception by my purposes. I see who is attending, who's not, who is understanding, who is not, or at least I get a myth about this subject, which may be quite correct. I'm interested in getting that myth as I talk.

Consider the state of medicine today. It's called the science - medical science. What happens is that in a vulgar sort of way we think it would be nice to get rid of polio, typhoid, cancer, a list of diseases and pathologies.

So we devote research money, effort, to focussing on those "problems". And at a certain point Messrs Salk & Co. "solve the problem of polio". They make a bug-solution which you can give to children so that they don't get it. This is now the solution to the problem of polio. At this point we stop putting large quantities of money into the problem of polio and we go on to the problem of cancer or whatever it may be. We end up, therefore, with a total science whose structure is essentially a bag of tricks - that of a bag of separate tricks - and within this science we have extraordinarily little knowledge of the sort of things I'm talking about: that is, of the body as a systemically, cybernetically organised self-corrective system, and its internal interdependencies. What has happened is that purpose has organised that which will come under the inspection of medical science. And if you allow purpose to organise that which comes under your inspection, what you will get is a bag of tricks - some of them very valuable tricks; it may be an extraordinary achievement that these tricks have been discovered, all that I don't argue. But still we do not know two-pennorth, really, about this total network system. Cannon wrote a book on The Wisdom of the Body, but nobody has written a book on the wisdom of medical science, because wisdom is precisely the thing which it lacks. Wisdom being the knowledge of the larger interactive system, which is, and which, if disturbed is likely to get you into these runaways. And consciousness operates in exactly the same way in its sampling of the input of perception, and in its sampling of what goes on in the total mind. It is essentially organised in terms of purpose, and is essentially a short-cut device to enable you to get at quickly what you want; not to act with maximum wisdom in order to live, but to follow the shortest logical causal path to get at what you next want, which may be dinner, it may be a Beethoven sonata, it may be all sorts of things. So you buy a ticket and you get in the tram and you go there.

That's all very well. And you will say, Yes, but we've lived that way for a million years, and consciousness has been about for a million years, and may have been about a great deal longer than that - I'm not prepared to say that dogs and cats are not conscious, still less that the porpoises are

are not conscious; I would on the whole assume that they are, and the dogs and cats. So you may say, Why worry about that? And the answer is that what I'm worried about is the addition of technology to a system in which consciousness and the total rest of the mind are in a certain ratio, and now - that ratio at the level of the cats and dogs seems to balance out nicely, and they seem to live in a state of grace, as Aldous Huxley used to say. Domestication is not so good for their state of grace, I may say. Anyhow, what happens is that we start to implement the purposes of consciousness by more and more effective machinery, transportation systems, aeroplanes, weaponry, medicine and so forth. And the moment you start to do that, then you're beginning to get into a rather serious state. A pathology is proposed, I may say, by this process.

I think it's reasonable to suggest that a very great deal of what brings us here today is basically related to the thoughts that I have been putting before you: The systemic nature of the individual human being, the systemic nature of the culture in which he lives, the civilisation in which he lives, and the systemic nature of the biological, ecological system around him; and, to, the curious twist in the systemic nature of the individual man whereby consciousness is, almost of necessity, blinded to the systemic nature of the man himself. That is, you pull out from the total mind sequences which do not have the loop-structure which is characteristic of the whole systemic creature, and you are left, essentially, greedy and unwise - if I use "wisdom" as a word for the recognition of and guidance by a knowledge of the total systemic creature.

I am inclined to regard the total systemic creature, you see, as mind, and the total systemic ecology as mind, and the culture as mind: a circuit structure having the formal characteristics of mind as now recognised. Call it God if you like. You know, there's a story about a garden. It wasn't really a garden, it was more like an eco-system. It had many hundreds of species - it was probably in the sub-tropics - living in great fertility and balance, with nice fertile soil and so on. And in that garden there were two anthropoids who were, as such things go, rather brighter than others. And on one of the trees there was a fruit which was rather high. And the two apes were unable to reach that fruit, so they began to think about this -

