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Gregory Bateson, Fourfold Vision and the Myth of Power: A

Double Bind that Encourages Creativity and Wisdom

being a thesis submitted in fulfilment of the

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to four people, all of whom were important in my work and my life.

My mother, Paddy Palmer, the scholar Noel Charlton, whose insights into the work and life of Gregory Bateson were invaluable to me, Gregory Bateson, whose thinking has had a lasting impact on me and Dr E. W Taylor, my uncle, whose gentle example led the way.

Paddy Palmer, who died in the pandemic of 2020 was a great support to me. She wrote the following during lockdown, just a few months before her death:

"During the last three weeks I have watched the sparrows enjoying the freedom of coming and going to the hedge where they are building their home. I have watched the cherry blossom (flourishing when I last hugged Hugh) depart from the tree and blow wherever the wind would take it, and I have watched the daffodils come and go as nature intended. I saw how all nature is interdependent and lives according to the seasons. Freedom. But now, as Saint Paul says, "I see through a glass, darkly", for I'm blessed so much that Hugh can come to my window, that I can see his smile, know he is alright. But we can't touch, we can't hug. We can only wave and blow kisses to one another".

Noel Charlton died in 2016, but without his perceptive insights, I would never have gone on to link Bateson's epistemology and Blake's Fourfold Vision. His gravestone has the inscription, "**Now all that was owed is repaid, and all that was owned returned. Now all that was lost is found, and all that was bound free**". As with Bateson, Charlton's thinking is still immanent in this world.

Acknowledgements

Abstract

This thesis discusses my writings on power in the professional fields of systemic family therapy, supervision and training and how they together make a substantive and original contribution to the field of systemic therapy. The writing emerges out of a relationship between my understanding and appreciation of the work of Gregory Bateson (9 May 1904–4 July 1980) and a reflexive process of theorising my own practice and that of colleagues.

I have selected four peer-reviewed journal articles, one book chapter and a paper from a professional magazine to illustrate and discuss the contribution and the development of my thinking.

I had been particularly interested in understanding why Gregory Bateson was so opposed to the idea of 'power' in connection to relationships, which ultimately led to me developing a deeper understanding of his proposed cybernetic epistemology and going on to formulate a new approach to therapy and supervision (Fourfold Vision).

The narrative that connects these papers is the exploration of the concept of systemic thinking in the context of therapy and beyond. The papers discuss how systemic thinking can be applied to address complex problems in various areas, including therapy, ecology, and cybernetics. The papers also explore the role of the therapist and how they can integrate multiple perspectives, such as science, theory, humanism, and art, to facilitate healing and transformation. In addition, the papers challenge the traditional view of power and propose a more collaborative and interconnected approach to problem-solving. Overall, this body of work emphasises the importance of systemic thinking in promoting holistic and transformative approaches to various fields and leads to connections with feminist, new materialist thinking and indigenous studies.

The papers included in this thesis are:

- Palmer, H. (2014). Steps towards fourfold vision: From the myth of power to a cybernetic unity of healing. *Context 135*, Warrington: AFT.
- Palmer, H. (2016) Fourfold vision and cybernetic unity: Therapist as scientist, theorist, humanist and artist. In McCarthy, I. & Simon, G. (Eds.) (2016). *Systemic Therapy as Transformative Practice*. Farnhill: Everything is Connected Press.
- Palmer, H. (2017). Fourfold Vision in Practice: Data, Theory, Intuition and the Art of Therapy. *Human Systems: The Journal of Therapy, Consultation and Training*. 28(1), 21-39.

- Palmer, H. (2021). Where did the Eco go in Systemic Practice? *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice,* 4(1), 1–12. ttps://doi.org/10.28963/4.1.2
- Palmer, H. (2022). "Think different" to prevent extinction. Connecting Gregory Bateson's Cybernetic Epistemology with Posthumanism. *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice*, 5(2), 14-27. https://doi.org/10.28963/5.2.3
- Palmer, H. (2022) Systemic thinking and the myth of power. *Feedback: Journal of the Family Therapy Association of Ireland.* 2022, 32-41.

To the eyes of the man of imagination, nature is imagination itself.

Letter from William Blake to the Revd Dr Trusler, 23 August 1799.

"I salute the light within your eyes where the whole universe dwells. For when you are at that center within you and I am at that place within me, we shall be one."

Tasunke Witko, Oglala Lakota, 1839-1877

How can I describe in words the complexity of it all?

Living in a world that is understood by reducing wholes to parts,

creating boundaries and bits and bobs,

a world of things, seemingly unconnected.

Walking through a thicket of pines; the ground soft, countless needles decomposing,

bracken and wood anemones, beetles and lichen,

the scent and sounds enveloping.

Stumbling upon an ant colony, a swarming mass of life,

seeming chaotic, but no... there is some order, even purpose, here

Mind written with a myriad of tiny creatures,

an ecology of relationships and communication.

Beautiful, messy and never fully known.

A world of ideas.

Yet these words are shifting sand by the sea; rain on a warm day.

Leaves falling on a lake,

drifting

away

Hugh Palmer 2016

Contents

Introduction

Now I a fourfold vision see,

And a fourfold vision is given to me:

'Tis fourfold in my supreme delight

And threefold in soft Beulah's night

And twofold always, may God us keep

From single vision and Newton's sleep!

(William Blake, Letter to Thomas Butt, 22 November 1802)

My first published paper was in 1995, and as I look back over my publications, it is apparent that I have often written about topics that matter to me, usually where I have direct experience of the subject matter and have taken a position I wish to share or develop.

I first discovered the writing of Gregory Bateson in 1989 when I undertook practitioner-level training in Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP). At that time, I had completed training as a Registered Mental Nurse, having previously worked as a Registered General Nurse. I had already developed an interest in psychology and hypnosis as a coronary care nurse in the mid-1980s, often borrowing books from the hospital library on these subjects. Looking back, I think I wanted to influence others, to have some 'power', which I suppose was understandable as a relatively short young man who had been bullied as a schoolboy.

As a young boy, I had a relative (who was one of my mother's relatives and not really an uncle) who significantly influenced me. Uncle Wilf (known to most others as Dr E. W. Taylor) was a fascinating man who had served in both world wars; in the first, he was wounded as a lieutenant in the trenches and was seconded to the Navy to work on searchlights. During the second world war, he was primarily involved in developing optical instruments for naval and land weaponry, as his field was optics. Uncle Wilf was active in the founding of the Yorkshire Naturalists Trust in 1946, being one of the original Trustees and was instrumental in the acquisition of Spurn Head and many other reserves for the Trust.

I was fascinated by Uncle Wilf's stories about both world wars and was intrigued that he knew Barnes Wallis (the engineer famous for inventing the bouncing bomb used in the "Dambusters" raid). More importantly, he instilled in me a love of nature and the importance of conservation; he often took me to the local reserves he had acquired for the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust.

Later in my life, in my late twenties, I began reading work by the anthropologist and social scientist Gregory Bateson, who reminded me so much of Uncle Wilf; another scientist who cared deeply about conservation.

In 1996, I began training in family therapy. Having a break during the time I was in New Zealand between 2001-2003 meant I didn't qualify as a family therapist until 2007. By this time, Bateson was a footnote in a profession now influenced by social constructionism and postmodern ideas, yet I held onto an appreciation of Bateson's thinking - along with a sense that much of Bateson's ideas had been either neglected or even misinterpreted by family therapists.

