Relevance of Mythopoeic Insights to Global Challenges

Cognitive integration implied by the Lord of the Rings

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Part 2 of Uncritical Strategic Dependence on Little-known Metrics (2009)

Metrics with a "human face"?

"Eclipse of the lifeworld": The nature of what tends to be lost in conventional abstraction has been highlighted by Steven M. Rosen (Topologies of the Flesh: a multidimensional exploration of the lifeworld, 2006; Dimensions of Apeiron: a topological phenomenology of space, time, and individuation, Value Inquiry Book Series, 2004). He notes the manner in which the richness of psychosocial engagement with the world has been completely undermined by formal discourse -- an "eclipse of the lifeworld" in his terms. Ironically, in a period of sensitivity to the challenges of "resources" and "energy", this view is echoed by other authors, notably arguing for the desirable potential of a participatory encounter with reality:

- Paul Feyerabend (Conquest of Abundance: a tale of abstraction versus the richness of being, 1999)
- Sallie McFague (Life Abundant: rethinking theology and economy for a planet in peril, 2000)
- David Abram (The Spell of the Sensuous: perception and language in a more-than-human world, 1997)
- Thomas Moore (The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life. 1997)
- Morris Berman (Re-enchantment of the World, 1981)
- Henryk Skolimowski (The Participatory Mind: a new theory of knowledge and of the universe, 1995; The Voice of the Earth; an exploration of ecopsychology, 1993)
- Stephanie Mills (Technology as Symptom and Dream, 1989)

Overly simple "answers": As noted in assessment of criticism of the Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential:
There is widespread hope that a simple answer can be formulated to the challenge of the times. Many believe fervently that such answers exist in single-factor statements such as "peace", "love", "order", etc. Whilst a necessary feature of the psychosocial system, such belief obscures the richness and significance of the fundamental disagreement concerning the ways such conflicting answers can be implemented in practice.

Edgar Morin (Pour sortir du siècle XX, 1981) and Kenneth Boulding (Ecosystems: A New Theory of Societal Evolution, 1978) both note the dangers of single factor explanations at this time. In Boulding's words: "The evolutionary vision sees human history as a vast interacting network of species and relationships of many different kinds, and there really is no "leading factor" always in the forefront. At times, changes in material technology are the major mutational developments and create niches for social changes of various kinds. At other times, however, intellectual or spiritual movements take the lead and create niches for new material artifacts and technologies; sometimes climatic changes dominate the scene, or sometimes biological mutations dominate, such as the disease bacteria that caused the great plagues." (1978, p.19-20)

To safeguard global society in the longer-term, the challenge would seem to be to find some comprehensible way (or set of ways) of interrelating the simple answers which must necessarily emerge as short-term local responses to such an environment.

Achieving "traction". There is however little attention to how credibility is attributed (sustainably) to information funnelled through a single metric. Arguably it is the very "singularity" of the metric that leads to "polarization" between "believers" and "sceptics" in debates. This has been dramatically evident in that on climate change (although manifest with respect to other potentially dramatic issues). As an extreme alternative to such equations and single factor metrics, it might even be appropriate to understand any belief system as a "metric" of a different kind, encompassing a topic in its own way.

The difficulty with conventional efforts by governments to "deploy" a single metric is that typically they lack psychoactive "traction" -- irrespective of the dangers with which they are purportedly associated. This is evident in efforts at mobilizing populations in support of global strategies.

Neglected geometric "metrics"

Configuration: The challenge of the single metric is most evident in the predilection for eliciting it from an equation or a set of equations. This completely loses sight of the nature of psychological engagement with any explanation. Fruitful engagement may depend more on configuration than on indicators, notably in the case of leadership. This was well-indicated in decades past by Harold D. Lasswell (The transition toward more sophisticated procedures. In: Davis B. Bobrow and J.L. Schwartz (Ed.). Computers and the Policy-making Community; applications to international relations, 1968):

Why do we put so much emphasis on audio-visual means of portraying goal, trend, condition, projection, and alternative? Partly because so many valuable participants in decision-making have dramatizing imaginations...They are not enamored of numbers or analytic abstractions. They are at their best in deliberations that encourage contextuality by a varied repertory of means, and where an immediate sense of time, space, and figure is retained.