that was the mistake, they began to think about it. And the he-ape, whose name was Adam, went and got a box or a brick or an old log or something, and put it under the tree and stepped on it, and he found he still couldn't get there. So he got another brick or log or something and put it on top of the first one, and he climbed up on the two of them, and finally he got that apple. They then became almost drunk with excitement: by God, this was the way to do it, you make a plan, A B C, and you get it. They then began to specialise in doing things this sort of way, you know, which was essentially casting out from the garden the concept of their total systemic nature, and its total systemic nature. And after they had cast God out of the garden they really went to work on this purposive business and pretty soon, you know, they lost the topsoil. When they'd lost the topsoil, Adam found that gardening was much harder work, and he had to get bread by the sweat of his brow, and he said "Oh, it's a vengeful God". So.. and of course, you know, there'd been a sort of qualitative change in the relationship between Adam and Eve after they had discarded God from the garden, and Eve began to resent the business of sex and reproduction. Because whenever these rather basic phenomena occurred, they reminded her, you know, of the rather larger life which had been kicked out. As a matter of fact, you know, she'd asked for a washing machine, and Adam therefore had had to work much harder to get one, and the sort of larger and more human aspects, shall I say the systemic aspects of their life had gone dry a bit. So Eve began to resent sex and reproduction, and when it came to parturition she found this was very painful, and she said this too was due to the vengeful nature of God, who had cursed her with..etc. etc. He also had cursed her, the Bible tells us, with a liability to love her husband: "Thy desire shall be unto thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." That's the curse of Eve.

So Adam started the free enterprise system, from which Eve was excluded more or less, so she joined a bridge club, you know. Now, there's a certain.... You know, I don't believe President Johnson is really happy. You see, it isn't just a lot of beatniks in the Round House who think there's something wrong. It's a much wider spread of the population who, consciously or unconsciously, feel that things are very wrong, and I don't really believe that President Johnson thinks he can get out of Vietnam a solution that will last him more

than a couple of years, maybe three years if he can keep it going, you know. But then there'll be more trouble, and he knows that, - related, I suspect, to the sort of things we're talking about. And our problem is not a political problem of how to support one side or the other, how to be Christians or Romans, or Jews. The problem is how to deal with the status and functions of mind and its workings, and its pathologies and distortions, it's especially, as I've pointed out this morning, the problem of consciousness. How in heck to you correct this particular balance between consciousness and the total mind that I've been talking about? What does one know? It's a question really of building in the total population, and especially the policy-maker and the symbol-manipulator, those wisdoms - and I think Ronnie would agree with me anyway - that this in a way has to go at all three levels. If you want to get from a patient in analysis, the "Ahaa!" response - by which he suddenly sees, "By God, yes, that's what I've been doing all my life and I'm doing it now, and I don't really have to." This response occurs when the same formal pattern crops up simultaneously in a dream and in the patient's material narrative of his childhood, and in his operation, his relation to the therapist. When the transference pattern, the childhood narrative, and the dream material suddenly can be brought together to show the same formal pattern, you get "Ahaa!" Yes, a step forward.

And I suspect that as individuals we can make those steps forward in terms of the sort of problem that I'm talking about, when we simultaneously see something in the ecological system, something in the social system and something in the individual creature - "Ahaa, that's it." It's the same biz, it's the same pattern. Somehow, you see, the only correction - if we are going to increase the power of consciousness, then we have also got to increase the wisdom of consciousness. I think we are beginning to be ready to do that.

With the Industrial Revolution, of course, the main thing that happened was a vast increase in the arrogance of the conscious individual: By God, we can make trains, we can get one block on top of the other and we can get on top and get that apple. Of course, why on earth they decided that it had been eating the apple that had been the sin, instead of climbing on the blocks, thinking of climbing on the blocks, I don't know, but that's what they seem to

have concluded from the whole garden episode - that you shouldn't eat apples, which isn't the point.