The years between 2009–2011 were difficult for me, professionally and personally: I was close to giving up systemic practice and was considering the possibility of leaving the lecturing post at the University of Hull, where I'd been working since 2003. In part, some of this crisis was because I had shared some information about the struggles my children were having in a teaching session on the foundation in family therapy course I was running. My intent had been to demonstrate that, as therapists, whatever is going on in our own lives will influence what we pay attention to in therapy, meaning some elements will appear more salient than other elements that may be more important to the family. However, my disclosure was taken to be evidence of psychological distress by one of the participants, and the subsequent events following them voicing their concerns led to *actual* psychological distress. Looking back, I can appreciate that my development of Fourfold Vision was influenced by this experience and my subsequent attempts to process what had happened, and to find a means to articulate the need to be 'human' in therapy.

Towards the end of the trying period at the University, a surprising opportunity emerged. Nora Bateson had produced a video about her father (Bateson, 2011), and began to tour the world to promote this valuable resource. She was due to show the film at the National Media Museum in Bradford in February 2012 at an event organised by Bradford Relate. Gail Simon, central to organising the event, had been my supervisor during the first year of my qualifying training as a family therapist, invited me to present as she knew of my interest in Gregory Bateson. This was a turning point for me.

The papers in this thesis provide a narrative of some of my thinking and writing that emerged from this fortunate opportunity, and over the coming pages, I will provide reflections on each of the selected papers before ending with an overall reflection on the evolving theme of Fourfold Vision.

Paper One: Steps towards Fourfold Vision: From the myth of power to a cybernetic unity of healing

This paper was an attempt to develop and widen the audience for the presentation I gave at Bradford in 2012, and I returned to Bateson's writing and his biographers–David Lipsett (1980), Peter Harries-Jones (1995) and Noel Charlton (2008)–to better understand and appraise Bateson's rejection of the idea power in relationships that I had begun to appreciate in the context of developing my presentation.

I was not satisfied with previous writers' attempts to explain Bateson's position on power, although they offered some useful elements. For example, while I did not agree with Harries-Jones's (1995) suggestion that we would be better served by reflexive dialogue about the 'metaphor of power', as I felt it was side stepping the issue, I found his advice to see ourselves as simply parts of a larger situation very helpful, as this led to my thinking about different contexts in which power differentials are manifest.

Additionally, I was curious about Bateson's clinical work, described by Lipsett (1980) and supported by communications from many of Bateson's contemporaries, including William Fry, Jay Haley and Ronald Laing. What emerged was a sense that Bateson was intuitive, empathic, and rigorous in his work with families where a young person was diagnosed with schizophrenia. It was evident that Bateson was very much against directly influencing other people but would ask gently challenging questions. I would suggest that his experience underpinned his later work with the Milan School of Family Therapy.

I was struck by Charlton's (2008 p.10) appreciation of Bateson's understanding of the sacred in his book, in which he hoped that his reading of Bateson …" may enable, for many people, a new awareness of the sacred nature of our living ecology", and, returning to his work, I noted that he suggested Bateson considered psychology to be evolving in two directions, 'humanist' and 'circularist' and that Bateson saw the way forward as being a compromise, a working together of both types of practice, between intuition and examination and description, each informing the other. Charlton added that other aspects might be necessary; "Humanist, scientist, artist and theoretician are all needed to form the cybernetic unity of healing" (p. 94).

Charlton's recognition of Bateson's distinction between "humanist" and "circularist" (in Reusch & Batseon,1951) highlights two different approaches to understanding human behaviour and experience. The humanist approach emphasises the individual's subjective experience and the importance of empathy and understanding in the therapeutic process. The circularist approach, on the other hand, focuses on the

interactions and relationships between individuals and the systems in which they are embedded.

Charlton suggested that Bateson believed an integration of intuition and examination, and of the humanist and relational, would facilitate a more comprehensive and dynamic understanding of human experience. Charlton's further addition of scientist, artist, and theoretician to the cybernetic unity of healing expands on this; the scientist brings a rigorous and systematic approach to understanding, utilising empirical evidence and data and the theoretician brings a theoretical framework to understanding, offering conceptual frameworks for understanding the complexities of people and their relationships. The humanist brings empathy and intuition, and the artist may be found in how these different approaches can co-create a more complete and integrated approach to healing that recognises the complexity and diversity of human beings. Working together, they can create a healing environment that is both evidence-based and empathetic, and that recognises the importance of both objective and subjective understandings in the healing process.

I needed to find a way to articulate these ideas in a comprehensible and useful way, and, while I was reading William Blake's writing, it dawned on me that his description of 'Fourfold Vision' connected with Charlton's 'cybernetic unity of healing' and that it might offer a route to thinking about Bateson's epistemology differently and provide a means to include both intuition and scientific analysis in psychological practice.

In hindsight, it now seems to me that I had developed a means to think about therapy from a second order cybernetic position (see von Foerster 1974, Pask 1976, Hoffman 1985), and later in this document I will offer a considerably refined and revised overview of Fourfold Vision, recognising that earlier versions were integral to the development of my thinking.

Paper Two: Fourfold Vision and cybernetic unity: Therapist as scientist, theorist, humanist and artist

In this paper, I particularly wanted to include the voice of Bradford Keeney, who had once demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of Bateson in his writing but had become a marginal and difficult figure within family therapy–in part because he held to Bateson's rejection of power. He had recently co-authored a paper (Keeney & Keeney, 2012) criticising systemic therapy as no longer being systemic, and within this they also provided a robust explanation of Bateson's position on power. I had not seen this paper until after my initial work on Fourfold Vision had been published, and felt it was important to integrate some of this critique into the chapter, especially given Keeney's claim that systemic, postmodern and narrative therapies ignored Bateson's call for non-participation and non-cooperation in the making of descriptions, explanations, or premises that were derivative of the metaphor of power. Keeney correctly observed that Bateson was often misunderstood and misrepresented in our field, but his tone undermines his critique of the loss of circularity within systemic therapies.

I used this paper to develop further arguments regarding the myth of power– and indeed, the title of this thesis is drawn from Phillip Guddemi's (2006 p. 59) observation that "The legacy of Bateson's critique of the power idea puts many of us who feel ourselves in his tradition in a double bind—a double bind of the creative type, I hasten to add" and I too have found Bateson's critique of power to have become a double bind that has led to my own creativity. While I have regard for Guddemi's response, to think of "power as relational asymmetry" (Guddemi 2006 p. 66), my reaction was to see inequality and asymmetry as being both nested within, and reflections of, the broader contexts from which they emerge.

I wanted to elucidate how I had found value in both the attempts of Harries-Jones (1995) and Dell (1989) to square the circle of Bateson's critique of power, and I explained that Fourfold Vision evolved, in part, as a synthesis of these attempts. Where Harries-Jones considered that we would be better served by reflexive dialogue about the "metaphor of power" (Harries-Jones 1995, p. 46) and see ourselves as parts of a larger situation, I felt that, while this might offer a partial resolution to the problem, when we widen the boundaries of what we are accounting for, then the relationships we characterise as 'power relations' may be seen as parts of wider circuits.

Equally, Dell's (1989) attempt to explain the problem of power as confusion between two profoundly different and separate domains is relevant. He suggests that Bateson talks of power and lineal control in the domain of scientific explanation, whereas therapists' talk of power is located in the humanist domains of experience and

description. While this might appear to be an attractive resolution to the double bind, thinking of "domains"-breaking things into parts–is, in my view, antithetical to Bateson's cybernetic epistemology.

