



DAG HAMMARSKJÖLD FOUNDATION

# What Next?

Draft thematic paper

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From Knowledge to Understanding: Navigations and  
Returns

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## **WHY ARE WE WHERE WE ARE?**

Life is an unending sequence of bifurcations. The decision I make implies all the decisions I did not make. The route I choose is part of all the routes I did not choose. Our life is inevitably a permanent choice of one among an infinity of ontological possibilities. The fact that I was at a given place, at a very precise moment in time, when a given situation occurred or a given person appeared, may have had a decisive effect on the rest of my life. A few minutes earlier or later, or a few metres away in any direction, might well have determined a different bifurcation and, hence, a completely different life. As the great Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset pointed out: 'I am myself and my circumstance'.

What holds for individual lives, holds for communities and whole societies as well. Our so called Western (Judeo-Christian) civilisation is the result of its own bifurcations. We, in the West, are what we are, but we could also have been something we are not. Let us then look at some of our decisive bifurcations.

Sometime during the 12th century, in Italy, a young man named Giovanni Bernardone, while still very young and very rich, decided to radically change his life. As a result of his transformation, we remember him today under a different name: Francis of Assisi. Francis, when he referred to the world, spoke of Brother Sun and Sister Moon, of Brother Wolf, and of water, fire, trees and people as his brothers and sisters as well. The world he described and felt was a world where love was not only possible but made sense and had a universal meaning.

Some time later, also in Italy, we hear the resounding voice of brilliant and astute Machiavelli, warning us: 'It is much safer to be feared than to be loved.' He too describes a world, but in addition he creates a world.

The world we have today is not that of Francis; it is the world of Machiavelli. Francis's philosophy was the route not taken. The navigation we chose was that of Machiavelli, and inspired by it we have constructed our social, political and economic concepts.

In 1487, another very young man, just 23 years of age, Francesco Pico della Mirandola, prepares himself for the public defence of his 900 theses about the concord between the different religions and philosophies. He refuses to enclose himself within the narrowness of just one doctrine. Convinced that truths are multiple, and never just one, he longs for a spiritual renewal that can reconcile all human beings.

Some years later, a fervent believer in absolute truth and in the possibilities of certainty, Francis Bacon invites us to 'torture Nature' to force her to reveal her secrets, so that we can extract the truth.

Again, two worlds: one representing the route we took, and the other the route we did not take. We did not follow the way suggested by Pico della Mirandola. Instead, we accepted Bacon's invitation, and we continue to apply his recipe with

efficiency and enthusiasm. We continue torturing Nature in order to extract from her what we believe to be the truth.

In the year 1600, Giordano Bruno burns at the stake, victim of his pantheism, since he believed that the Earth is life and has a soul. All things, for him, are manifestations of life. Everything is life.

Three decades later, Descartes whispers in his *Metaphysical Reflections*: ‘Through my window, what I see are hats and coats covering automatic machines.’

We did not take the route of Giordano Bruno. We chose Descartes’ route, and for that reason we have witnessed the triumph of mechanisation and reductionism.

For Galileo and Newton, the language of Nature is mathematics. Nothing is important in science that cannot be measured. We and Nature, the observer and the observed, are separate entities. Science is the supreme manifestation of reason, and reason is the supreme attribute of the human being.

Goethe, whose scientific contributions have been overshadowed – unjustly – by his colossal achievements in literature and the arts, felt upset with what he believed to be the limitations of Newtonian physics. For Goethe, Jeremy Naydler explains: ‘...science is as much an inner path of spiritual development as it is a discipline aimed at accumulating knowledge of the physical world. It involves not only a rigorous training of our faculties of observation and thinking, but also of other human faculties which can attune us to the spiritual dimension that underlies and interpenetrates the physical: faculties such as feeling, imagination and intuition. Science, as Goethe conceived and practiced it, has as its highest goal the arousal of the feeling of wonder through *contemplative looking* (*Anschauung*), in which the scientist would come to see God in nature and nature in God.’<sup>1</sup>

Two worlds once more. Another bifurcation. We are still under the spell of the overpowering lustre of Galileo and Newton, and have chosen not to take Goethe’s route. Feeling, intuition, consciousness and spirituality are still banished from the realm of science, some new enlightenment arising from the field of quantum physics notwithstanding. The teaching of conventional economics, which, incredible as it may sound, claims to be ‘value free’, is a conspicuous case in point. A discipline where mathematics has become an end in itself instead of a tool, and where only that which can be measured is important, has generated models and interpretations that are theoretically attractive, but totally divorced from reality.