Alright. We're trying to face the problem, what in the devil to do with it. I think we've moved from the position of the 1850s to, say, 1920s which was a position with a vast increase in the arrogance of the purposive conscious self. I think we are beginning to be a little humiliated, a bit - to achieve a little humility, That's not the same as being humiliated, by the way. Awareness that we are only a part, that the individual is only a part of family of a larger thing and so on and so on; and that the part can never, in fact, really control the whole, because there's always the self in there too. You see, Goebbels may think he can control public opinion in Germany with a vast communications system and radio and all the rest. But in fact he has to have his spies out to tell him what the people are saying about his radio programmes, and this puts him in the position of being responsive to what they are saying; and in the end he cannot have a linear control from him to them - it isn't like that, nothing in life is like that. So this lesson, I think, is beginning to creep in, and it's a very important one. That it's no good blaming the mothers of schizophrenics, they aren't that powerful. It's no good blaming the schizophrenics either because they're not that powerful. They work on each other. There is that discovery.

Then there is the question of the royal road to the unconscious, which was what Freud called "the dream". And here I think I should lump together dreams, works of art, or the activity of art, or the perception of art, poetry, such things. That these are all ways in which knowledge may be a little bit developed towards wisdom, towards systemic wisdom. I think it's characteristic that in the 1960s a very large number of people are looking to the psychedelic drugs for precisely this purpose: to enlarge consciousness and, though perhaps they wouldn't put it this way, to achieve some sort of systemic wisdom. I'm not convinced that the drugs are a very good way of doing this, but that's another question. But I think it is characteristic and systematically understandable that this would be a direction in which they would search for that sort of wisdom. I'm not sure there are any short cuts, you know, and I'm inclined to think, from the few LSD people I've known well, that this provides

a sort of short cut; and I'm not sure there are short cuts to wisdom.
Maybe I'm an old puritan.

Then there is the natural world. If you... one of the rather interesting things is that in several parts of the world, especially Australia, "primitive man" has exercised himself very particularly about how to identify with animals; how to get an empathic feeling of what it's like to be a creature - which you are anyway. This is called, sometimes, totemism; it goes on into all sorts of ramifications of behaviour. There is in James Stevens' Irish Fairytales a very beautiful statement of what appears to be a totemism, which evidently preceded Christianity in Ireland. And old man is being interviewed by the missionary. This comes down to us as the actual - no not the actual, but in the form of the interview between the missionary and the savage. (I must have been inaudible half my lecture. O.K.)

The savage, the Irishman, St Fion or Fiona - my Irish knowledge is not good - it's in James Stevens' Fairy Tales, I recommend it. The missionary and the savage introduce each other to each other, introduce themselves, and each gives his genealogy, and the savage then gives another genealogy, backwards through X, through Y, through Z to the Sons of Noah. The missionary's hair starts to prick _____ and he says "But how can you have two genealogies?" And the second genealogy is a genealogy through which *Duan he?*

wanders in Ireland, he came.. there's an immigration story, and he wanders as a wild man in Ireland, he gets old, his ^{toenails and} /fingernails grow and his hair's dirty, and he's old, and he goes to a cave, and he dreams. And he dreams that he's a stag, and when he wakes, he was that which he had dreamed. And he runs around Ireland as a stag. And you get these marvellous descriptions of what it's like to be a stag. The stag gets old, the wolves are after him, and he goes to the cave again. The wolves say "Come out and we'll eat you". He says "I'll come out tomorrow." He dreams, he dreams that he is a wild boar with tusks. And when he comes out he tusks those wolves, and he has a ^{good} heck of a/time being a wild boar and what it's like to be a wild boar.

Finally he's a salmon, and he's the king of all the salmons, and it's so grand to not have arms and legs that hang out and you have to look after them.

To be made all in one piece. And finally he's caught, he's eaten and is then the baby of the woman who ate him and is born as a human being, and thereby gets his second genealogy.

By the way, this is familiar stuff in a place which most of you have probably read, that's in The Sword in the Stone, T.H. White's story of Arthur, which is a similar initiatory myth through identification with animals.