Paper Three: Fourfold Vision in Practice: Data, Theory, Intuition and the Art of Therapy

Paper Three, published in *Human Systems: The Journal of Therapy, Consultation & Training,* was an attempt to further elaborate on the Fourfold Vision approach to therapy that offers a way of thinking about elements of practice as being equally important interconnected parts of an aesthetic whole rather than separate parts or domains that all need to be attended to in a formal or rigid structure. Part of the attraction of writing for this journal was that it is highly regarded, with an international readership, thus I could reach a larger audience than I had with my previous work.

At the time of writing this paper, I had left the University context and was working in an inpatient Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service unit. I used a case study from my clinical practice within the unit to illustrate one way of employing Fourfold Vision. Within the case study, I included the use of outcome measurements to demonstrate how these might be incorporated into a Fourfold Vision approach as a component of Single Visioning.

I had also become more familiar with other writers, and I had developed a friendship with Nora Bateson, who was very generous with her feedback on my thinking, so I hoped to share some of my more recent insights in the paper. I brought in the voices of Tom Andersen, the Norwegian family therapist who wrote about intuition, and John Shotter, a psychologist and theorist (who also happened to be influenced by Tom Andersen), as I felt that intuition and thinking about the self of the therapist were very much neglected elements of the theory of systemic therapy.

In this paper are hints of the development in my thinking that would emerge later, particularly in the 'Think Different' paper published in 2022, where I began to articulate ideas about conscious purpose being destructive and I also attempted to elaborate upon the concepts of both Twofold and Threefold Vision.

I felt that this paper presented a cohesive overview of the Fourfold Vision approach, synthesising the visions offered by Blake with the areas of practice identified by Charlton that stemmed from his understanding of Bateson. I had linked the different visions to more understandable concepts by identifying the four types of vision as therapist as scientist (single), theorist (twofold), humanist (threefold) and artist (fourfold), as I wondered if the terminology might be hard to understand. I was pleased to be asked if a version of this paper might be translated into Portuguese and it was subsequently reprinted (with relevant permission) in *Nova Perspectiva Systêmica*, a Brazilian systemic therapy journal (Palmer, 2017a).

Paper Four: Where did the Eco go in Systemic Practice?

Following an Association for Family Therapy conference in Dunblane in 2017, I had participated in creating a network of systemic therapists who shared a mutual interest in ecological issues, and we communicated via email and a Facebook page. 2020 brought with it a pandemic and lockdowns, and in the spring of that year, a group of us met on a Zoom call to discuss our reactions to the lockdown and our reconnections with nature. By this time, Gail Simon had joined our group, and we discussed the possibility of an online workshop to consider and discuss ecological concerns from a systemic therapy perspective. This workshop was a success, leading to the proposal of an edition of *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice* focussed upon ecology and systemic practice.

My presentation for the workshop was predicated upon my belief that Bateson had hoped therapists with an appreciation of his cybernetic epistemology might also be open to thinking more systemically about environmental and ecological issues, yet there was little evidence that, collectively, we had done so. In fact, in my view, much of Bateson's contributions to our field had been neglected in favour of more action-orientated ideas.

I spent many hours researching mentions of ecology in systemic therapy literature and was surprised to discover that few writers had considered wider ecological issues, whereas many authors used the term 'ecology' to connote the ecology of the immediate family.

At the same time, I had been introduced to posthumanism (see Braidotti & Bignall, 2019) and new materialism (see van der Tuin & Dolphijn, 2010, or Simon & Salter, 2019); approaches that decentre humanity and avoid dualistic thinking. I wanted to demonstrate that these approaches - especially given the influence of Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) upon the evolution of posthumanism - were derived from Bateson's cybernetic epistemology. I introduced some posthumanist writers to the discussion and made comparisons between their thinking and that of Bateson, recognising that many of my peers in systemic therapy may not be familiar with writers such as Barad (2007), Braidotti (2019) or Haraway (2016).

I wished to acknowledge the painful breakdown of the relationship between Bateson and his Palo Alto colleagues, primarily over the issue of power, which almost certainly resulted with so much of his work being neglected by family therapists. Bateson wrote to Paul Watzlawick (cited in Harries-Jones, 1995 p. 28) following the publication of 'Pragmatics of Human Communication' (in which much of Bateson's work was

presented out of context) saying that "I used to wonder how the Kahunas [Hawaiian priests] feel when they see the carvings of their gods in the shop window of a travel bureau. Now I know . . . And the loot is sometimes correctly labelled as provenance. And the native has no comeback."

Similarly, while posthumanism shares Bateson's rejection of dualism, this is not attributed to him, instead dismissed by Deleuze and Guattari for his 'American career'. Shaw (2015 p.152) suggests that Deleuze and Guattari's criticism of Bateson "belies the depth of influence that Bateson had on their work...Concepts such as plateaus, rhizome, the double bind, ecosophical thought and schizoanalysis all appear to have their origins, at least in part, in the work of Bateson".

Part of the dilemma in writing this paper was to identify what systemic practitioners might be able to do themselves regarding ecological concerns. I had been able to critique the lack of attention paid to wider ecological concerns, but what could I suggest people do? I wanted to acknowledge Bateson and to remind colleagues, not only of his wisdom, but also the necessity for systemic practitioners to embrace systemic thinking in their personal lives, in addition to their therapeutic work, as an urgent response to the real threat of ecological collapse.

I had been introduced to the work and writing of Arne Næss, the Norwegian philosopher, by a colleague, Andreas Breden (an ecologically focused family therapist who works in Trondheim), and this was a revelation to me. Næss (2008) had described deep ecosophy and shallow ecosophy, and the more I read, I could see parallels with Bateson's cybernetic epistemology. Næss contrasted the mainstream shallow ecology movement with the deep ecology movement, which stresses the need for extensive changes in values and practices, especially in industrial nations. There is little evidence that Næss and Bateson knew each other, and they had very different origins – whereas Bateson was a scientist and anthropologist, Næss was a mountain climber and philosopher influenced by Spinoza and Gandhi.

I felt that Næss 's (2008) call to be active in the face of climate collapse was helpful, and this led to me coining the term *systemic activist* as an all-encompassing term that could include making changes in our personal and working lives, as well as more overt forms of activism. This is not entirely new; Midgley (1997) had called for political activism to become an essential element of systems practice in the 1990s, although his focus was on social policy and not therapy.

To retain a focus on systemic therapy, I removed a large section of an early draft of this PhD overview document in which I critiqued capitalism and dualistic thinking. This

material was eventually revised and enlarged to become "Think Different to Prevent Extinction" (Paper Five), published the following year.

Paper Five: "Think Different" to Prevent Extinction: Connecting Gregory Bateson's Cybernetic Epistemology with Posthumanism

This paper had been brewing inside me for some time. I was becoming increasingly frustrated with so many issues that all seemed to relate to what seemed to me to be a lack of collective wisdom in many cultures, particularly in the Global North.

As I was writing in the summer of 2022, we were experiencing record-breaking levels of heat in the UK, water companies were pumping raw sewage into waterways, billionaires were taking trips into space while food banks were becoming more numerous than McDonalds restaurants, and we were still reeling from the impact of Covid-19.

I think the pandemic had given me time and space to think, but contact with the outside world, particularly via social media, had left me feeling dispirited by the sheer amount of intolerance, deceit and selfishness that was commonplace. I also felt sad that we had been warned many years ago by Bateson that we were heading towards catastrophe unless we shifted the way we think, but no heed had been taken of his words. I wanted to write in a way that would make Bateson's thinking more accessible to other therapists; this was part of my activism, but also something deeply important to me.

