

On Floating Hierarchies

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This text is a transcript of a talk given at the annual conference of the American Society for Cybernetics. Initially, Brün was asked to give a description of hierarchy.

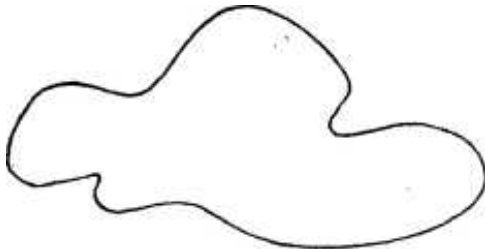
[Comments added by the transcriber, Lesley Olson, appear in square brackets.]

HIERARCHY is that flow of instruction which is clearly known and is an argument. The instructions alone are not a hierarchy, and a flow alone is not a hierarchy, and knowledge alone is not a hierarchy, but that knowledge about the flow of instructions that can be used as an argument: this is when I speak of a hierarchy. So it is not always a good idea to make the pyramids and the arrow-studded networks, because it's all really not necessary.

For instance, when Professor Krippendorff is here, and he can determine my grade, and I use the fact that he can determine my grade as an argument for my behavior, then I am in the presence of a minimal, but definitely powerful hierarchy. Since my knowledge is indispensable for it, I don't think there is an objective hierarchy.

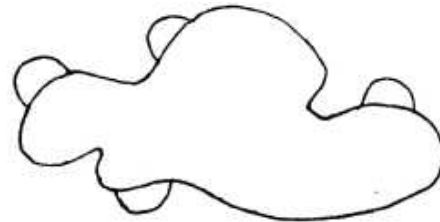
'Floating hierarchy' is of course not a very serious coinage. I enjoy this coinage vsry much, so I'm serious about it. It is not always serious about me.

I have some kind of universe [drawing] of which I stipulate some boundaries; that's the best I can do.

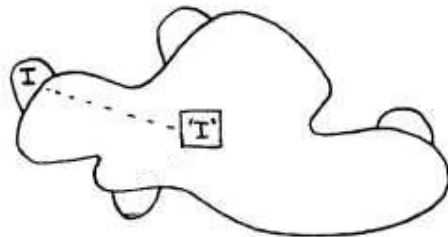


Whether they really are there or are not there will depend largely on whether I really explore it ever. But I simply assume that's the end ... and that's the end ... and that's the horizon.

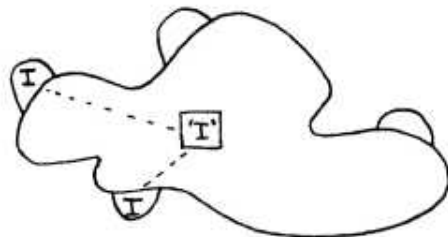
I have at these boundaries, so-called *terminals*:



A *terminal* means several things to several people. For me it is a place where I sit ... and think I'm here ... in the center:



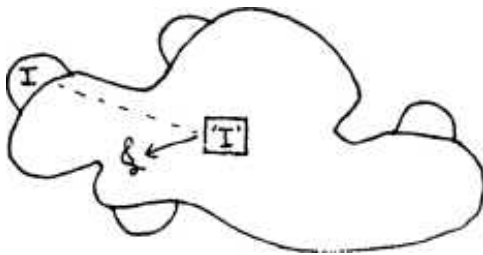
Now if another I sits over *here* ... in a terminal ... and thinks it sits *here* ... in the center ... then *this* I and *that* I both think they sit in the center:



When I sit at the terminal, I am as if where 'I' is. 'I' is the center. 'I' is the I of the third-person singular.

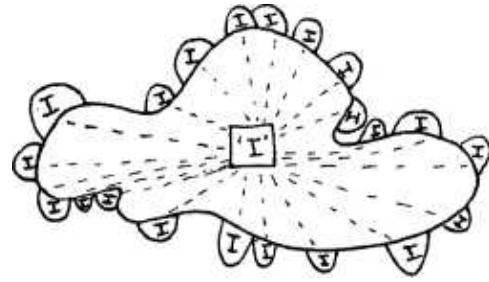
We have a concept which is called *time-sharing*. If you would put on to it another *s* then you would have *times-sharing*. The time-sharing process in the computer installation at the moment is a technological difficulty. At the moment it is the case that [two people] can not copy the same file at the same time; somebody has one file, somebody else wants the same file, and it is a *time-sharing*. The *sharing* is underlined; the time isn't really shared, the sharing is timed.

If we could think of this situation not only as a technological difficulty, but investigate it as the solution to a real problem — namely, that at any time you enter a place in the universe where you have a terminal in which you are [an] I, and think you sit in the center — then we have the beginning of a hierarchy. But it is not yet developed; what is needed is that you can exert from here some kind of control and that, at least, you use the knowledge that you can exert control as an argument.



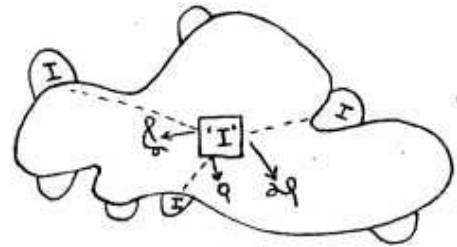
So it is the knowledge that when I enter a system in which I can, from a terminal, pretend that I am the center and in control of things, that I begin to be a component of a hierarchy; and if I use that fact as an argument for what I'm doing, then I have made a hierarchy.