What I'm trying to talk about - I'm afraid I've digressed a little! - is the whole problem of taking an urban, two-legged, forked creature who believes that diet should be balanced in various ways, and that automobiles will get him to work, and that the electric light will always come on when he throws the switch - all these fantastic pieces of mythology we believe in - and get him to realise that under all this he is a live animal, with hair in patches and all that: that he suckles his young - the female - and so on. And I do not know of any simple solution that will do this. I don't believe that, until the human being is willing to accept his biological nature, that he is going to have, and be capable of letting in the sort of information about what is around him that will solve the Romano-Palestinian problem. The Romano-Palestinian problem is another of these exponential runaways of the general Malthusian type, in which I hit you on the nose, you hit me on the nose.....

I've been going for an hour and a half, apparently. Now look, I think I should sit down and see what comes back when I sit down. Otherwise I shall be detached from this system.

Discussion

Q You say that unconsciousness rejects what is not acceptable to it, or what would upset the balance because of "purposes". And you quoted purposes such as getting food, or going to a concert. Would you say that consciousness is always limited by such short term purposes? Can it be limited by longer term purposes such as the desire to acquire money, social prestige, social position, etc?

X A. Yes, of course. One of the great advantages of warfare is that it gives you a perfectly clear purpose that you can devote yourself to without thinking any awkward thoughts. This is a very great relief of anxiety for 95% of the population, who are beginning, at any given moment, to feel uneasy about such things as I was talking about. Warfare, if you can keep it going long enough, will relieve your anxiety for the length of time you can keep it going. Of course peace-making at the end of it is a terribly anxious business, and quite embarrassing - usually treacherous. I didn't exactly say that "unconsciousness rejects what is not acceptable to it".....

(inaudible interruption from Hall)

....Oh it should have been "consciousness", it was a slip, yes, O.K.
Anybody else for the mike?

Q. What we had was a discussion, a very wise discussion and the point that I would like to make is that a wise discussion, of course, is the most unwise of discussions. Because a wise discussion always puts itself outside of context, outside of human struggle. And here is exactly.... the fundamental question posed is, how to build consciousness of total system so that problem solving does not produce imbalance in the system, causing ~~the~~ degenerating sequence in the system. Now the idea of problem solving being something that is not located in context, that is that it's just a problem-solving, just a point, and you argue to it; and that people don't perceive, don't operate in a world.... that the largest context that they can construct, is to me.... let's see, I'm not articulating well... I'm doing alright. The idea is that, for instance, his particular example of people operating in

it was typical - he used the example of wars, and then from the third person viewpoint said that war was bad... (interruption from Hall)¹¹¹₂₂₂. let me just, I'm sorry that I'm having difficulty in stating just what I want to state. A third ... a second thing is, he talks about a degenerating sequence in a system. The question is, is the system really degenerating, because, say, if we take a Marxist point of view, the history of a system is really the history of conflict of two groups, and one group's Malthusian - what does one say - growth is not considered by the group that is gaining power to be degenerating, as a degenerating system - it's a success. I don't believe that Johnson is having a painful time, I think Johnson is enjoying himself, actually. So there is the micro-level and the macro-level, to get back to the first lecture, the micro-level - the problem solving people solve problems, people act, in the largest context that they can place the problem in. Gestalt theory tells us, in fact, that the problem is posed in a field, a field always exists. Now the fact that somebody can say, that's not the largest field - that's the third person always saying "That's not the largest field, that's not the largest field". That's in action, when you say, "That's not the largest field" and perpetually come on with that, you can always construct larger fields, always... that's a theorem, you can always construct larger theorems, fields. And then the second thing

(from platform: "In one sentence")

...right, in one sentence. So therefore, this wisdom... the commend of a wisdom... the wisdom comes from a value-judgement hors de conflict, out of the conflict, scene. It gives us a structural functionalist point of view essentially, an equilibrium notion, of system.