Use of simplistic geometry: In any quest for little-known metrics, the sense in which "geo-metrics" is of significance to any understanding of globalization merits consideration.

Curiously, although geometry is basic to strategy formulation by policy-makers (through "pillars", "poles", "axes" and "sides"), little effort is made to make more sophisticated use of such geometry, as suggested by the following explorations:

- Polyhedral Pattern Language: software facilitation of emergence, representation and transformation of psycho-social organization, 2008

Unconventional metrics: In this context it is appropriate to note "metrics" which are felt to have a "human face":

- sacred geometry
- predictive systems depending on configuration, such as astrology
- decision-guidance systems: I Ching (Patterns of I Ching / Tao te Ching)
- personal typing systems (the AQAL of the integral movement, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator)
- image: the manner in which a singular image can be held to epitomize and constitute a measure of the conditions of a period merits its consideration as a form of metric in its own right (cf Kenneth Boulding, The Image: Knowledge in Life and Society, 1956). The Vitruvian Man of Leonardo da Vinci -- portraying "man as a measure of all things" -- exemplifies the role of an image.
- metaphor: a metaphor may, like an image, be used as a measure of a period. For example, a symposium of the wise, to celebrate the sesquicentennial of Boston University (Lance Morrow, Metaphors of The World, Unite!, Time, 16 Oct. 1989) selected a Tessellation as the metaphor that best captured the spirit of the times.
- humour: given the worldwide role of humour is focusing understanding of a situation in order to be able to reframe it, it is appropriate to consider how this has characteristics of a metric with a human face (Humour and Play-Fullness: essential integrative processes in governance, religion and transdisciplinarity, 2005)

Topology and engagement: especially given the mnemonic aids provided by configuration:
Mythopoeic insights of relevance?

Faced with the dramatic challenges of the world, is it appropriate to introduce this dimension? Like it or not however, more people are engaged by the mythopoeic than by "sustainability" and other formulaic challenges from academe. Most of these terms, as they figure in political discourse, have been emptied of their meaning as positive or negative attractors for people. They have been "sterilized" and can only be activated through fear. The human significance of any single metric is quickly lost in the formulaic.

Curiously the most omnipresent "metric" is that provided by the music that is of central importance in the lives of many. It is an attractor inviting evident engagement. The particularly close connection between myth and music has been argued by Claude Lévi-Strauss (In Myth and Meaning, 1978) -- with music-making to be understood as a modern form of myth-making. Karen Armstrong (A Short History of Myth, 2005) stresses the capacity of the human mind to seek out and value the coherence carried succinctly through myth and its associated symbolism. She notes the continuing role of myth in industrialized societies and its long-demonstrated functions:

Another peculiar characteristic of the human mind is its ability to have ideas and experiences that we cannot explain rationally.... imagination is the faculty that produces religion and mythology. Today mythical thinking has fallen into disrepute; we often dismiss it as irrational and self-indulgent. But the imagination is also the faculty that has enabled scientists to bring new knowledge to light and to invent technology that has made us immeasurably more effective.... Mythology and science both extend the scope of human beings. Like science and technology, mythology...is not about opting out of this world, but about enabling us to live more intensely within it.

Myth sustains an understanding of complex connectivity, and an engagement with it, that is typically lost in a single metric. In the terms of Gregory Bateson (Mind and Nature: a necessary unity, 1979) it offers an engagement with the meta-pattern:

The pattern which connects is the meta-pattern. It is a pattern of patterns. It is that meta-pattern which defines the vast generalization that, indeed, it is patterns which connect. Myth cultivates the imagination in ways that are alien to the dominance of a single metric (Imagining the Real Challenge and Realizing the Imaginal Pathway of Sustainable Transformation, 2007). As a parenthesis this suggests the value of distinguishing "metric-making" from dependence on a single closed and finished metric -- as argued with respect to another "metric" (Poetry-making and Policy-making: Arranging a Marriage between Beauty and the Beast, 1993). The relation between "mythopoesis" and the "single metric" might indeed be fruitfully explored in terms of "arranging a marriage".

