The Systemic Point of Vue: *Trait d'Union* between Art, Science, and Spirituality[1]

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To See the World in a Grain of Sand
and Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Infinity in the Palm of your hand
and Eternity in an hour.
William Blake

The finest emotion of which we are capable is the mystic emotion. Herein lies the germ of all art and all true science.
Albert Einstein

1. INTRODUCTION

This report aims to a systemic perspective in a methodological setting, that is to say, to show how the systemic point of view, *trait d'union* between Arts, Science and Spirituality, is nowadays almost a set approach in the communicative dynamics, if we want to reach the cognitive improvement to which the present day is leading us.

Our world is so complex that it doesn't allow to control the outcomes of its systemic interaction. The changes are too unforeseeable for a mind that has fallen behind with its maturation compared to the quick times of technological progress. What concerns me, therefore, is to point out that at the root of a world that changes in every single moment, the systemic perspective as *trait d'union* of the most remarkable dimensions of the human thought, should be reconsidered with a different view, as far as the methodological and communicative approach is concerned, in order to learn to learn a new way of thinking our relationship with the world.

One of the essential means of this different view is the metaphor, as *modus operandi* of thought and constructive element of the human speech. Therefore, I will start with a brief historical panorama of the systemic thought, and then I'll mention some possible tools –including cognitive metaphors- that allow the mind to make the qualitative leap forward required by the present day.

2. BRIEF HISTORICAL PANORAMA

As we know, the main characteristics of the systemic thought emerged simultaneously in many branches of learning in the first half of the 20th century, as a reply to the new detections of biology, which originated the organicist school of thought in opposition to the mechanistic one of the 19th century. From the discovery of the living organisms as integrated complexes, emerges the awareness of the complexity of life and of the total interrelation of all the living beings. However, we must recognize that already towards the end of the '800, the literary and philosophical movement of Romanticism, also helped by the German romantic philosophers as Schopenhauer

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and von Hartman, strongly opposed the mechanistic paradigm. The appearance of the systemic concept, at first intuitively in the artistic and philosophical fields, involved a deep revolution in western scientific thought. We can say that one of the biggest divergences between the complex and the linear thought is that the complex one cannot be understood through analysis. Actually, since the discoveries of quantum physics, we know that the intrinsic properties of the parts of a system can be understood only in the perspective of a wider whole, that each system has a hierarchical complexity that grows at every level, and that the view of the observer changes the observed system, that is why issues regarding the perception and the representation of the world become processes quite difficult to understand with the only analytical instruments. These discoveries have completely changed the relation between the parts and the whole, and between the whole and the macro-context that contains it.

The Austrian biologist L.von Bertalanffy founded the general theory of the systems, but already years before his publication in 1968, the emerging properties and the systemic approach were mentioned. Another fundamental discovery in the scientific field was on the 25th April 1953, when on the revue *Nature* appeared the article of two scientists, the American James Watson and the British Francis Crick (both Nobel in 1962), who announced the detection of the DNA, or deoxyribonucleic acid, double helix structure. The connection between researches on DNA, the systemic perspective, and the virtual technologies have lead in the last years to surprising results with regards to cells and the neural synapses of the brain, also in the relation between the brain and the various theories on mind, and have also amplified and linked seemingly distant issues such as the interaction among metaphor, cognitive modalities, and world representation. Until that moment, that is until the middle of the 20th century, especially in Europe, the relation between science and what was promulgated by the philosophical and the spiritual theories wasn't the best, because the concept of knowledge wasn't yet globalized.

Then there was the great information explosion of the eighties, with the massive use of the Internet and of a more and more sophisticated technology, and the world has extraordinarily changed ever since. Equally, in the last 30 years, we have witnessed such expansion of scientific discoveries, that the specific competence in an only branch of knowledge has become obsolete. The human mind had to quickly adapt to collective knowledge, to the concepts of interdisciplinarity, of interrelationship, of transverse and polysemous meanings, and all this required an enormous perceptive and mental openness, a cognitive improvement that not everyone was able to face as the explosion of knowledge is like what is metaphorically called rhizomatous labyrinth: a no-centre labyrinth in constant expansion. For this reason, the learning methods for new generations are radically changing, seeing that– with the new technologies - their mind has changed and is not able to acquire knowledge in the same way it was learnt thirty years ago. Nowadays the school is metaphorically described as becoming 'liquid', where the learning environment is not the traditional classroom anymore but a polycentric space where the frontal lesson is replaced by the collaborative processes that doesn't pass on knowledge anymore. This implies for the teachers a great adaptation effort, in the transition from the traditional teaching to a new model of sharing research courses with the students. It's a new perspective that involves big cognitive and communicative changes in the family and in the society. These changes urge us to rethink the spiritual research approach, in order to be able to also involve the new generations in an effective way.