- A. O.K. Let me say that there was no small contribution from Marx..... I was saying that actually Karl Marx made a considerable contribution to the thinking that I was offering you earlier. That he was one of the early scientists who got the idea of interacting systems and of the exponential phenomena of such systems. And therefore we give him all honour as a scientist, contributing what he could contribute at that time. At the present time we are - what, 60-70 years later - and things are a little different. We now could look back and see that the third person who sees the larger system has something

on his side. That perhaps it's a good thing to see the largest system that you can. To say that the penultimate person is better than the next one after him doesn't seem to me to be very convincing. All I'm saying is: look at larger systems. At the moment I happen to be a third person because I've sweated on this - some of you no doubt have also sweated on it, and are third persons too; and I think that the third persons have a certain greater wisdom than the second persons who have greater wisdom than the first. Perhaps we should count Marx as second, and should try, in the present date, to be third. It's that simple.

- Q. Dr. Bateson, to return to what I believe was your last point of your talk, you indicated that you would like to see, or like to contribute to, or like to help cause, a change in consciousness of people. You spoke of wanting them to become more aware of the nature of their mythology, and become aware of themselves as animals, as human beings, and so forth and so on. Now if we accept the premise that consciousness develops out of a dialectical relation between one's, say, sensory and emotional experience, and the conceptual framework that one generates around this: ideas, theories, stated values and so forth - it would seem that in general there are two ways of changing consciousness. One is by a change in experience, the other is by, say, theoretical or conceptual thinking. Now it would seem that the most direct and immediate way of changing consciousness is by giving one... or one's having an experience that violates the old forms of consciousness. I hope I won't shock anybody by saying that nobody can really feel like an animal, nobody can really feel alive in terms of his body, if he's never had a good fuck. Now, you rejected drugs as a short cut. It would seem that drugs, among other things, provide a short cut to experiences which are generally inaccessible in the western industrialised world. Other things along this line, creative experiences, certain sensory experiences - I would ask you your response, or perhaps your adherence to the idea that if we want to change the consciousness of the western world, we must work not so much by telling everybody to change their consciousness, but by helping them to get, or showing them at least that it is possible to get, experiences that will

help them to change their consciousness.

- A. I think I'm in 100% agreement with what you say. The arts I mentioned, poetry, and I also mentioned the drugs. I think I should perhaps say a word more - because I think that's really what you wanted to talk about, isn't it? (inaudible from Hall) No, everything, alright. I haven't really wide experience of people who have had a lot of LSD, had LSD often. Such experience as I have had has led me to believe, to observe, that the LSD experience becomes so important, almost as an end in itself, that the amount of outside things that they do is reduced. Now I may be wrong in this, I don't really know. And there is also this, that of course if you are talking to somebody who is in psycho-analysis, who is engaged in that method of trying to increase his wisdom, for the period of his analysis and perhaps for several years afterwards you find that the analytic experience is so central that he ceases to really participate at full level outside. This does not mean that when he does come back to participating, he will not participate much better, and that may be true of the people who are getting drug experience. I cannot fully answer the question.

Laing Would you like people who are making statements or asking questions to give their name? Not particularly? Right.

- Q Well, I apologise to begin with for the vagueness and abstractness of my question, but it is partly due because I try to make them as compressed and short as possible. One is - I've got it down - two words: The systems, and the participants. Now what do you mean by the word "system"? Do you mean particular aspects constituting human life and the social life, or do you mean some sort of objective, total relation-structure of these elements? Parts of individual life and of social life? This would be one. The second is the evolutionary aspect and the disturbances within these systems, and the relationship structures, whether this equilibrium isn't something that is alien, foreign to human life as such. My view, human life differs from animal life, that it is a constant equilibrium and tension within the equilibrium, and reorganising it into a new equilibrium - I call this dialectics -

- A. I think animals have it too. May I answer those two points. The first

point was the question of the reality, objective reality of systems, or are they conceptually drawn by us, subdividing a world which is not naturally subdivided. That's roughly it isn't it? Yes, I would agree that in large measure we subdivide the world into "systems" for purposes of our analysis. On the other hand I would not agree that the lines on which we draw these subdivisions are totally artificial. There are better places to draw those lines, and worse places to draw those lines. And the difference between the worse and the better places is determined externally to the observer. What I'm arguing is that if we are going to draw lines to determine what we are going to think about and how we are going to think, we should habitually draw those lines in such a way that we do not see lineal sequences - **A LEADING** to B leading to C - but that we see at least the beginnings of total circuit systems, in which A leads to B leads to C leads to X leads to A etc. Now that is the difference that I'm really arguing for. There also are such edges as the edge between the individual and the society, ~~an~~ the edge between the human species and the environment in which it lives, and so forth. Now these edges, I think, are convenient for thinking, but I think we have to be willing at any given moment to move from this system at the narrow level to this system at the next bigger level, and this jump is a thing that takes a lot of drill and is very important. Have I answered those two questions? No there was another one. What was the other one?