The challenge would seem to be to engage with the "externalities" that are designed out of any single metric, as argued separately (Existential Embodiment of Externalities: radical cognitive engagement, 2009), specifically the challenge of Investing significance in mnemonic aids. A metric may indeed be understood as a form of mnemonic aid. The challenge is how to detect and use a range of such aids, as argued separately (In Quest of Mnemonic Catalysts -- for comprehension of complex psychosocial dynamics, 2007)

The outstanding worldwide popularity of Dan Brown's The Da Vinci Code (2003), and its sequel The Lost Symbol (2009), highlight many qualities of a "metric" which people -- citizen voters, taxpayers and consumers -- find meaningful. In each case the "metric" is a form of secret, whether from the past or held by a secretive society. Curiously the real-world versions of the societies depicted -- the Catholic Church and the Freemasons respectively -- are increasingly unable to elicit analogous cross-cultural engagement for their central symbols.

Aside from its value as literature, it is evident that the mythopoeic reality lends itself to transformation into movie and video form -- as well as into interactive video game formats. A case has been made for the use of the latter to carry richer insights into the challenges of governance (Playfully Changing the Prevailing Climate of Opinion: climate change as focal metaphor of effective global governance, 2005). In a comment on the significance of the newly released, unusually succesful and controversially reviewed, movie Avatar (2009), the co-director of the Co-Intelligence Institute, Tom Atlee, notes how the plot could be transformed in any sequel to carry significance of even greater relevance to the future challenges of governance (Avatar Transforming: its power, its message, its possibilities, 2010). That movie is another example of myth-making.

Cognitive drama of the disciplines

An exemplar of the mythopoeic genre -- of worldwide contemporary significance -- is the epic tale of J. R. R. Tolkien (The Lord of the Rings, 1954). This might be understood as a complex "metric", with a scenario classically synthesized in poetic form:

Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the sky, 
Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone, 
Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die, 
One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne 
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.

One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, 
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them.
The "ultimate" nature of the "One Ring" in that metric -- the "formula" of the sixth and seventh lines -- is provided by the following (an inscription, rather than a "description"):

\[
\text{In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.}
\]

The challenge of any quest for a single metric is exemplified in the drama of The Lord of the Rings -- as the highly competitive and (dangerous) quest for a metric (the "One Ring") on which others are (or can be made to be) dependent. A means of holding the world to ransom -- at least cognitively? The dangers are highlighted by Tolkien's presentation of the inscription (above) in the fictional language of Black Speech.

To what extent are the presentations of single metrics in the form of equations to be understood as "Black Speech", given their essentially inhuman and alienating nature? Is the above inscription any more or less comprehensible to most than the equations descriptive of conventional single metrics? Is any quality of "blackness" then to be appropriately associated with incomprehensibility and ignorance?

The potentially fundamental psychosocial implications of recent symmetry groups work, and the challenge for their comprehension, have been discussed elsewhere (Potential Psychosocial Significance of Monstrous Moonshine: an exceptional form of symmetry as a Rosetta stone for cognitive frameworks, 2007; Dynamics of Symmetry Group Theorizing: comprehension of psycho-social implication, 2008).

How "black" is the Monster (mentioned above), given the nature of its proof as described by Marcus du Sautoy (Burden of Proof, New Scientist, 26 August 2006):

The proof of the classification of finite simple groups, a kind of periodic table of mathematical symmetry, for example, was announced in 1982. Stretching to over 10,000 pages, it was authored by hundreds of mathematicians - and it turned out to be incomplete. In the early 1990s mathematicians trying to master the argument in its entirety discovered that a portion of the proof was missing. After battling for some years the gap was finally plugged in 2004, but it took a paper whose proof was more than 1200 pages long.

Curiously it is only the deliberate use of Black Speech by Tolkien that recognizes incomprehensibility -- a dimension characteristically considered irrelevant in the formulation of many conventional metrics.

