Leadership and Steinbeck’s ‘non-teleological thinking’

A framework for embodying emergence in visioning

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Abstract

Uncertainty is an inherent attribute of emergence. This makes the traditional approaches for envisioning a desired future state not only ineffective but often grossly misleading. The unexpected crashes of the financial markets, for example, proved devastating for several organizations. This paper proposes an entirely different way of engaging with emergent reality based upon the ideas introduced by John Steinbeck and hopes to stimulate further research in this field.

Introduction

Once we accept a complexity based structure of reality, it becomes quite clear that extrapolating trends or relying upon simple causal relationships would be a risky way to formulate a vision for future. The movements in disparate arenas may come together to birth a qualitatively different future where actions and choices of the past would no longer be effective. In this paper, we propose a framework for envisioning future based on ‘non-teleological thinking’, a concept introduced by Steinbeck in his book, ‘The Log from the Sea of Cortez’. Steinbeck contrasts teleological thinking from non-teleological thinking as follows:

What we personally conceive by the term “teleological thinking,” is most frequently associated with the evaluating of causes and effects, the purposiveness of events. This kind of thinking considers changes and cures—what “should be” in the terms of an end pattern (which is often a subjective or an anthropomorphic projection); it presumes the bettering of conditions, often, unfortunately, without achieving more than a most superficial understanding of those conditions. In their sometimes intolerant refusal to face facts as they are, teleological notions may substitute a fierce but ineffectual attempt to change conditions which are assumed to be undesirable, in place of the understanding and acceptance which would pave the way for a more sensible attempt at any change which might still be indicated. Non-teleological ideas derive through “is” thinking, associated with natural selection as Darwin seems to have understood it. They imply depth, fundamentalism, and clarity—seeing beyond traditional or personal projections. They consider events as outgrowths and expressions rather than as results; conscious acceptance as a desideratum, and certainly as an all-important prerequisite. Non-teleological thinking concerns itself primarily not with what should be, or could be, or might be, but rather with what actually “is”— attempting at most to answer the already sufficiently difficult questions what or how, instead of why.

Philosophers have for centuries argued over the limits of the human capacity to see reality as it truly is, or the ‘isness’ of reality. Plato’s famous cave allegory shows the human predicament to be similar to that of the cave dwellers, so confined in their seats that they are forced to construct a view of reality based on observing the shadows on the back wall of the cave. Plato did go on to say that with some extensive training and an ascetic life, it maybe possible for a fortunate few to be able to see the ‘Forms’ that may transcend the reality constructed from observing shadows. His academy was founded on this premise, however, there isn’t much evidence that the pupils of the academy were able to ascend to this level of seeing reality. Even before Plato came along, there were Vedic philosophers in India that posited the concept of ‘Maya’, a distorted view of reality, the only view that human sensory mechanisms were capable of accessing. Descartes proposed a similar notion, he suspected that the human senses were used by demons to conspire against the ability to see true reality. Nietzsche proposed the notion of ‘perspectives’ and went on to say that not only are human beings limited to viewing partial reality but that this partial view is engineered by an overarching field that he referred to as ‘the Will to Power’. The human ability to see reality, or rather the lack of it, is perhaps one of the few subjects most philosophical traditions agree on.

Now that our neuroscientists have the ability to observe neural activity in real time, they have come up with interesting insights into the complexity of how we sense reality and all of the opportunities for distortion and curtailment that pop up along the way. Dr. Ramachandran et al have described such insights into a research paper titled, ‘A Pure Critique of Vision’. Vision is selected in this paper as the dominant sense perception mechanism, however, the other sense mechanisms show similar processing distortions and complexity. In the first 5-10 milliseconds of visual sensing, the incoming signals are force-fitted to the three dimensional notion of space and linear oneway notion of time. The near impossibility of being able to visualize the fourth dimension reflects how deeply the three dimensional view of space is hard wired in our brains. A few milliseconds later, the
cognitive data becomes engaged shaping the incoming visual information according to prior associations and experiences. As visual processing proceeds further, a large percentage of inputs are rejected, something in the order of 110 get selected out of some 1.5 million inputs in formulating the final view. Clearly what we see is a tiny abstraction of what's truly out there and even that bit is being distorted by all sorts of intellectual, emotional and physiological associations.