Q. I wasn't merely thinking of the subjective or objective systems, but - and not only of your kind of integrating the bits into circular patterns, but also that these circular patterns themselves have their inner historic dynamics, evolution, and in a way I think the purpose of this Congress is that there are some problems, contradictions, within the systems around which our life is organized, and we need to find some reorganization - not only on one aspect, of political or economic aspects of our life, but on all other aspects.

A. I think, if I understood the question, there is not only the matter of systems, which I have been talking about; there is also a second matter

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which I did not discuss, which I think is relevant to this whole problem of the historic background and nature of the components of the system. If you have a learning organism, and man learns a very great deal - suppose we open the word learning to include all receipt of information. Now information is of very different kinds. There is information of the rather simple, direct kind; "The microphone is on the platform!" There is more abstract information, that "microphones are for talking to people, if they work". There is much more abstract information about the sort of situation in which one is talking. Is this a didactic situation, is it an interactive situation, is it a situation of contempt, of respect, of prestige, of dependency, of hostility - all sorts of quite abstract patterns of information about the situation in which one is. This is a much more abstract sort of learning, to learn to shape and pattern one's behaviour according to the relationship in which one is. Now, there is a peculiarity of human and animal learning, that it ^{sinks} ~~thinks~~. What you receive at a superficial level becomes what is called habitual, and as it becomes habitual it becomes less conscious, and sinks. That which has sunk becomes more difficult to disrupt, to change; and it becomes difficult to change because one has built on it. It is, as the computer people say, hard-programmed. To change it means disturbing a whole mass of more superficial ideas which one doesn't want to disturb because they work out alright. And to make the change at a deeper level is difficult. It is particularly the more abstract ideas, ideas about relationships, that tend to be the more unconscious ones. They tend to go on being true when the episodes change. You have to keep the episodes at a conscious level to keep changing, and fit the new situation, or the new detail. Whereas one's idea about the structure of situations one mostly absorbed in childhood, and doesn't easily make much shift in. This is ~~what~~ the psycho-therapist is trying to change all the time - the stuff which has been sunk. It is not always sunck, you know, because it is repressed; it is sunk because it is economical to sink it. Who wants to think through the problems that have been thought through before? You don't, you reply to them with habit, you deal with them with hapit. Now, the whole systems thing that we've been

talking about has to have added to it, which I did not do, almost another dimension owing to this sinking process and its selective nature. I don't know whether I answered the question there but I think I answered something or other.

Q. I heard you mention a little while ago about the dreams and particular forms of art which maybe led to a further understanding of, a form of greater wisdom as you call, the total system; socio-, eco- , I think those were your words, system. I wondered if you could actually give any examples of dreams, I mean maybe it's difficult there because one is going to deal with a particular dream, and if one's going to deal with a painting it will be your particular example - so whether you can answer it.

A. There is on sale, or there was yesterday or Saturday, probably still on sale, at the counter over there a thing called FIRE, a large folio sized magazine, which contains an article by Kilton Stewart on the Sanoi of Malaya. They are people who pay a great deal of attention to dreams, and who continually use their dreams to iron out their personal relations. I recommend that article to you.

Q (inaudible).... art form....