3. A FEW METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGIES IN SUPPORT OF THE SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE

Among the fundamental changes of our living global society, there are the communicative dynamics that, due to the increasingly wider interdependence and differentiation of knowledge, together with the spreading of tablets and smartphones, lead to a crisis in the listening and mutual

coexistence dynamics, and force to a creative management of conflicts. The pleasure to listen, to know how to observe and to share where possible the new points of view with more awareness becomes, in this type of complex society, an art that is important to learn, if we don't want to surrender to the world crisis that is foreseen in a short while.

On this point, it is pertinent to remember the two perspectives considered important in the world of complexity by Gregory Bateson, renowned scholar in the social sciences: I'm referring to the dynamics of humour and to the cognitive input of the emotions (Sclavi 2003: 10-11). From a phenomenological point of view, these two perspectives, in addition to metaphors, allow us to get out of the linear frames in which we are immersed, which are parts of our way to perceive the world. They are means to combine with a learning meta-frame. When we get to understand concepts such as deutero-learning (that is learning to learn, or second degree learning), we realize that almost none of us, according to the western culture where we were brought up, can explain how we could get ahead with this deutero-learning. Actually, we all think to know how to look at a work of art, to read a good book or to understand a new scientific discovery, and more at ground level, our neighbours' world. Yet it doesn't mean that beliefs are entirely in accordance with facts. This is proved by the quantity of communicative conflicts among the different fields of knowledge. These conflicts are generated by mostly unconscious beliefs but, as theosophy teaches (and psychology too), they can be modified. As for example, believing that it is necessary to control the emotions to handle impulsiveness, whereas on the contrary it is not control that makes us aware. The function of emotions is to inform that we are activating a more or less unconscious pattern because considered to be the most appropriate to an expected perception of a context. This presupposes a good degree of emotional self-awareness, which has nothing to do with sentimentalism but with the cognitive input of our emotions. Still, even if we believe we can change the automatism of beliefs, and even if we often talk about change, how much have we effectively changed in our reality, in our daily behaviour in the last 5 or 10 years? We are light-years away from a behaviour that reflects the systemic perspective and the new learning mental modalities that the historical moment requires.

3.A. THE COGNITIVE METAPHOR

One of the tools which helps us understand this improvement is the cognitive metaphor, a fundamental element of study in the nowadays scientific research. We know that from Aristotle onwards, the metaphor (from the Greek *metà-pherèin*, to move over, out of the original field) was a rhetorical figure based on analogy, suited to embellish the language of poetry, which implied an unusual use of the language, so the metaphor was considered the key factor of all the art forms. Indeed, the symbols and metaphors of the various types of art and literature have been, over the centuries, privileged means that have helped the human mind not only to open new windows on the internal and external realities, but also to let emerge and to remodel the hidden aspects of the psyche so as to often allow it to transcend the frontiers of the I.

However, around the seventies a new epistemological attention about metaphor was born, when its peculiar complexity is understood as *modus operandi* of thought and not only as an essential constituent of language. Many studies on metaphor and its basic factor, that is analogy, were published from different perspectives, at the crossing among semantics, linguistics, rhetoric and cognitive sciences, aiming at understanding the ontological, cognitive, and interactive dimension of the metaphoric figures.

So, from the studies of Max Black, Paul Ricoeur, Lakoff and many others, metaphor as means of knowledge starts to appear also in the scientific language. Therefore, its use in different fields from the traditional ones expands in a macroscopic way, and new research fields come into being as well as innovative languages connected to biogenetics, to neurocognitive sciences and to the

artificial languages. In these fields, the metaphor as cognitive component of both the oral and the written texts has a dual-purpose use: a) as a substitutive element, that is as a pedagogic example of the scientific language (for ex. The solar system in miniature as a model for the atom structure); b) as a constitutive or interactive element, that is to say, as an instrument of thought that generates new fields through isomorphisms and innovative connections.

The different use of metaphor as cognitive structure expands the semantic wealth of the scientific language with linguistic clusters of 'daughter' metaphors, allowing this way a metaphoric new description of the world. We are talking about metaphors based on similarity but also about metaphors being creators of similarities and of isomorphisms, therefore knowledge tools. So a reversal in results is produced as regards the poetic language, because while the poetic metaphor loses significant meaningfulness and becomes dead metaphor or catachresis, as its innovative character decreases, with the repetition in daily language, the cognitive metaphor acquires in the scientific field a plurality of meanings increasingly valid as its use spreads and radiates.