**Human remedial capacity: a ninefold challenge?**

Nine planetary boundaries: A team of 26 scientists, led by Johan Rockstrom and Will Steffen, and centered on the Stockholm Resilience Centre and the Stockholm Environment Institute, have produced a report entitled Planetary Boundaries: exploring the safe operating space for humanity (2009), separately summarized as The Nine Planetary Boundaries. This was presented at the Club of Rome General Assembly (Amsterdam, 2009). These boundaries are necessarily environmental constraints and boundary conditions, and the focus is on the degree to which they are already exceeded or in process of being exceeded.

The challenge of the "nine boundaries" mnemonically echoes the "nine rings" of Tolkien's "Mortal Men doomed to die" (in the poem above). The boundaries identified in the study are:

- **Stratospheric ozone layer**: decrease allows increasing amounts of ultraviolet radiation to reach ground level, damaging biological systems
- **Biodiversity**: increase in species extinction potentially threatens the viability of ecosystems with unforeseeable problematic consequences
- **Chemicals dispersion**: irreversible additive and synergic effects of emission of persistent toxic compounds, notably leading to increased infertility and permanent genetic damage.
- **Climate change**: potentially driving the Earth system into a much warmer state with rising sea levels
- **Ocean acidification**: reducing the amount of available carbonate ions essential for shell and skeleton formation in organisms dramatically affecting ocean ecology and potentially resulting in drastic reductions in fish stocks.
- **Freshwater consumption and the global hydrological cycle**: increasing scarcity of freshwater and disruption of river flow and associated ecosystems, notably downstream.
- **Land system change**: conversion of land-use for purposes of agriculture, thereby reducing biodiversity and affecting water flows
- ** Nitrogen and phosphorus inputs to the biosphere and oceans**: conversion of nitrogen into reactive forms polluting waterways and coastal zones and disrupting ecosystems
- **Atmospheric aerosol loading**: promoting climate change and adversely affecting human health

**Dysfunctional metrics**: Each of these nine boundaries is associated with a metric -- that of client change with the Kaya Identity, for example. It is useful to consider the dysfunctional potential associated with the other metrics described in the first part of this paper (Uncritical Strategic Dependence on Little-known Metrics, 2009).

- **Gaussian Copula**: The relative lack of understanding of it resulted in the financial crisis of 2008. It might be said that the solidity conventionally associated with the banking institutions and the financial system -- as emblematically represented by a pyramid (on
the financial system pyramid was discovered to be balanced precariously on its head through use of the metric and inability to assess the risk that it represented.

- **Kaya Identity**: It might be said that the relative lack of understanding of it undermined debate regarding climate change -- and the emergence of any effective response. The deliberate avoidance of the population issue, if only the avoidance of factoring in the avoidance, render suspect any outcome based upon it. If the issue is "hazardous", like radioactivity, then appropriate procedures should be developed for recognizing and dealing with it (Overpopulation Debate as a Psychosocial Hazard: development of safety guidelines from handling other hazardous materials, 2009). Lipoproteins: Developing a Strategy Omitting a Key Problem: the systemic challenge of climate change and resource issues, 2009)

- **Sustainability metric**: No use has yet been made of this metric but it might be asked whether its failure to render explicit the number and variety of species that constitutes "biodiversity" exposes users to the risk of dependence on too limited a range of species. In a period when species are becoming extinct at an unprecedented rate, how many species are appropriate to a sustainable ecosystem and to requisite environmental complexity? What are the tipping points in the case of biodiversity -- especially as carriers of psychocultural values (Darrell A. Posey, Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity: a complementary contribution to Global Biodiversity Assessment, 1999)?

The focus of the climate change debate on rise in temperature may be metaphorically compared to assessment by a physician of an individual's health solely with the aid of a thermometer -- neglecting other symptoms relevant to any diagnosis of the person's health and experience of pain. Ironically, in the human body significant core body temperature elevation (hyperthermia), or depression -- that is prolonged for more than a brief period of time -- is incompatible with human life. Any rise in body temperatures of more than 2°C (above 36-37°C) to 40°C is life-threatening. Ironically, in the case of global warming, a permanent rise of more than 2°C is considered potentially fatal to many, with 1.5°C advocated as acceptable by developing countries. The correspondence does not however "translate" into widespread concern about the health of the planet or the other illnesses of which global warming may be a symptom.