Watching politicians using techniques from Neuro-Linguistic Programming to manipulate their audience led me to think about how systemically orientated therapies followed Haley and his belief in power (along with the influence of Milton Erickson) rather than the humble but precise footsteps of Bateson. So, while Keeney and Keeney might have been controversial in their 2012 paper, I agree with them that:

> He [Bateson] advocated non-participation and non-cooperation in the making of descriptions, explanations, or premises that were derivative of the metaphor of power. Family therapy, narrative therapy, and postmodern therapy never heard or responded to Bateson's call. It was as radical a challenge as the proponents of nonviolence must have seemed to social movements wanting to fight their oppressors with equivalent conceptual and physical tools. Bateson was discouraged by how he saw the metaphor of power organizing theories and practices of family therapy—especially when they also bantered about the metaphors of communication, systems, mind, cybernetics, the very ideas that he saw as an alternative to thinking in terms of power (Keeney & Keeney 2012 p. 25).

I utilised a paper entitled "The Roots of Ecological Crisis" (included in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 1972) to outline the drivers of ecological collapse, and to stress that changing the way we think is the only realistic route out of the predicament we face, as limiting technological advance and population control would only become likely (and acceptable) in the context of a different worldview.

Bateson maintained that how humans think, especially 'Occidentals' (to use his terminology), is deeply problematic. Our thinking is characterised by conscious purpose and dualistic thinking that, combined, Bateson termed hubris. I used my paper to identify how hubris has contributed to capitalism, climate change, and the potential schismogenesis (a term used by Bateson that means "creation of division") likely to emerge from a runaway complementary relationship between an increasingly wealthy minority and a growing poor minority (the extremes of wealth and poverty are clearly linked – see Robeyns, 2019).

At this point, it is worth noting that Bateson, along with many others, rejected what he called Descartes' mind-body dualism, and he viewed the work of Descartes as a decisive philosophical moment in the history of Western thought. However, Duncan (2000 p.509) argues that many such readings of Descartes have been selective and misleading, suggesting that "the reductionism of biomedical science may have some roots in Descartes' philosophy, but it is not sufficient to explain away that reductionism by a dismissive reference to Cartesian dualism".

Another significant element of this paper of mine was to further elaborate on the links between Bateson and post-humanist thinking, providing an overview of immanence, linking this with Bateson's (Bateson & Bateson, 1987) later thoughts on the sacred.

Since writing this paper, concerns about artificial intelligence (AI) have become a salient topic, and Sam Altman, co-founder of the start-up behind ChatGPT (an AI chat bot), warned about risks in his first appearance before US Congress, where he acknowledged that AI could cause significant harm to the world. He argued that the most immediate threat it can cause is damage to democracy and to our social fabric. He pointed out that highly personalised disinformation campaigns run at scale are now possible thanks to generative AI (Zang, 2023).

We are creating technology without the systemic wisdom to inquire into the possibility of currently unanticipated consequences (i.e., to broaden our range of anticipatory thinking, for example, see Poli 2019). AI has the potential to amplify the hubris and purposive thinking that Bateson refers to, particularly if AI developers and users do not consider the broader implications of their work. AI systems are typically designed to

optimise specific objectives, which can lead to unintended consequences if ethical considerations are not prioritised (Taeihagh, 2021). For instance, AI algorithms can inadvertently perpetuate biases and discrimination when trained on biased data (Varona & Suárez,2022).

This paper also was slightly edited and published online by the Secular Buddhist network: https://secularbuddhistnetwork.org/think-different-to-prevent-extinction-the-value-of-gregory-batesons-cybernetic-epistemology-and-posthumanism-for-a-secular-dharma/

Paper Six: Systemic thinking and the myth of power

I wrote this paper to consolidate my thinking around power and Fourfold Vision, and I took the opportunity to present some of the more recent influences upon my thinking, particularly links with posthumanism. I also began to think of how Fourfold Vision might offer a route for others to imagine a way of thinking and living that could enable the adoption of an embodied, personal, cybernetic epistemology. I argued that Bateson's view that power is a myth in relationships and mental processes is central to his cybernetic epistemology and took the opportunity to note that, as someone who has experienced being bullied and sexually abused, I could understand the critique of Bateson's position, and used this double bind as an opportunity to become more creative.

I used Fourfold Vision in the paper to illustrate (using a typical but fictional situation of domestic abuse) how understanding the context of domestic violence requires us to look beyond the household where the abuse is happening to see how violence is used to control and coerce others in national and international contexts. I argued that 'power' is not the problem; instead, how we are encouraged by predominantly dualistic Western discourses to think about our relationships with each other is our collective problem, and there are some resonances with Foucault's (1976) understanding of power;

"Power is everywhere: not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere…power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (Foucault, 1976 p.93).

Within the paper, I acknowledged and attempted to answer the seemingly legitimate criticisms of Bateson's position on power. Not only had the rift between Haley and Bateson diminished Bateson's influence upon family therapy, but so too did the feminist critique (Goldner 1985, MacKinnon & Miller, 1987), which understandably argued that to deny the reality of power in relationships was to deny the suffering of those oppressed by violence or coercion, with the added potential risk of therapists appearing to 'side' with perpetrators of abuse and violence, or see the abused as equally constructing an abusive situation with the perpetrator.

Of course, the answer to this criticism is not straightforward because it requires a deeper understanding of Bateson's epistemology and recognition that, by only adopting a few elements of Bateson's contributions, his ideas were shoehorned into a lineal,

dualistic epistemology and, therefore, out of their original context, lost much of their meaning.

If everybody adopted a cybernetic epistemology (or Deep Ecosophy), then concepts of power, control and, therefore, abuse and inequality would be redundant. Unfortunately, as long as humans adopt dualistic thinking, we shall continue to hurt each other, other species and our environment; a view and concern that is repeated in much of Bateson's writing, and a significant impetus in my own writing, too. Perhaps the posthumanist shift towards non-anthropocentrism, as noted by Hupkes and Hedman (2022), gives some cause for optimism.

Since writing my paper, Won (2022) has also attempted to grasp the thorny issue of power from Bateson's perspective. He believes that Bateson suggested that power itself doesn't inherently lead to harmful secondary effects, but failing to put mechanisms in place to prevent such outcomes inadvertently strengthens pre-existing feedback loops that allow power to remain unregulated. Essentially, unchecked expansion of a specific, inflexible set of rules or principles can result in catastrophic consequences, including environmental crises, social and political upheaval, and economic turbulence. This blindness to and inaction towards the uncontrolled escalation of the concept of power results in a setting of misplaced connections that confound our understanding and awareness, something Bateson considered harmful to both scientific and social clarity.

While it might be convenient to suggest that Bateson considered power to be an epistemological error (Flaskas and Humphries, 1993), belief in power (in the context of relationships) is merely one of many symptoms of an impoverished, dualistic epistemology.

This issue of Bateson's position on power and the reasons that family therapy did not adequately address the topic was covered by Flaskas and Humphries (1993 p.2), who wrote:

> The first theme is that the concept of power is an epistemological error, that one individual cannot hold unilateral power over another because people are always subject to the constraints of being part of a relationship (Bateson, 1972, p.486). Power became defined as a lineal concept that failed to grasp the systemic nature of the world. The second and connected theme is Bateson's idea that a punctuation of the world, using the notion of power, is potentially unethical and toxic in its effects (Bateson, 1972, p. 486). It is clear that the theoretical and political position expressed

in these two themes not only precludes further theorizing about power, but, in fact, actively censors the concept of power; hence, there is an absence in Bateson's own work of any further consideration of power and its effects.