Dr. Robert Laughlin, a Nobel laureate physicist, in his book, ‘A Different Universe-Reinventing Physics from Bottom Down’ proposes moving away from reductionism and embracing emergence as a way to progress beyond the irreconcilable observations of quantum physics and Classical Newtonian physics. All laws, even Newton's laws of motion, Laughlin argues, shouldn't be looked upon as fundamental laws, but simply organizing principles of an emergent order. The implications of Laughlin's insights for a leader in an organization are quite profound. Envisioning reality by looking for familiar patterns or fundamental causal laws could be grossly misleading. Every situation must be seen with all of the trivial and nontrivial initial conditions to grasp the emerging dynamics. Given the limitations of our sense mechanisms and the fact that many of them are hard wired into our physiology, the possibility of any conscious determination of what we see simply does not exist.

Steinbeck’s non-teleological thinking proposes an interesting alternative for overcoming the limitations of conscious seeing. Instead of seeing from the standpoint of an outside observer, it proposes that the observer ought to ‘flow into the situation’. The process of becoming the situation being observed can be seen as removing the space between the observer and the situation, moving through phases as shown in the diagram below.

As we come upon a situation, the process of engagement begins with teleological enquiry and responses. We look for the causes or purposes of what we see in the situation and are tempted to form a narrative that makes sense for a quick comfortable closure. This part of the process is well researched and articulated by Daniel Kahneman in his book, ‘Think Fast and Slow’. In the interest of a closure, any anomalies get cast aside as trivial. The anomalies, however, can provide a gateway to the next phase of observation. As Steinbeck puts it,

*The differential is the true universal, the true catalyst, the cosmic solvent. Any investigation carried far enough will bring to light these residua, or rather will leave them still unassailable as Emerson remarked a hundred years ago in “The Oversoul”—will run into the brick wall of the impossibility of perfection while at the same time insisting on the validity of perfection. Anomalies especially testify to that framework; they are the commonest intellectual vehicles for breaking through; all are solvable in the sense that any one is understandable, but that one leads with the power n to still more and deeper anomalies.*

However, at this point if we choose not to settle for the closure and seek out the anomalies that challenge the narrative, the process of observation can move on to the next phase. The search for reconciliation, aside from sustaining engagement, can bring in finer details or wider contextual view. However, engaging in this dialectic phase also ushers us into a phase of uncertainty, triggering discomfort manifest as anxiety over time constraints and appearing indecisive, tempting us to abort the process of observation. Our emotional fortitude as leaders plays a crucial role in this phase. Steinbeck articulates what occurs in this phase as follows:
Chiefly, however, we seem to arrive occasionally at definitive answers through the workings of another primitive principle: the universality of quanta. No one thing ever merges gradually into anything else; the steps are discontinuous, but often so very minute as to seem truly continuous. If the investigation is carried deep enough, the factor in question, instead of being graphable as a continuous process, will be seen to function by discrete quanta with gaps or synapses between, as do quanta of energy, undulations of light. The apparently definitive answer occurs when causes and effects both arise on the same large plateau which is bounded a great way off by the steep rise which announces the next plateau. If the investigation is extended sufficiently, that distant rise will, however, inevitably be encountered; the answer which formerly seemed definitive now will be seen to be at least slightly inadequate and the picture will have to be enlarged so as to include the plateau next further out.

If we are able to survive the challenges of sustaining engagement in this phase, we enter the next phase, ‘the existential phase’. Many of the great artists have expressed this phase as a frightening one, a phase where one experiences something akin to death. It involves complete dissolution of one’s ego and achieving a level of intimacy with the situation where actions and thoughts are no longer emerging from the ego-self, but from the larger situation. Novelists often speak of the characters taking over the story to the point where the author seems to lose all sense of control. Composers such as Beethoven have described the process of composition as one of taking dictation. Actors speak of the experience of disappearing into their characters. Steinbeck has this to say about it,

This deep underlying pattern inferred by non-teleological thinking crops up everywhere—a relational thing, surely, relating opposing factors on different levels, as reality and potential are related. But it must not be considered as causative, it simply exists, it is, things are merely expressions of it as it is expressions of them… Strictly, the term non-teleological thinking ought not to be applied to what we have in mind. Because it involves more than thinking, that term is inadequate. Modus operandi might be better—a method of handling data of any sort. The example cited just above concerns feeling more than thinking. The method extends beyond thinking even to living itself; in fact, by inferred definition it transcends the realm of thinking possibilities, it postulates “living into”.

Further research is needed to test the underlying premises of non-teleological thinking. It appears that the emerging dynamics of complexity cannot be envisioned from the standpoint of an analytical outside observer, one must learn to use the brain in a radically different manner, as an instrument, for complete immersion into the situation. I suspect that the study of living systems and artistic creations are more likely to offer opportunities for such research than the physical sciences.

References