Johannes Brahms composed two piano concertos. Regardless of which of the two may be more to one’s liking, the fascination is with the first. This concerto is a splendid exposition of the route Brahms subsequently decided not to navigate. We have been left forever with a taste of how the *other* Brahms might have been.

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<sup>1</sup> Naydler, Jeremy, *Goethe on Science*, Floris Books, UK, 2000, p. 23.

That's the way it is. A route not navigated, remembered only by 'library worms', and a navigated route to which we attribute spectacular successes and achievements. The University in particular has chosen the routes of Machiavelli, Bacon, Descartes, Galileo and Newton, while Francis, Pico, Giordano Bruno and Goethe (the scientist) have remained historical footnotes.

As a result of the navigated route, we have managed to construct a world in which, as the Catalan philosopher Jordi Pigem has suggested,<sup>2</sup> the Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity have been metamorphosed into schizophrenia, depression and narcissism. The navigation, no doubt, has been fascinating and spectacular. There is much in it to be admired. However, if schizophrenia, depression and narcissism are now the mirror of our existential reality, it is because all of a sudden we find ourselves in a world of confusion. In a world of disenchantment, where progress becomes paradoxical and absurd, and reality becomes incomprehensible, so that we desperately seek refuge in a technology that offers us an escape into *virtual realities*.

### **WHERE ARE WE NOW?**

We have arrived at a point in our human evolution where we know a lot but understand very little. Our chosen navigation has been piloted by reason, leading to the port of knowledge. As such it has been overwhelmingly successful. We have never in all of our existence, accumulated more knowledge than during the last 100 years. We are celebrating the apotheosis of reason, but in the midst of celebration we suddenly have the feeling that something is missing.

Yes, we can acquire knowledge about almost anything. We can, for instance, guided by our beloved scientific method, study everything there is, from theological, anthropological, sociological, psychological and even biochemical perspectives, about a human phenomenon called love. The result will be that we will *know* everything that can be known about love. But once we achieve that complete knowledge, we will sooner or later discover that that we will never *understand* love, unless we fall in love. We will realise that knowledge is not the road that leads to understanding, because the port of understanding is on another shore, and requires a different navigation. We will then be aware that we can only attempt to understand that of which we become a part. That understanding is the result of integration, while knowledge has been the result of detachment. That understanding is holistic, while knowledge is fragmented.

At least we have reached a point in which, (many conventional academics notwithstanding), those of us who, in Goethe's perspective, are concerned with the relation between science and spirituality, are finally becoming aware that knowledge is not enough, and that we have to learn how to attain understanding in order to achieve the completeness of our being and the completeness of our science.

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<sup>2</sup> Pigem, Jordi, *La Odisea de Occidente*, Editorial Kairós, Barcelona, Spain, 1993.

We are, perhaps, beginning to realise that knowledge without understanding is hollow, and understanding without knowledge is incomplete. We therefore need to undertake, at last, the navigation we have so far postponed. But in order to do so, we must face the great challenge of a language shift.

José Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish philosopher already mentioned, used to say that ‘every generation has its theme’. We might add that every generation, or historical period, is dominated by, or falls under the spell of, a particular language. That is the way it is; and there is nothing wrong with that, as long as the dominant language of a given period is coherent with the challenges of the period. It is important to keep in mind that language influences our perceptions and, hence, shapes our actions. Let us go through some examples.