They go on to offer an alternative view based on the writing of Michel Foucault to underline the need for family therapy to abandon the restrictions of Bateson's ideas on power, and to tackle the task of family therapy developing its own knowledge, influenced by a Foucauldian understanding of power. They suggest that the essential ideas to hold are the ideas of the "productive potential of power, the notion of power as relational, the need to study power in the context of the specific social relationships in which it occurs, and the possibility of resistance" (Flaskas & Humphries, 1993 p. 5). I have to accept that this is still a reasonable position, given that dualistic thinking, where power can (and does) exist, is endemic in the Global North.

Reflections on Fourfold Vision: Power, Control, Second Order and the Sacred

As a systemic psychotherapist I think that it is important to acknowledge that my writing has largely focussed upon the field of systemic family therapy. My writing was principally intended for psychotherapists, and although it may have relevance for practitioners from other disciplines, it should be borne in mind by readers that the sources I have used are largely drawn from systemic therapy literature, as well of course, writing by, and about Gregory Bateson. Therefore, my understanding of some principles, for example, first and second order cybernetics, are from family therapy practice. I am aware of the much wider range of disciplines that are informed by systemic and cybernetic theory, but my emphasis is on what Christy (2016) terms 'Cyber II' which focuses upon communication within natural ecosystems, including human systems, rather than the 'Cyber I' focus upon control mechanisms and feedback loops.

I believe that Bateson hoped that those mental health professionals open to his ideas would heed his warnings about wider systemic concerns and accept our responsibilities towards achieving clarity about our role and thinking about the "massive aggregation of threats to man and his ecological systems arises out of errors in our habits of thought at deep and partly unconscious levels" (Bateson, 1972, p. 493).

Few systemic therapy theorists have dared to challenge the paradox of Bateson being lauded as one of the 'founding fathers' of the discipline of systemic family therapy, yet most of his ideas were either neglected or discarded. Maria Nichterlein, in her (2013) Doctoral Thesis does consider this paradox, identifying Jay Haley's close connection with Milton Erickson (ironically introduced to the Palo Alto group by Bateson), a psychiatrist known for his hypnotic and strategic approaches to helping patients, and she describes how the emerging relationship between Haley and Erickson contributed to a theoretical discrepancy within the group, primarily regarding what Bateson considered to be attempts to control or manipulate patients. This ultimately led to the rupture of the Palo Alto group, and Bateson, disillusioned by the arguments over power and control, eventually left to go and study porpoise communication in Hawaii. Nichterlein (2013) notes that Bateson did not consider this to be a rupture in his research as he stated: "I am still investigating the same problems that I was investigating then, but the psychiatric data are no longer at the core of the questing" (Bateson, 1991, p. 193).

It is also worth noting here that Bateson was concerned about what he perceived to be a degree of reductionism within the emerging applications of his ideas. He had expressed some reservations regarding the premature writing on the double bind and was upset with the publication of Pragmatics of Human Communication (Watzlawick et al., 1967) which he not only considered it to be a 'theft' of some of his ideas (Lipsett, 1980), but, more significantly in the book's conception of communication as some kind of pragmatic tool. Bateson (cited in Harries-Jones, 1995) following the publication of the book, sent a letter to Haley regarding their different views on power:

> For me it brings back all the bitterness and agony of being unable to get my point across to you. I guess you thought that every move I made was a 'power' play. I assumed, of course, that a year or two of working in our project would be sufficient to convince you that 'power' is a cultural myth based upon an anti-cybernetic position (in Harries-Jones 1995, p. 272).

Following the departure of Bateson, Haley developed what came to be known as strategic family therapy and later went on to work with Salvador Minuchin who developed structural family therapy. Both approaches, it should be noted, privileged therapist responsibility for change, as well as locating the family system as the (discrete) area of interest.

Keeney and Keeney (2012) made similar observations to Nichterlein regarding those early days, noting that family therapy's early embrace of the metaphor of power led to practices that valued competition and manipulation, arguing that these ideas were not only evident in practice but also in professional discourses. They went on to criticise proponents of simple cybernetics who held on to ideas of circular interaction rather than allowing the circularities of interaction to guide their circular participation. Like Nichterlein, they also critiqued later postmodern advocates of higher order cybernetics who did not seem to embody its circularity, but instead began to prefer non-circular interpretive discourse that "highlighted endless commentary, reflection, conversation, and description of observations and observations of observations" (Keeney and Keeney 2012 p. 26).

Lynn Hoffman, whose (1993) book 'Exchanging Voices' marked family therapy's turn towards postmodernism, comes under vehement (arguably discourteous) criticism from Keeney and Keeney (2012 p.27) who, after demolishing her misinterpretation of first vs second order cybernetics, went on to suggest that she

> …further debased cybernetics by her corrupted definitions of its basic terms, such as 'control,' which in her discourse is trivialized to mean a

desire for unilateral control over or manipulation of others, rather than a way of indicating a system's organizational stability. Her criticism of the early systemic models of family therapy would be comedic if it weren't for the fact that other therapists took it seriously, as she demonized interactively organized therapists as dominators of control who treat others as trivial machines non-engendered by complex relational and contextual concerns.

Keeney was a significant voice in debates about epistemology within the family therapy community that ensued in the years immediately following the death of Bateson, and his book "Aesthetics of Change" (Keeney, 1983) was a notable attempt to formulate Bateson's cybernetic epistemology for therapists. Keeney and Keeney (2012 p.28) argue that second-order cybernetics was misinterpreted within our discipline, noting Gordon Pask's (1996) observation that second-order cybernetics emphasises participant observers who all interact, and they remind therapists that, in our practice, "the observation of pathology, problems, solutions, resources, patterns of interaction, narratives, and meanings are inseparable from the actions of the therapist".

Therapy, from a second order perspective, could be considered the 'therapy of therapy'; where first-order cybernetics asked us to take responsibility for changing the client and second-order cybernetics requires us to change ourselves to facilitate change in others. However, I am becoming to believe that, to Bateson, immersion within a second order position means something far more profound that taking a position on a topic or a therapeutic encounter– it connects with what he began to term the 'sacred'. If, in second order cybernetics, the observer is part of the system being observed, in an immanent world, then the observer is part of everything.

Bateson's last book, Angels Fear (1987) was written in a period following a cancer diagnosis (which then went into remission for a short period before returning) and the book was completed by Mary Catherine Bateson following his death. The book is subtitled "Towards an epistemology of the Sacred" and he wrote (Bateson & Bateson 1987 p.64):

> As I write this book, I find myself still between the Scylla of established materialism, with its quantitative thinking, applied science, and 'controlled' experiments on one side, and the Charybdis of romantic supernaturalism on the other. My task is to explore whether there is a sane and valid place for religion somewhere between these two nightmares of nonsense. Whether, if neither muddle-headedness nor hypocrisy is necessary to religion, there might be found in knowledge and in art the basis to support

an affirmation of the sacred that would celebrate natural unity. Would such a religion offer a new kind of unity? And could it breed a new and badly needed humility?

This echoes the writing of the Norwegian ecologist Arne Næss (2008), influenced by Spinoza, who envisioned the sacred as being a recognition of, and reverence towards, an immanent universe. In Bateson's epistemology, this is a universe in which we are active participants, a universe that influences and shapes us, and is simultaneously influenced and shaped by us, yet can never be fully known or understood. Thus, an immanent second order position is one of humility; an appreciation of being part of an infinite, connected universe that both influences and is influenced by us.