A. This is very difficult, in this sense: I have just come from Paris, and in Paris you see, as the predominant object which you see in the centre of town this whole mass of Napoleonic architecture. Now Napoleonic architecture is pretty pathological, you know. One comes away from it sort of in despair. And I must say if you look at the faces of the people walking past in front of the buildings, that despair is not alleviated. So that the first difficulty that one faces is that the statements of art, architecture etc. are likely to be, in large measure, symptoms. Now the question of the function of the symptom comes up, which is another matter that we haven't really considered. And symptoms have two functions: one, they alleviate the pathology; two, they become the method by which one finds one way out of the pathology. There is a paradoxical business there. I wonder if I wouldn't

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rather hand over this thing to Ronald Laing, on this. What's the best reference I can give you? A little book called Operators and Things - oh a book I edited actually, let me try and sell a book I edited, called John Perceval's Narrative. John Perceval was a son of Spencer Perceval, the Prime Minister who got shot in the House of Commons in 1812. He became psychotic and he wrote a very good autobiography of what the psychosis was like. His voices told him to do all sorts of things, and he did them. The voice told him to stand on his head, he stood on his head. Then he discovered that the voices were giving him metaphoric, or symbolic, instructions. They did not mean that he should do literally.... He then started interpreting his voices, as psychoanalyst would have done - this back in 1840, before any of that crap - and as he started to interpret his voices he discovered that when they said "Stand on your head", they meant "Do the opposite of what you are doing, for example. He then started to get well. So you've got the voices, the discovery of how to handle them, then the progress. Does that answer it?

Laing Operators and Things is published in this country by Etek Books, in the States as a paper back by Ace Books. And the Narrative of Lord Perceval is published in this country by Cambridge University Press, and by Stanford University in the U.S.

Q. I believe you drew a dichotomy between problem-solving which is a trap, which does not lead to a better life, and wisdom of total systems, which does. Now there are many, the majority of people in the world right now cannot have the luxury of trying to reach the wisdom of this total system. They are involved in very, very real problems - for instance the Vietnamese people, and the Negro people in the U.S. - and I don't believe that we either can allow ourselves this sort of luxury, that we are also in a material problem-situation, and that we have to try to work out this problem and if we're going to reach a knowledge of a higher system, this knowledge will have to be reached while working through these problems, and if the knowledge is less complete because of that, it will have to be that way. And these things can't be a dichotomy, they have to be integrated.

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A. I object only to the word "luxury". As I see it, we have what the physicists might call a half-life, which one has to re-evaluate from moment to moment I guess, in human affairs. By a half-life I mean, a time, a number of years for which one would be willing to say that there is an even chance of something more serious than the extermination of any one nation, is likely to occur within that number of years - an even chance. I put that half-life estimate at something between ten and thirty years. The problems which we have been talking about this morning seem to me to be absolutely essential if we are going to deal with man's willingness, tendency to destroy his society and his total eco-system and his own soul. There are many ways now, with the implementation of purpose, with which this can be done. It can be done by increasing the CO₂ in the atmosphere; CO₂ is transparent to light but opaque to heat. If therefore we move up the CO₂ figure in the atmosphere, long before we start to asphixiate the temperature in the world will go up of the order of, average shall we say, 5 degrees. Somewhere at that point, the ice-caps melt, the Polar caps: the sea level rises of the order of 300' and agriculture goes out of business. Period. There is also the radio-activity which we are steadily building up in the atmosphere; there are very peculiar things which we quite irresponsibly do in the Van Allen belt - scattering mess up there, we have not the slightest idea what the effect of those actions is upon the total meteorological balance, and meteorology is another of these cybernetic networks. There are then the major risks of actual atomic blow-up, fall-out and the rest of it. There are probably three or four more major destructive possibilities in which we can engage, without really thinking what we're doing, if we don't think properly. Now I'm inclined to think that there's an even chance of one or other of these major disasters occurring in something between ten and thirty years. The problems which I have set this morning are problems which require that order of time at least to begin to think through. Alright, now, it is also true that there are a very large number of places in the world where what is happening to human beings shouldn't happen to dogs. It is happening to those human beings as a result of things which I have been talking about. There may be short-term

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solutions that can be reached, either by, as I said, backing the Romans or backing the Palestinians in the gross monstrosity of imperialist situations. But I believe the larger problem is one which it is not a luxury to put attention to. I believe it is an urgent necessity to put attention to the larger problems.