

## Participatory Reality

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The idea of participatory reality has been developing in the Network for some time. A May Dialogue has been held on the theme, we engaged with some aspects of it at a symposium last year, and the ideas from that fed into the Participatory Reality symposium this year. Both symposia were generously hosted in Drynachan Lodge by COUNTESS ANGELIKA CAWDOR, whose hospitality did much to foster an atmosphere where intellectual ideas and personal experiences could be freely exchanged.

We began with an attempt to pin down some of the key ideas of this broad area in the points I listed in the last issue of *Network*, such as a notion of evolving truth, a holistic emotional/physical/spiritual view of the person, and a practically grounded awareness of the ecological interconnection of all beings. This led into a set of questions that was sent to all participants, which started with "What is the interplay between your life and you worldview in relation to the idea of participation?" and developed this by asking about particular personal experiences. The points and questions were published in the last Network and on the SMN web-site, while the abstracts of participants' ideas were circulated to local groups, and feedback from this was taken into the symposium. An e-mail discussion group was started among the participants, through which we decided that "A 'participatory reality' seminar must surely be participatory" and that "we should avoid formal presentations  $\frac{3}{4}$  unless there is a consensus for a presentation in some particular case."

In view of this, the emphasis throughout was on the issue of the difference that the adoption of a participatory worldview made to life, and hence on the relation of the theoretical concepts to personal experience. This theme was well developed, whereas purely theoretical issues (such as comparison of different philosophical and methodological positions) were little developed. Engagement with personal experience, together with development of the process as itself participatory, was achieved by personal and interpersonal sharing by the participants to foster an open, safe and trusting environment in which these complex issues could be better explored. In particular, this involved:

- Opening with introductions that included significant aspects of the participants' life-histories, which both encouraged the trust needed to explore personal experiences and also illuminated participants' different positions
- Including a review of the process at the end of the first full morning, as a result of which the programme was modified (subsequent modification also taking place informally)
- Including, as a result of the review, a session where music (the Adagio from Mahler's 5th symphony) was listened to and the various internal reactions analysed
- Conducting almost all the discussion through a modified version of the Bohm dialogue principle, in which two "talking sticks" were used to pace the discussion, ensuring that speakers were not interrupted, and that there was a pause after each contribution.

This process was successful in progressively increasing the participatory aspect of group interactions, stimulating useful challenges within the group. The "holistic view of the person, embracing emotional, physical and spiritual aspects" (one of the defining points that I had listed) was reflected through participants' allowing their emotions as well as their intellect to engage with the material.

The result was a rich and powerful mixture, which we are still digesting! The prior intellectual papers were in many cases added to during the meeting, and in some cases we did decide to have detailed presentations. All the papers are available in abstract form at [www.scimednet.org/events/dryn99.htm](http://www.scimednet.org/events/dryn99.htm) so here I will only gesture towards them. The fundamental philosophical points were covered by RON BRADY, LANCE BUTLER, MAX VELMANS and HENRYK SKOLIMOWSKI. Ron Brady described the approach of Goethe to this world view and also gave practical illustrations with slides of the phenomenological approach to reality, which forms the historical foundation of the whole idea. Max Velmans, writing on "the boundaries of objectivity and subjectivity" engaged with similar issues. Lance Butler presented a post-modern perspective on the notions of truth and reality, which has played a vital role in the (rather different) re-thinking of these notions by participatory philosophers such as Henryk Skolimowski - who, in his brief "nugget" of input both pulled together the intellectual ideas and drew us into his enthusiasm for a dynamic, transformational view of the world. Participating really makes a difference to life!

Different scientific perspectives were given by DEBORAH DELANOY, PETER FENWICK and DAVID FONTANA, who stressed the importance of parapsychological investigation and the paradoxically combined richness and inadequacy of the neurological viewpoint. A feeling of the concrete experimental underpinning of the interconnectedness of reality flowed from their reports, which threw into relief the question of the whole nature of science: what sort of epistemology, what sort of investigation, is appropriate to a participatory world? This question was touched on by JOAN WALTON, in a paper which introduced the social dimension of "how to create a society in which all experience their lives as meaningful and rewarding". And this dimension was taken up at a global level by EMILIOS BOURATINOS in a visionary proposal for a "new Delphic oracle" comprising a community of the wise who "like the ancient city-healer Epimenides, will draw on ... a participatory understanding and incorporate it in its technical advice on the specific issues facing society." The concept of the Delphic oracle extended interconnectedness to the whole vista beyond the material, and this was covered by a survey by DAVID LORIMER and a cabalistic view from ANNE BARING which framed our whole discussion.

A number of distinct themes emerged from the overall process, some tied up, some left dangling. Two which struck me in particular were the themes of *boundaries* and *yearning*. The role of interpersonal boundaries was contrasted with the absence of boundaries both revealed by and methodologically encouraged in parapsychological research, and we explored the fear that was involved in erecting boundaries. In addition we compared the feelings of yearning for unity that underlay both meditative exercises and also the group interactions.

We finished with a long list of unfinished items for the future. Some concerned methodology: what values 'should' be involved in participation? how should feelings - as opposed to ideas - be taken into account? Others linked with personal spiritual practice: is it necessary to participate in one's own being before one can effectively participate with others? And outstandingly important were those which looked to the whole context of

participation, in society and planet: what is the role of education? how do we participate in saving nature? what about participation in the suffering of others, in both a psychological and an economic sense - how can the rich nations best participate in (assist in helping) the reality of what it means to be poor in a third world country?

Taking forward such diverse material was difficult. The strongly personal and experiential nature of the event suggested that a published "conference proceedings" would be inappropriate, so we agreed to present our meeting in two alternative forms: either personal accounts of the symposium that combined first-, second- and third-person perspectives; or (the preferred option) "fairy stories" extracting in simplest possible form the key ideas for life, aimed perhaps at 6-8 year olds. So watch this space for the next instalment! In addition, networking activity is linking the ideas from this symposium with a parallel one held at the Fetzer Institute, Michigan, in November, attended by myself and several other Network members. The flavour there was as much practical as philosophical, with several participants well versed in the techniques of participatory action research, so that their proceedings (which are due to be published in article form) will form a valuable complement to the output from the Drynachan symposium.

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