Lowell Christy (2016) suggested that the birth of Cybernetics resulted in twins, labelling the first twin 'Cyber I,' primarily concerned with control mechanisms and feedback loops. This aspect of Cybernetics spurred the development of various technological advances such as guided missiles, robots, computers, and drones. Cyber I quickly gained favour, sustained by substantial investments, including military research funding. As a result, engineering education increasingly focused on systems design and dynamics, but this trajectory also reinforced existing assumptions about cybernetics and sustaining the power structures of human organisations.

In contrast, the second twin, termed by Christy 'Cyber II,' embodies a quite different orientation, prioritising communication within natural ecosystems, including human systems. Christy observes that Cyber II's growth has been stunted, lacking the recognition, funding, and institutional support afforded to its more (arguably) mechanistic counterpart.

Gregory Bateson cautioned against exclusively focussing on the control-oriented twin, anticipating that an imbalance could lead to the creation of systems so efficient and fast-paced that humanity would struggle to comprehend and manage their implications, potentially resulting in systemic collapse and conflict. His prophecy of such collapses, has increasingly manifested since the turn of the millennium, leading to what Simon (2021, p.91) terms the 'panmorphic crisis' of climate, economic and societal collapse.

The Fourfold Vision I envisaged was intended to provide an entry for others (primarily systemic therapists) into thinking more systemically about themselves and their practice, as an invitation rather than an injunction, and with an acceptance that people will necessarily discover their own ways to integrate (or operationalise) these ideas into their lives and work. Chaney (2017 p. 66) echoes Bateson's distaste with attempts to

'apply' his thinking when contrasting his position with that of Margaret Mead at the time their marriage was ending:

> She [Mead] was recognized as a personage, a leader. In contrast, Bateson's former ambivalence concerning the application of science—that conflict between what he had done and what he believed—was over for good. He would henceforth always avoid any pressure to seek applications of his thought, often strenuously, and almost always against the tide.

Christy notes that "To advance and actually accomplish Heinz von Foerster's stated objective of a 2nd order therapeutic Cybernetics to overcome 2nd order pathologies of society requires that we move beyond academic infighting and post-modern deconstructionism" and goes on to ask, "How do we enter the world of Cybernetics and Systems from the living side of the equation and leap over the great wall of Cybernetics - the observed/observer dichotomy?"

Fourfold Vision represents a move towards making these ideas more accessible and intelligible to systemic family therapists who have trained, and practice, within a discipline where Bateson's contribution might be considered more of a vestige than a legacy. However, my intention was not to create a checklist, nor a means to operationalise Bateson's thinking into a therapeutic model, but rather an invitation towards an aesthetic approach that is not a detached practice of contemplation, but instead a committed and engaged ethical way of being that acknowledges the sacredness of life and the inability of the conscious mind to fully comprehend, let alone control it.

Towards Fourfold Vision

The Fourfold Vision concept emerged partly from my attempts to understand why Bateson didn't like the idea of 'power' regarding relationships, but I also wanted to understand Bateson not just as a scientist and theoretician but as the empathic and humble human being who emerged from recordings, writings and the accounts of those who knew him. I sought to find a means to articulate the importance of being human in therapy and address the comparative lack of attention paid to the 'self of the therapist' by the discipline of family therapy.

David Lipset's (1980) biography provided a rich seam of anecdote that contributed to a sense of Bateson being 'human' and open about himself with the families and patients he worked with, and further, that he abhorred strategic attempts to influence or coerce

others. These insights were revelatory to me. Despite my long-time interest in Bateson, I had not previously seen any mention of these issues within systemic family therapy literature; however, they also left me with the problem of establishing a structure within which I could incorporate them that might help make Bateson's thinking more accessible to colleagues.

Regarding Bateson's being 'human' with patients, I was drawn to Charlton's (2008 p.94) suggestion in his overview of the evolution of Bateson's ideas that 'Humanist, scientist, artist and theoretician are all needed to form the cybernetic unity of healing.' These four positions of humanist, scientist, artist, and theoretician offered the potential for a framework that could incorporate the idea of being 'human' along with other qualities required for therapeutic practice.

Bateson, Blake and Fourfold vision

Lipset (2005 p.909) noted that Bateson was 'deeply absorbed by the poetry and symbolism of William Blake', commenting that he had grown up in a home with many original works by the poet and artist. Bateson often quoted Blake, and I wonder if the non-dualistic thinking evident in Blake's work (Freeman, 1997) influenced Gregory Bateson's cybernetic epistemology.

Donaldson used William Blake's 'Fourfold Vision' quote (see page 1) from the letter Blake wrote to Thomas Butts in 1802 at the start of the introduction to the collection of Bateson's papers he edited (Bateson 1991 p. ix) and within this collection, Bateson himself quoted 'May God us keep From Single Vision & Newton's sleep!' from the same letter to Butts at the beginning of his paper 'The New Conceptual Frames for Behavioral Research' (Bateson, 1991, p. 93). I had not recalled these quotes (at least, not consciously), and my stumbling across Blake's Fourfold Vision was serendipitous, but the concepts of Single, Twofold, Threefold, and Fourfold Vision did seem to be a fitting framework to locate the positions of scientist, theoretician, humanist and artist.

On reflection, my earlier papers provided insufficient evidence of the theoretical development behind this transposition, so at this point, it will be helpful to revisit Blake's work and call upon more current scholars to illuminate the connections between Blake's Fourfold Vision and the Charlton/Bateson positions of scientist, theoretician, humanist, and artist.

Bateson frequently referred to the poetry of William Blake to illustrate how imagination can become part of our faculties of perception. Blake had insisted on the importance of the 'eye' of imagination entering our processes of perception; instead of simply

perceiving 'with the eye,' we perceive 'through the eye'. This is a subtle but profound shift away from standard scientific interpretation of perception. Harries-Jones (1995, p. 265) believed that "Bateson took Blake's point to mean that poets raise submerged features of the unconscious as an aid to our conscious understanding" adding "The artistic imagination fitted particular parts of the content of submerged consciousness. Blake, he noted, had even written about the need to correct conscious interpretation through a synthesis of the polarities of consciousness and the imaginary."

Skar (2020 p.2), writes, "William Blake's mythic system is designed to change the way we think and see, to lead us into a world where imagination and ferocious forgiveness are social structuring principles", and I would argue that Bateson shared those same values, and this becomes even more evident in his later work, when he was grappling with his own mortality.

Blake frequently mentioned the Fourfold nature of man and used different terminology to describe these aspects, notably Single Vision being 'Ulro' (also Satan), Twofold Vision being 'Generation', Threefold being 'Beulah' and Fourfold being both 'Eden' and 'Eternity'. In his seminal work on Blake, Frye (1947 p. 67) explains that:

> As Ulro is a single and Generation a double world, so Beulah is triple, the world of lover, beloved and mutual creation; the father, the mother and the child…This world therefore is Fourfold, expanding to infinity like the four points of the compass which in this world point to the indefinite.

Sklar (2007, p. 33) notes that "…all things must be quantifiable. Ulro is an empirical universe in which everything can be expressed mathematically. Objective reality is the only reality", and she also notes that in Blake's poem, Milton, "the movement from Ulro's mathematical 'Single Vision' to divine wholeness is an *aesthetic* shift (my italics)". In her overview of the elements of Fourfold Vision (Sklar, 2020 p. 6) proposes:

> In Ulro [Single Vision], that which can't be expressed quantitatively does not exist. The state of Generation [Twofold Vision] is more organic, a cyclical state, a productive world filled with cycles of birth and copulation and death…Blake's Beulah is a resting place, where erotic bliss can flourish. If the bliss of Beulah is blighted by what Blake calls Selfhood it can fall into reductive Generation and/or Ulro, reducing the beloved to an object, a thing to be controlled. But when Selfhood is annihilated, Beulah is a launching pad into the state called Eden/Eternity [Fourfold Vision], where all living things interconnect in the sensuous divine body.