With respect to "climate change", the question might indeed have been opened up to ask what other diagnostic measures could offer insight, and of what deeper malaise might any observed increase in temperature be a symptom. Might "globalization" and "growth" then be recognized as associated with a "fever"? This medical metaphor has been explored to distinguish the complementarity of insights from two classical medical approaches (Remedies to Global Crisis: "Allopathic" or "Homeopathic"? Metaphorical complementarity of "conventional" and "alternative" models, 2009).

Diagnosis of human health may follow two contrasting patterns:

- **conventional or "allopathic" practice**: typically medical diagnosis may involve measurements of temperature, blood pressure, pulse rate, complemented by various tests (urine, fecal tests, saliva, blood). More complex tests may also be used. The patient may be asked about the source of pain and the regularity of bowel movement.

- **alternative or "homeopathic" practice**: as one example of complementary and alternative medicine, ayurveda distinguishes seven primary constituent elements of the body, emphasizes the need for balance of three humors or energies, and has eight treatment disciplines. Suppression of natural urges is held to undermine balance and to lead to illness. There is therefore a need to stay within the limits of reasonable balance, with moderation in food intake, sleep, sexual intercourse, and the intake of medicine. In diagnosis by the physician, all five senses are employed.

The degree to which the sets characteristic of the cognitive organization of ayurveda are echoed by those of The Lord of the Rings raises interesting questions about the number of factors considered significant in elaborating any single metric.

**Dramatis personae**: In the spirit of general systems theory and its recognition of isomorphism, it may be fruitful to explore the global challenge "through" the systemic functions of the sets of entities within the drama and dynamics of The Lord of the Rings, and "through" the recurrent patterns with which they are associated:

- **Nine "Mortal Men doomed to die"**: Each controls (or is controlled by) one of the "Rings" as "planetary boundaries" -- having succumbed to the power of the One Ring and achieved near immortality thereby. Within that myth the nine "Men" were also called Ringwraiths, Black Riders, or Dark Riders. The Nine Rings caused Men wearing them to become invisible. They also extended the lifespans of those Men who possessed them, although this eventually led to the Men becoming wreaths under the control of the possessor of the One Ring (of the single metric?).

Existence of their equivalents in relation to social change merits exploration (The "Dark Riders" of Social Change: a challenge for any Fellowship of the Ring, 2002):

- The Ringwraiths might be compared to the practitioners of particular sciences of "ex-planation" and objective, linear connectivity, who effectively sacrifice their humanity to the patterns of their respective professions -- from which, as professionals, the complexity and interiority of the human dimension is typically excluded. The emphasis on explanation is associated with reductionism, reification and closure -- a form of cognitive "dead hand" precluding openness and evolution. The argument has been developed through the theory of general semantics by Alfred Korzybski (Science and Sanity: an introduction to non-Aristotelian systems and general semantics, 1933) with respect to the inappropriate closure associated with assertions of what "is".

- Any "growth" thereby promoted tends to be associated with replication of cognitive patterns striving to subsume all other perspectives -- possibly to be appropriately described as cancerous, and with a marked tendency to metastasis (Menemic and Information Diseases in a Knowledge Society, 2008).

- Dysfunction cognitive patterns are usefully seen in terms of vicious cycles of various kinds, especially entrapment in them, as previously discussed (Dysfunctional Cycles and Spirals: web resources on "breaking the cycle", 2002)
• The commitment of such modes of knowing is essentially to abstraction, dematerialization and dehumanization -- which is exemplified in their professionalization. This contrasts with a potential "conscientific" approach (Towards Conscientific Research and Development, 2002) of which one aspect has been developed by Robert Romanyshyn (The Wounded Researcher: research with soul in mind, 2007).

