Holy and Unholy Systems

When large and influential corporations such as Amazon or Meta describe themselves as an "ecosystem", it rankles me. It is if they were trying to align their own proprietary systems with the vast planetary complexity of the biosphere, foist them onto the same level of ethical value to dupe us into full engagement. Their "ecosystems" are highly effective at achieving what they are designed to do - maximise profit and influence at the expense of truth and social cohesion.

A systems view in contrast to an object view allows our imaginations to escape the reifying tendencies of object thinking which places all the primacy on discrete separate things, things with definite boundaries. The object view all too often prevents us from thinking of things as elements, as parts and wholes. It masks that any particular thing we can pull out of the flux is always part of something else and is constituted by smaller things . The object view forgets that things are always parts of wholes and those wholes in turn are usually parts of greater wholes.

Systems thinking prioritises the network of relations, the connections between things and the relationships between parts and wholes. It sees things as secondary and relationships as primary. Things are constituted in their relationships to the other things in the network. Nothing can exist in isolation any more than a triangle can have four sides. The boundary of any thing is not definite, it is ambiguous, ragged. Where a thing ends is anything but certain so enmeshed is it in a network of relations to the the other things existing in the system of which it is a part and without which no-thing could exist.

This is particularly a problem for western individualistic thinking, less of a problem in majority south and oriental cultures that prioritise community. For example the key Buddhist principle - *Pratītyasamutpāda* - sees all phenomena - actions, things, ideas arising in dependence upon other things. Nothing arises from itself, it is always caused by other selves. Similarly the Vedic metaphor of Indra's Net situates every single existent thing as a mirror reflecting every other single existent thing in a vast cosmic web of relations. In both Hindu and Buddhist cosmology it pictures an infinite, interconnected cosmos of multifaceted jewels each reflecting every other jewel, a representation of how every phenomenon contains and shapes every other phenomenon and the whole. These metaphors seem to have a peculiar resonance with branches of contemporary physics. In the classical mechanics of Newton and Galileo, solid objects move through a passive and inert background of space like billiard balls on pool table. In Quantum Field Theory, space is

not empty, it is not a vacuum, it is a plenum, a vibrant field of potential, a fundamental reality from which we conceptualise particles, artefacts of our measuring devices. In Hindu/Buddhist cosmology and Quantum Field Theory things arise from other things within flux of the world and take their place within that flux and create further things. In his 1950 book, *The Human Use of Human Beings* the 'godfather' of systems thinking and cybernetics, Norbert Weiner says: "We are but whirlpools in a river of ever-flowing water. We are not stuff that abides, but patterns that perpetuate themselves" To think in systems is to think in time, in transience, in ever emergent phenomena giving rise to each other.

The systems view is monistic, that is mind and matter are of the same stuff, separable but not separate aspects of the whole. This is the opposite of the inherited interpretation of Descartes' famous meditation, c*ogito ergo sum*, which maintains an absolute dualism between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* or the interior world of thinking and the external world of things. Many esoteric and metaphysical systems share with modern systems thinking a monistic theory of mind - ultimately all manifestations, all forms of intelligence trace back to one mind, what Irwin Schrödinger called the *singulare tantum*. Humans and other entities participate in this mind, forming unique perspectives or portholes through which this universal mind shines and our maps, our depictions, our stories, what we say to ourselves about our particular place within this universal mind reflect the staggering diversity of cultural and historical situations of particular minds within it.

Relationship as the ground of reality poses devilish questions for the western doctrine of individualism. If every person is a reflection of every other person's point of view, how can individuation, "authentic" selfhood arise? How could those individuals who have affected revolutionary change for better or worse have gotten to the point where their sense of self overrode their social context? How could such an individual do something about their dissatisfaction with the received order of the society they live within if they never differentiated themselves from that society in the first place? How can an element within a system step outside that system to see it from an external perspective? Do we need to maintain the individualist/object view to allow individuals to express themselves and effect change for the good? Does striking a balance between these views lie in having a well developed sense of intrinsic worth of every individual without severing it from its network of relations?

The answers lie in the systems view being not so worried about intrinsic content or essence, more extrinsic relations, or rather essence arises from relationship. Value and essence are not solely

contained within an entity. This should not devalue a particular individual but the problem is that when a systems view is instrumentalised, it empties the unit or person of value, they become a node in the net, a dot in the diagram with no intrinsic value which is reassigned to the network. This inhumane and pitiless systematisation undergirds that mantra of dogmatic and opinionated individuals intervening in the lives of others that 'the end justifies the means'. A systems view sees the London tube map as a network of related nodes, just as the rail system of the third Reich was a network of relations ferrying Jews, gypsies, and political prisoners to their deaths at its nodes, the concentration camps. The birds eye view of the system is dissociated from the worms eye view of the human suffering.

Never has a world view been more open to abuse. This unholy purging of the intrinsic value and subjectivity of a person seen as a node or unit allows monstrous systems to corral and control the voiceless. In his 1989 book, *Modernity and the Holocaust ,* Zygmunt Bauman, Polish–British sociologist and philosopher saw the Nazi genocide not as a regression to uncivilised barbarism, but the outcome of a highly evolved modern systems approach - bureaucratic, technological, and rational. He argued that the focus on efficiency, social engineering, and scientific planning made the Holocaust possible and predictable. When the bureaucratic systems remove individuals from the consequences of their actions, atrocities all too easily become routine management tasks.

Yet at the same time, never has a world view allowed such an empathic identification with the other, the other as intrinsically valuable as oneself, because, from a systems viewpoint every other is constitutive of oneself and ones own self is constitutive of the other. Value is found in the system therefore the connected components of the system are just as valuable. Nothing escapes the entangled network of relations. This humane view offered by systems thinking is remarkably resonant with the ethics of many faith systems, Eastern, Western, Indigenous, at base, founded in principles of relatedness and monism.

This ethical standpoint was also held my many the originating exponents of systems thinking, Aldous Huxley, Arthur Koestler, Gregory Bateson, Margaret Mead and others including Norbert Weiner who in his book, *Human* warned explicitly against its instumentalisation, all too aware of the abusive capacity of the potent mode of thought he had unleashed, if it fell into the wrong hands. This ethical ambivalence is the essence of systems thought - such a potent way of thinking that enormous harm and enormous good can flow from the choices of the thinker.

The *Tao Te Ching* beautifully expounds upon the paradox of the one on the many, the indivisible unity underlying “the ten thousand things”. A sense of solidarity, a sense of unity needs diversity to make any sense. Unity cannot be a unity of unity, it is by definition always a unity of the many. Any one thing is always both the one and the many. Any one thing is a knot in the net and a unique mirror of the rest of the created order. A unity can logically and semantically only be a composite of plurality. Plotinus held that absolute unity (The One) is the ultimate source of all beings and all being. In this view, a plurality cannot exist on its own; each thing requires an a-priori unity to exist at all.

This holds true for life on earth, the tree of life, the genealogical map of evolution gathers the tens of millions of species living on our planet now, regressing branch by branch, ultimately back to a single-celled progenitor living in the first billion years of Earth’s history. Of course this map is anything but an elegant bifurcating diagram, it is full of dead ends, mass extinctions, horizontal gene transfers and extreme responses to catastrophic change, nevertheless it establishes kinship between every organism.

The holy and unholy implications of the systems view are two signs of the same coin. You cannot have one without the other. From the systems of viewpoint nothing exists without its opposite. The use or misuse of systems thinking depends on the ethics of the thinker and their ability to think around problems in a nuanced, rather than a literalistic way.