According to the Blake dictionary (Damon, 2013), Single Vision is seeing with the physical eye only the facts before it. In contrast, Twofold Vision is seeing 'through' the eye: it is the perception of values in all things and reveals a universe which is entirely different from that of Single Vision. The one is imaginative, the other materialistic. Threefold Vision 'in soft Beulah's night' is the creative state, where thought appears in emotional form. According to Damon, Fourfold Vision, 'my supreme delight,' is mystical ecstasy, such as the one Blake described to Butts.

Philip Pullman (2014), (the author of the 'His Dark Materials' trilogy and a notable Blake scholar), writing in The Guardian, observed that:

> Fourfold Vision is a state of ecstatic or mystical bliss. Threefold Vision arises naturally from Beulah, which, in Blake's mythology, is the place of poetic inspiration and dreams…Twofold Vision is seeing not only with the eye, but through it, seeing contexts, associations, emotional meanings, connections. Single Vision is the literal, rational, dissociated, uninflected view of the world characteristic, apparently, of the left hemisphere of the brain when the contextualising, empathetic, imaginative, emotionally involved right brain is disengaged or ignored.

Wilson (2023, p.59), offers a view of Blake that is consistent with Bateson's vision of a shared 'sacred unity' and further, that this shared shift in perspective is a necessary move for us:

> The central paradox of Blake's reception is that this expanded vision, in which everything is drawn into a unity, is imagined by many of his readers today to be a personal matter of achieving insight and psychic integration. But a divine unity of one is an oxymoron, and Blake's fire in the mind can only really take off if it becomes a general conflagration. In other words, it must become a shared vision and a shared perspective: it must become a counter-culture to the dominant Urizenic necro-culture.

Wilson sets a similar challenge to Bateson; creating a shared vision of immanence and moving towards a counterculture that rejects the destructiveness of a dualistic mind set. I believe that Fourfold Vision can offer a route, or at the least, a reflexive tool, towards this goal.

Returning to Fourfold Vision

Initially, I envisaged Fourfold Vision as a vehicle to think about different contextual levels – from the focus on details of Single Vision to the widening focus of contexts, connections and theories of Twofold Vision, including the self of the therapist in Threefold Vision, with Fourfold Vision emerging as an aesthetic 'whole' from the interplay between Single, Twofold and Threefold Visioning. While this is certainly still the case, I also feel that a Fourfold Vision approach has the potential to support reflexive processes that can contribute to a meaningful and transformative sense of connection with others.

Single Vision

Blake termed Single Vision as 'Newton's sleep' and Newton's name functions as a heuristic for the act of scraping the holy from nature and diminishing the natural world to a mechanical universe, reduced to scientific laws, and certainly not infused with the divine. This is a world of objective rationality without beauty – or mind, as Bateson (1991, p.170), recalling Wordsworth, wrote:

> When you see a primrose on the river's brim, what do you actually see?
> The quote is, "A primrose by a river's brim, a yellow primrose was to him,
> and it was nothing more." On the other hand, if you see a primrose and it is
> something more, aesthetically, then I suspect that the primrose contains
> formal characteristics of symmetry, imperfect symmetry, complex
> interwoven patterning, and so forth, which indicate that the primrose itself is
> a mentally governed piece of morphogenesis, and that the aesthetic thing is
> a recognition of that, for better or worse, for beauty or ugliness. This is one
> of the matters I'm now rather interested in.

Perhaps Bateson was echoing Blake, who wrote 'A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees' and Preston (2018) observes that the only answer to what is a 'tree' in its totality can only be answered through Fourfold Vision, noting that a physicalist will only see the 'what' that comprises the physical and objective elements of a tree – wood, leaves and so on. He tells us that a biologist would additionally see the chemical and biological processes that sustain the tree and that a philosopher instead might be interested in the 'why' of a tree, while a poet or the prophet might see the spiritual form or mode of manifestation of the tree, as symbolic form. He adds that a materialist must consciously suppress any supposedly "non-objective" properties of the tree; the poetic or philosophic must be subdued, and this suppression is what Blake denounces as "Single Vision & Newton's sleep".

Single Vision is a place of binaries, analogous to the sort of dualistic, first-order perspective that is characterised by the consciously purposive thinking that Bateson decried as 'hubris' – at least when it is the prevalent way of thinking. He called this 'conscious purpose' – to simply be concerned with details, getting from 'a' to 'b' without consideration of the wider, systemic implications of an action, noting that 'mere purposive rationality, unaided by such phenomena as art, religion, dream and the like, is necessarily pathogenic and destructive of life' (Bateson, 1972, p.155).

Despite Blake's plea to God to be saved from Single Vision, it remains nevertheless, a necessary element of the Fourfold Vision approach. I would not be able to drive a car safely without the focus on detail and activity that is Single Vision. Conscious purpose and dualism both have their uses; without the ability to be rational and objective we wouldn't have been able to make the scientific and technological advances we have achieved as a species. However, because we have not always attended to the wider contexts (or Blake's Visions) of our advances; along with the useful gadgets we have also created the apparatus for our own destruction.

Single vision, then, involves 'zooming in' to focus on details and components of a subject and emphasises the close examination of constituent elements that can help deepen understanding of the components of a system.

Twofold Vision

As an element of Fourfold Vision, Twofold Vision involves the process of 'zooming out' to explore relationships between elements and the theoretical connections that can be made or emerge. It encourages the consideration of connections between different elements and the broader context in which they exist.

Twofold Vision is 'Generation' for Blake, but also 'seeing through the eye' and holding two contrary positions simultaneously. Blake considered that it is not the physical eye that enables what we see, but the mind's eye; in other words, the retina, optic nerve and brain are the servants, not masters, of perception. This links with Bateson's 'double description' and he suggests that "the two-eyed way of seeing is itself an act of comparison" (Bateson, 1979, p. 87) which involves taking account of both similarities and differences between compared elements.

Twofold Vision incorporates first-order thinking and positioning as it is very much about relationships and connections between 'parts', and it is possible to believe 'as if' one is a detached observer of the relationships within a given system. Second-order thinking is also (to limited extent) part of Twofold Vision when an observer (or therapist)

acknowledges that they themselves are part of the system of interest, but this is limited to the immediate context. A crucial distinction is that Twofold thinking about taking a second-order position in the context of working with a family – i.e. "family + therapist = new system" is vastly different from the Fourfold second-order experience of continuous connection with every other entity in the universe.

Threefold Vision

Threefold Vision is Blake's 'Beulah', who represents the realm of the subconscious; the source of poetic inspiration and of dreams (Damon, 2013), whose daughters are described by Blake as the Muses of creativity in his poem, Milton.

Significantly, Bateson came to view consciousness and conscious purposes as the source of, not the solution to, people's troubles in the modern world (Bateson, 1972). He felt that a reliance on consciousness and conscious purposes narrows possibilities and cuts off the direct responsiveness to psychic life; and it could be argued that such narrowing has been (and demonstrably continues to be) a cause of the destruction, by humans, of the physical environment and the balance of nature. Threefold Vision perhaps offers a route into embracing unconscious elements, but also is the place of the imaginal, as defined by Corbin (1972), who identified a facet of Sufi practice that involved the contemplation of the *alam al-mithal*, a world created by the visual imagination that has an independent existence between the physical and spiritual.