Curiously the abhorrence of religion by science, as articulated by one of its most controversial exponents (Richard Dawkins, The God Delusion, 2006) has been expressed metaphorically in terms of the Islamic burkha -- epitomizing such controversy. Dawkins concludes that religion is "The Mother of All Burkas" through the cognitive cloak that it imposes on women, effectively rendering them invisible -- as with wearers of the nine "rings". However, as with all such polarized arguments, the reverse may be alleged, namely that science itself imposes cognitive constraints allowing it to be understood as "the mother of all burkhas" (Burkha as Metaphorical Mirror for Imperious Culture?, 2009).

• Seven "Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone": Their diminished or stunted stature, compared to "Men", suggests comparison with the reductivism typical of the focused application of wider knowledge through rigid procedures and practices -- effectively a deliberate materialization of knowledge, appropriately understood as the petrification or fossilization of frozen categories.

In a global context, they might be compared to "sectors" variously understood as the leaders of the seven continents, the global institutions and bureaucracies (such as UN and its agencies), the factories of multinational corporations, religious institutions, the military services, and the legislatures. Their cognitive framework may be appropriately caricatured as based on unchanging concepts "set in stone" -- even to the point of being inscribed on their architecture, as with the early initiatives of Hammurabi and Ashoka. Elsewhere the current case for "unfreezing categories" has been made (Framing the Global Future by Ignoring Alternatives: unfreezing categories as a vital necessity, 2009).

• Three "Elven-kings under the sky": These represent a degree of etherealization beyond the cognitive constraints of the disciplines and their application -- and expression of tacit, implicit and subjective knowledge -- expressed through music, visual arts, and performance arts, as a three-ringed elven circus. They represent patterns of "im-planation" rather than "ex-planation." This emphasis on nonlinear connectivity and symbolic correspondences has been explored separately (Walking Elven Pathways: Enactivating the Pattern that Connects, 2006; Climbing Elven Stairways: DNA as a macroscopic metaphor of polarized psychodynamics, 2007; Theories of Correspondences -- and potential equivalences between them in correlative thinking, 2007)

There is an intriguing possibility of a form of generic correspondence between the "factors" in an equation giving rise to a single metric and the dramatis personae of a myth and their dynamics. The factors make their characteristic contributions to any plot of the equation - - as do the personages in any dramatic plot.

Clearly the playing out of the relationships tends to be more readily comprehensible in the case of a fictional plot as the sequence of interrelated events arranged to form a logical pattern and to achieve an intended effect. The classic approach to organizing the dynamics of such plots is that of Georges Polti (The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations, 1916) who endeavoured to categorize every dramatic situation that might occur in a story or performance -- building on the earlier work of Carlo Gozzi. (see separate discussion Taxonomies of dramatic situations, 2009).

It is tempting to consider the possibility that the 36 plots embody a quadrilemma applied to the "nine". The quadrilemma transcends conventional linear duality by distinguishing: A, not-A, A-and-not-A, as well as neither-A-nor-notA. It is typical of human experience and quandaries. The importance of this quadrilemma has been highlighted by Kahiide Mushakoji (Global Issues and Interparadigmatic Dialogue, 1988).

Nine psychosocial boundaries: With respect to the essentially inhuman "nine planetary boundaries" distinguished, it has been separately argued that any effective response to them needs to take into account a range of essentially human psychosocial factors, otherwise excluded from any single metric that might in future "bind" the boundaries together (Recognizing the Psychosocial Boundaries of Remedial Action: constraints on ensuring a safe operating space for humanity, 2009). The question partially explored there was how to think about such corresponding psychosocial boundaries and the insights into the higher order complexity of humanity and human dynamics that they potentially represent.

Each psychosocial "boundary" might, for example, be understood as a "ring-bounded system" -- cognitively as a "way of knowing". Following Magoroh Maruyama, rather than the "single vision" typical of a single metric, and the consequent "subunderstanding" of the whole, the argument there was for Polypocular strategic vision.

In the myth of The Lord of the Rings, the actual "Fellowship of the Ring" -- an extension of the dramatis personae above -- is made up of nine characters better known worldwide than many a global strategy: 4 hobbits, a wizard, 2 men, an elf and a dwarf. It is through the interplay of their modes of knowing that the tale explores the challenge of safeguarding an "operating space" for all.

Continued in Part 3: Cognitive Cycles Vital to Sustainable Self-Governance