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## Editorial:

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# Bringing Forth a World: Inviting Maturana into the Conversation of the “Wide World Over”

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After attending the *Canadian Hermeneutic Institute* this month in Calgary, with Professor Theodore George as the visiting scholar, foremost in my mind has been the ethics and responsibility to understand in relationships and interactions with others. Dr. George spoke of many topics in his remarkable three days of lectures - from conversation to translation, the linguisticity of language, and the ethics of experience in hermeneutic research, the “wide world over.” George maintains that “we only become genuinely undogmatic through interpretive experience achieved while displaced from tradition, abroad in the world.” George is also the author of *The Responsibility to Understand: Hermeneutical Contours of Ethical Life* (George, 2020) and this book addresses contemporary hermeneutics and the question of responsibility as well as our capacity for displacement. From a totally different field, the Chilean neurobiologist, Dr. Humberto Maturana, has been talking about responsibility for a very long time.

Humberto R. Maturana was a Chilean neurobiologist, born in Santiago in 1928. He studied medicine in Chile, anatomy in England, and received a PhD in biology at Harvard in 1958. His theories of cognition and autopoiesis (the organization of living systems) were presented in his book with colleague Francisco Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding* (1984/1987/1992). Maturana died May 6, 2021, after leaving a mark on the fields of biology, second-order cybernetics, philosophy, therapy, and education. In the 1990s, I was involved in a

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practice of Family Systems Nursing therapy (Wright & Bell, 2021) that embraced many of Maturana's ideas as useful in seeing clients, informing practices, and shaping our beliefs about how to "live well with and for others in just societies" (Ricouer, 1992, p. 352).

Maturana was concerned with responsibility in human relations and responsibility in the awareness of knowledge. He maintained that it is not knowledge, but the knowledge of knowledge that compels.

It compels us to adopt an attitude of permanent vigilance against the temptation of certainty. It compels us to recognize certainty is not a proof of truth. It compels us to realize that the world everyone sees is not the world but *a* world we bring forth with others. It compels us to see that the world will be different only if we live differently. It compels us because, when we know that we know, we cannot deny (to ourselves or to others) that we know... (This) implies an ethics that we cannot evade... an ethics that springs from human reflection and puts human reflection right at the core as a constitutive social phenomenon. (Maturana & Varela, 1992, p. 245)

Ultimately, Maturana offered considerations for how we might bring forth a world that recognizes the legitimacy of the other, while remaining in an ethical domain of social actions involving personal and collective responsibility. This position or claim of a world where all actions might be equally legitimate, though not necessarily equally desirable or preferable, has not been without critics. When his book with Varela was first published in 1987 as a biological explanation of human understanding, his work began to be noticed and embraced in fields of philosophy, therapy, and education. His claims also received some unfavorable responses, notably from Jim Birch (1991) and Morris Berman (1989).

Berman's critique (1989) is around claims of equal legitimacy and political accountability. He asked: "Do General Pinochet and his staff of torturers really have a worldview as legitimate and valid as those the Chilean citizens they have wantonly and systematically tortured?" (p. 282).

Maturana (1991) responded to this critique with the following explanation:

Far from advocating passivity in the face of evil, the book asks that we act out of responsible, personally chosen love, instead of from the belief that we hold a better "truth." In the case of Chile, this would mean opposing Pinochet for personal and cultural reasons rather than alleged biological principles of viability. Nothing is gained by attempting to defeat tyrants with the tyranny of our own, imposed, alternate truth. (p. 88)

This acceptance of a basic constitutive operational legitimacy of all manners of living in the biological domain "does not carry with it the acceptance of all manners of living as equally desirable in the human domain of coexistence" (p. 92). However, we act responsibly according to our preferences, not under the pretense that we are transcendently right. We are not owners of truth. "Values are cultural, not biological" (p. 92), nor are they facts. "Goodness and badness belong to the domain of values and responsibility belongs to the domain of awareness" (p. 95). We can choose to "bring forth a human world in which tyranny and torture do not show up as normal accepted actions" (p. 96). The wide world we can choose to bring forth does not accept all things as equally

desirable. We *can* get it wrong. The preferences we follow in the domain of responsible actions can be more - or less - desirable in creating the world we bring forth.

For Maturana, the social or the “wide world over,” comes down to being constituted in relations of love, which for him, is the acceptance of the other as a legitimate other and the domain of actions that constitute the acceptance of the other in coexistence with us (Maturana, 1991, p. 89). “I do not claim that love brings about the world; the world in which we live is constituted by us human beings in our coordination of actions in language” (p. 93).

Responsibility in human existence together is concerned with the responsibility that arises in the awareness of knowledge, the knowledge of knowledge that calls to action all things in the constitution of the world. “It is not the knowledge that a bomb kills, but what we want to do with the bomb that determines whether or not we use it” (p. 90). Maturana offered that it is an “invitation to responsibility” (p. 90), as does George in his invitation to the responsibility to understand (George, 2020). “(T)he word *love* in daily life refers to the domain of actions in which we act accepting the other as a legitimate other in coexistence with us, and the word *hate* refers to the domain of actions in which we orient our doings to the destruction of some particular other” (Maturana, 191, p. 93). Holding our own truths so tightly as absolute truths such that we insist or even demand the other should and *must* change then is an act of violence and is at the center of a world brought forth that is unethical.

But if I invite someone to responsible action, I cannot tell him or her what to do. At most I can open the possibility for a reflection together so that we may join in bringing forth a world for living together through our responsible coherent actions. (Maturana, 1991, p. 95)

This does not sound dissimilar to what Hans-Georg Gadamer offered in his book *Truth and Method* (1960/1989). Gadamer’s work is centered on remaining open to the possibility that the other might be right. “Gadamer’s approach to hermeneutical recognition reveals that our responsibility is to let the other say something to us, that is, to entertain the possible validity of the other’s claim (George, 2020, p. 114). This is not about reaching agreement necessarily, but the capacity to put one’s own claims into question to create space for the claims of another. George argued that, although we might strive for agreement, that is not the demand – the demand is openness and embracing the displacement that such encounters ask of us (George, 2020).

The wide world over then, is a world brought forth with others, a complicated, complex, and contingent world that has something to say to us. The world holds something of each of us that we might not even know or recall. I recognize that places in the world hold and carry aspects of myself that even I have forgotten. We all recognize that moment of returning to place or location – an ocean, a sound of bees buzzing, the feel of sun on our skin, the brisk bite of a winter’s wind, the distant mow of a lawn on a summer’s night and the smell of grass – where suddenly, we remember. The world remembers something about us that we may have forgotten. This world that carries us as asks, too, that we carry it, much as Celan wrote in poetry “(t)he world is gone, I must carry you” (cited in Derrida, 2005, p. 141). George (2017) suggested that, in grief, a particular world (person) might be gone but not the requirement to carry it (them). As in grief and as the world carries us, we are charged to carry the world and the invitation to carry it with responsibility, love, and the knowledge of knowledge *is* a “hermeneutical contour of ethical life” (George, 2020).

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