Also in the spiritual field, metaphors are used in the two modalities of the scientific language, as a pedagogic example and as possibility of increasing knowledge through isomorphic modalities among different semantic fields, or through some insights that can illuminate the evolutionary path of mind; also in this domain, its significant meaningfulness doesn't decrease with use. For ex., in *The voice of silence*, the semantic and poetic density of metaphors opens to the reader a world of resonances which increase the possibility to deepen the spiritual knowledge. In this sense, cognitive metaphors bring the two worlds, the scientific and the spiritual one, close to each other, besides being a valid support when using the systemic perspective in communication.

The understanding of the implications of the so-called systemic perspective, as *trait d'union* between different domains, even if it is not easy to apply at a communicative and learning level, should help the average mature human being to understand the unavoidable need to practise it, considering that the systemic perspective should really let change our point of view in every research field.

This perspective that drives to a cognitive improvement from various dualistic dynamics to a unifying and integrating view doesn't only imply the ability to change our perceptive and interpretative habits. Learning to learn to observe, to listen, and to connect events in a systemic way implies the ability to recognise and to practise the difference between changing point of view in a context taken for granted and changing that context. This distinction is the difference that makes the difference nowadays in the spiritual practise and, specifically, in a context such the various theosophical branches in the world.

Learning this systemic way of listening/observing is not easy due to a double obstacle: the first is that every culture, based on age-long beliefs, tends to accustom to an unconscious ethnocentrism; the second is that every culture tends to take for granted the contexts where people operate, whereas those contexts should be actually explored (Sclavi 2003:16). The cognitive leap is not a consequence of trying and trying again, or of giving examples, or illustrating the issue with images, as all these are means that operate always at the same learning level. We must reverse the perspective, start from the complex to arrive to the simple, and not viceversa. If we start from the simple, we arrive quickly to the complicated, not to the complex.

Let's bear in mind that the more an environment is complex, the more the same things and the same events have different and incompatible meanings among each other. This means that we must pay attention to the interface situations, to the non-reductionist communicative competence consisting of the following triad: active listening, emotional self-awareness, and creative conflict management (Sclavi 2003: 14-15). It is a triangle that requires practice in the three dimensions; if

one is missing, then the dynamics doesn't work well. Putting in practise this triangle implies accepting an active listening in order to create a mutual interaction in group working, it implies managing the conflicts creatively without the urgency to judge, it implies being aware of the possible tensions or emotions under way, it implies getting used to a pluri-verse rather than to a uni-verse world model. It also means humbly accepting the embarrassment for mistakes and the discordances as to someone else's comment. These inter-dialogic wrong-footings in an increasingly complex world allow to our small I to understand that he is not important, that his being a grain of sand in the universe must be reconsidered in the plural game of a community aiming to the Oneness of Life as a fraternal chance to be one in the diversity. In this sense, the humoristic approach – based on the dialogue with our own emotions – and the negotiation on our own and others' identity, are a fundamental part of the interactive dynamics. The good communicator's ability will therefore manifest itself not so much in observing the differences in the behaviours as in knowing how to move among the circular processes and the dynamics of mutual coordination and contexts changes.

4. CONCLUSIONS

At this point what could be the conclusions? We know that it is not easy to let our mind make a cognitive leap and to widen our awareness. It wasn't easy in the past, and it is even more complicated in our complex present. It is no accident that the first two requisites of the spiritual path have always been over the centuries *viveka* (discernment) and *vairagya* (detachment), which acquire today, so to say, an even deeper meaning in the light of the new issues created by the virtual world and by the rapidity of the scientific discoveries. Still, the history of human evolution teaches us the importance of challenging our I's inaction and embarking on an adventurous journey towards the unknown regions of the new behaviours required by the systemic perspective. The urgency of the moment demands to change in order to understand and not to understand in order to change, because this last option would need time that we don't have anymore. This means that the human being must accept to make the conscience leap which will allow him to move in the relational field of the already mentioned triad, in an alternative epistemology where the observer is not only part of the observed system, but also conscious of this process and can watch himself moving in and out of the communicative circularity. This applies not only to the contexts of scientific research but also to the ones of spiritual research.

In *The biology of Belief*, Bruce Lipton describes how this research on cells totally turned upside down his view on reality by building new bridges between the worlds of Science and Spirit. In Lipton's opinion, only when both the perspectives will be put together, we will have at disposal the means to create a better world. I think he has left out that changes in the world originate from a substantial transformation in mankind's consciousness, as Krishnamurti explained for years. Our biosphere has been marked by at least five mass extinctions, each of which has almost swept away the entire planet life (Lipton 2006: 218), so if we are not able to quickly change our biological programming through a deep transformation of our awareness, we won't be able to resolve the next sixth world extinction that will be caused, this time, by man's blindness. Only by triggering a new way of thinking, observing, and listening, creative solutions can be found, as Einstein would say, to problems caused by the old way of thinking, and only this way Science and Spirituality, in an increasingly complex world, will be able to proceed in a one joyful dance involving them both.

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