During the first three centuries of the Second Millennium of Western civilisation, the dominant language was of a teleological nature, meaning that human actions had to be justified in terms of a calling that was superior, and beyond the needs of everyday life. That made possible the construction of the great cathedrals and monasteries, where time was not an issue. So what, if the construction took 600 years! Nobody was in a hurry. After all, they were constructing for eternity, and eternity is not infinite time, but timelessness. Thank God the language of ‘efficiency’ had not yet been invented. The importance lay in the deed and not in the time it might take. It was a case of coherence between language and historical challenge.

The language dominating the 19th century was basically that of the consolidation of the nation-state. The great speeches of political leaders such as Disraeli, Gladstone, Bismarck, are relevant examples. Without going into detail, we may also say that the dominant language of the century was coherent with the challenges of the times.

It is only in the 20th century that the dominant language is that of economics, especially during the second half. A quick overview shows some interesting perspectives. The late 1920s and early 1930s, the time of the so-called Great Depression, coincide with the emergence of Keynesian economics. Keynesian language is in many ways the result of a crisis, having the capacity both to interpret the crisis and to overcome it. It is, again, a language (or rather sub-language) coherent with its historical period.

The next sub-language shift occurs during the 1950s and 1960s, with the emergence of so-called developmental language. This was an optimistic, utopian and happy language. Economists writing in those days were mainly dominated by the feeling that, at last, we had discovered how to promote true development and overcome world poverty. For the purpose of our argumentation, it is unnecessary to reproduce the prescriptions here. However, what should be pointed out is that although the hoped-for goals were not fully achieved, many things during those decades changed in a positive manner. The language was at least partially coherent with historical challenges.

And then came the last three decades of the 20th century, with the emergence of the neoliberal discourse: a language that is still dominating over a period in which global poverty has increased dramatically, the debt burden has crippled many national economies and generated brutal exploitation of both people and natural resources, destruction of ecosystems and biodiversity has reached levels unknown in human history, and accumulation of financial wealth in ever fewer hands has reached obscene proportions. The disastrous effects of this language, which has absolutely no coherence with the challenges of the time, are there to be seen by everyone, although decision-makers and holders of power prefer to look in the opposite direction and hold on to a pseudo-religious set of beliefs.

### **WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

There is a tendency to perceive ourselves as members of a successful culture. However, the truth is that no matter how much we extend the concept of success, we are still incomplete beings, materially overdeveloped and spiritually impoverished. And, most probably, it is that incompleteness, that poverty, which is responsible for the uneasiness and anxieties that permeate our existence in the world today. Perhaps the moment to pause and reflect has arrived. We have the opportunity now, to analyse with true honesty, the map of our navigation, with all its hazards and successes, with all its tragedies and glories. And it may then be wise to unearth the alternative map of the route we did not take, and see whether we can find in it orientations that can rescue us from our existential confusion.

What might be the consequences of unearthing the forgotten map? Perhaps it would make sense to start seeing the brothers and sisters who surround us. Perhaps it would be good to believe in the possibilities of harmony between many possible truths. Perhaps it would be to our advantage to dare to imagine and believe that the earth has a soul and that everything is life. Perhaps it would be good to realise that there is no reason whatsoever to banish intuition, spirituality and consciousness from the realm of science. Or, to put it in Goethe's words: 'If [we] would seek comfort in the whole, (we) must learn to discover the whole in the smallest part', because 'nothing is more consonant with Nature than that she puts into operation in the smallest detail that which she intends as a whole'.<sup>3</sup>

Our passionate pursuit of knowledge has postponed our navigation towards understanding. There would be nothing to impede the undertaking of such a navigation now, were it not for an economics which, as practised under the spell of the neoliberal discourse, increasingly distorts reality, thus contributing to our confusion and to the falsification of knowledge itself.

No sustainability (which obviously requires understanding) will or can be achieved without a profound language shift. We need a new language that opens the door of understanding: not a language of power and domination, but a language that emerges from the depth of discovery ourselves as an inseparable part of a whole that

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<sup>3</sup> See Naydler, Jeremy, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-93.

is the miracle of life. If we manage to provoke such a shift, we may still experience the satisfaction of having (belatedly) brought about a new century worth living in.

Let us hope for a safe voyage and a fulfilling navigation towards the land where we may become integrated beings capable of understanding the completeness of life.