I also consider Threefold Vision to signify the 'self' of the therapist, a self that incorporates both conscious and unconscious elements of personal experience, knowledge and intuitions that are continuously present throughout any given interaction of situation. In this framework, Threefold Vision emphasises that these individual perspectives and insights consistently inform and direct the exploration of details (Single Vision) and relationships/theories (Twofold Vision).

Fourfold Vision

Fourfold Vision emerges from the aesthetic (Sklar, 2020) interplay between Single, Twofold and Threefold Vision. Blake also termed this state 'Eden' or 'Eternity.' I initially interpreted Fourfold to convey the overarching aesthetic and ethical process that integrates insights gained from Single, Twofold, and Threefold Vision; a more holistic understanding emerging from the dynamic interplay of focusing upon details, exploring relationships, and incorporating personal experiences, intuitions and imagination. I now additionally believe that Fourfold Vision represents, as Sklar (2007, p. 33) tells us "...a state called Eden/Eternity, where all living things interconnect in the sensuous divine

body", a concept which connects very closely with Bateson's 'Sacred Unity' that describes the lived experience (and realisation) of everything being connected in an immanent universe.

Fourfold Vision then, is to experience life from a second-order position; perceiving something sacred, even spiritual, in the interconnected, immanent totality of nature, like that imagined by Spinoza, or in James Lovelock's (1979) Gaia. It is not simply 'thinking systemically' but to begin to *live* systemically.

In effect, Fourfold Vision is an expression of second-order cybernetics as not merely a theoretical position, but a way of living with an awareness of the interconnectedness of everything, including the self, in the universe. Bateson hinted at this wider take on a second-order position in his comments regarding Lake Erie when he suggests "…if Lake Erie is driven insane, its insanity is incorporated in the larger system of your thought and experience" (Bateson, 1972, p. 492).

My own experiences of Fourfold Vision have had a profound impact on my personal and professional life and continue to do so. I see this as an emerging practice, or discipline, akin to meditation.

Fourfold Vision: A Pathway to Systemic Thinking for Therapists?

Used as a reflective practice, Fourfold Vision connects with Donald Schön's (1992) idea of the 'reflective practitioner' and the importance of reflective practice in professional learning and development. Reflection-in-action enable professionals to reshape the situation or activity on which they are working while it is unfolding, and reflection-on-action is retrospective, where a practitioner explores what happened *after* a particular situation, why they acted as they did, whether they could have acted differently, and so on.

The continuous process of 'zooming in' (Single Vision) and 'zooming out' (Twofold Vision) echoes the ongoing process of reflection-in-action. This dynamic engagement with details and relationships suggests an active, on-the-fly reflexivity as the practitioner navigates through an activity. Threefold Vision being a constant process throughout aligns with Schön's emphasis on using both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, where personal experiences, intuitions, and feelings continuously inform and shape the exploration of details, relationships and theory.

As a recursive, iterative process within which individuals can continuously revisit and refine their ideas, Fourfold Vision resonates with Schön's view that learning is an ongoing, cyclical process that involves both doing and reflecting. The integration of Single, Twofold, and Threefold Vision into Fourfold Vision echoes Schön's notion that effective practitioners possess a holistic understanding of their practice, integrating technical knowledge with personal values and experiences. Fourfold Vision can be used by therapists as an 'in vivo' structure to reflect in action, and to reflect on action individually, or within a supervisory context, to develop their systemic thinking and practices.

I wonder how the discipline of family therapy might have evolved had we based our theories and practices on Bateson's epistemology, rather than discarding non-dualistic thinking in favour of the ideas of control that became dominant before they were, in turn, rejected when social constructionist thinking took centre stage. My hope is that Fourfold Vision might offer some insights into a sort of ethical therapeutic practice that Bateson might approve of – characterised by therapists who are humble and non-coercive, willing to be honest about themselves, accept that they will be changed as much as their clients by the process, less bound to rigid models and approaches and more able to improvise. Keeney and Keeney (2012 p. 33) note:

> All schools of therapy are actually the same: prescriptions to follow
> someone else's arbitrary rules rather than being more flexibly responsive to

what each session invites. This is a call to higher order ethics that is
grounded in situatedness rather than a moralistic framework

As a reflexive practice, Fourfold Vision can help encourage therapists to develop their own flexible responsiveness to the clients they serve.

Beyond clinical work with clients, I believe that Bateson's (1972) call for clarity, ecological awareness, and the reinforcement of sanity offers a compelling directive for therapists in today's context of multiple crises. He highlighted the need for clarity among therapists as our first duty, and this clarity is not simply about continuous *professional* development, but rather striving towards developing a deeper *personal* understanding of the sort of cybernetic epistemology he proposed.

Fourfold Vision has broader implications than an aide to reflecting upon clinical practice, or even thinking about ecology and practice. Undertaking this work has precipitated some profound changes for me, and I have had glimpses of a very different universe to the one I thought I inhabited; to experience an aesthetic Fourfold Vision is both humbling and strangely reassuring. It is a lived sense of being connected to every other entity in existence - past, present and future. This reminds me of the Einstein quote "For those of us who believe in physics, the distinction between past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion" and Blake's remarkably similar "I see the past, present, and future, existing all at once/Before me" in Jerusalem (1804).

From this perspective, every other entity is kin - a brother or sister, which organises my position in relation to them as equals whose autonomy requires consideration and respect. This has implications not only for therapeutic practice with clients, but for how to live a life that is respectful of all creatures and entities.

Conclusion

Writing this overview document for my thesis has been both challenging and rewarding but has uncovered my lack of exposure to the wider systemic community, as most of my past reading was drawn from the systemic therapy literature. This is perhaps reflective of what seems to be a general divide between systemic therapy and other systemic disciplines and suggests the need for more (systemic) interdisciplinary collaboration.

The Fourfold Vision approach would benefit from further qualitative exploration and research into its application, and to assess what value it might offer therapists. There is a potential for other disciplines to adopt this approach. Integrating the concept of immanence with second-order cybernetics offers a comprehensive view of a unified reality where there is no separation between the observer and the observed, the system and its environment, or the 'divine' and the material. While this may be a debatable position, and worthy of further exploration and critique, it aligns with Bateson's idea of a sacred unity, where in an immanent world, second-order cybernetics extends beyond specific systems of interest to include all of reality. Every system, from the smallest microbe to the largest galaxy, is part of this unified whole.

At times, I find myself in a similar place to Bateson, who wrote a few years before his death, that

> …I have driven myself, over the years, into a 'place' where conventional dualistic statements of mind/body relations - the conventional dualisms of Darwinism, psychoanalysis, and theology - are absolutely unintelligible to me. It is becoming as difficult for me to understand dualists as it is for them to understand me (1977, p. 236).

However, I still have hope, and like Bateson, can envisage a future where humanity appreciates and respects the complex web of interconnections that weave us all into an intricate tapestry extending beyond our species. He hoped for a world steeped in mutual, respectful and interdependent coexistence, where impulses to dominate or control are alien. This, perhaps, represent the sacred unity he sought for us all, that if realised, could transform our relationships with each other and our world, replacing notions of control and power with a humble appreciation for the complex, beautiful and fragile ecological dance in which we are all participants.

Bateson foresaw the multiple disasters facing humanity and many of the species and ecosystems on Earth, and his view was that of the three drivers of ecological crisis (population increase, technological progress and hubristic thinking), the only factor amenable to change would be to address the way we think. Fourfold Vision is an invitation for others to begin to think differently, whether it be to adopt a personal version of Bateson's cybernetic epistemology, Næss 's Deep Ecosophy, Buddhist practice or other ways of thinking and being in the world that recognise the interconnectedness of everything.

11013 words

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Appendix 1

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