Now, if there are many terminals, and in every one of them sits somebody who says 'I' (and you know that most people say 'I' ... There's always one more of I's than of You's in the world, and that is why I is in the majority and not, as everybody thinks, You) we have possible, that at one and the same time, lots of people think that they are in control, because every one of these I's *thinks* it sits here, in the center:

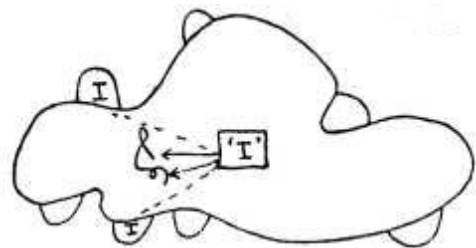




Everybody is where 'I' is, and everybody says 'I am'. In the beginning there is no distinction between 'I' and I. 'I' is also where I am.

This situation I consider a floating hierarchy, because of what happens now: this I, thinking it sits in the center, exerts that kind of control; at the same time, *this* I is thinking it sits in the center too, but exerts this kind of control; *this* I exerts another kind of control.



In this particular system, at that time, there will exist a temporary difference or consensus, agreement, discussion, whatever you want — some interaction of a divergent nature.

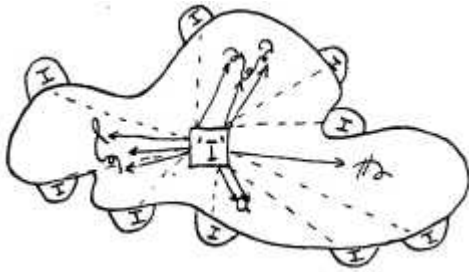


Very rarely will you find that something looks like that:  there's always a tiny difference: 

If these differences become the subject of conversation, if they become the desirable minimum of distinction between people, we have the beginning of culture.

The ironing out of differences, under the pretext that by doing that one irons out *conflicts*, is to stop.

Therefore, it is desirable that there are as many I's as possible, that as many I's as possible think that they are sitting in the center, that as many of them do know that they can exert control and use that as an argument, and that they with great pleasure find in the field between the horizon of the system and the center of the system all kinds of possible constructs that temporarily are audible (the constructs can actually say something, they have a contour), and that they then call them temporary hierarchies, or as I call them floating hierarchies.

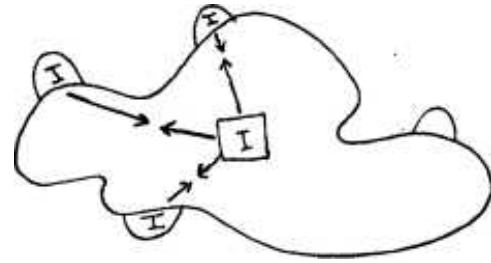


I would suggest that at that moment, the *threat* of the word 'hierarchy' would be removed, or at least greatly reduced.

The threat of the word 'hierarchy' rests actually only in its stability. That is that you usually use it when you find yourself in a position where you are one of those who can't do anything, because you are in a hierarchy and a hierarchy is a flow of instruction and you use the flow of instruction as an argument for saying, "There I can't do anything."

[Following this much of the talk — which had been interrupted a couple times for questions from listeners — Brün made a reference to a paper by Valentin F. Turchin; then several questions were asked (which were mostly inaudible on the tape) concerning the construction and the perception of floating hierarchies; Brün responded to those questions, applying the concept of floating hierarchies to the American Society for Cybernetics and to committee meetings; and then a few more questions were asked (again mostly inaudible on the tape) concerning "diverging arrows" (or controls, instructions, influences, points of view) and "how people become aware of this situation", to which the next several statements are part of Brün's response.]

One of the problems of a center is that any neighboring lines that go away from it, diverge . . . Instead of making the hierarchy a thing like that:



— which would be the hierarchy we always talk about — instead, people will now look at their various flows of instruction, and let *them* form a hierarchy, here, around these constructs.

The floating hierarchy is there only so long as I am there to keep it afloat; as soon as I and the other I (with whom I have constructed a floating hierarchy) leave . . . *poof!*

While they are the same 'I is', they are different 'I am's'. To distinguish itself an I leaves the terminal, goes away and plays ball, does something else for a while . . .

It is very *difficult* for a committee to come to diverging points of view. Usually they consider it a mistake; usually they are complaining . . .

The imagery I would like is that one is not moving aside for somebody else. It is not necessary: even though geometry says that every circle has but one center, it does not say that the center can not be populated by the complete totality of mankind. Imagination can solve certain problems where texts provide negative evidence . . .

My hostility belongs to the reward-oriented hierarchy. I could do with a lot of hierarchies, I wouldn't even quarrel with hierarchies, if I didn't find myself living in a *reward-oriented* hierarchy. I don't want a reward-oriented hierarchy. A reward-oriented hierarchy assumes that happiness is a reward; and I consider that not a *human* quality, but *natural* — and I therefore object. The distinction of the human is that it *could*, if it would so choose, start with happiness as a *premise*. The paradigm under which all our philosophies, all our religions, and all our thought-processes labor, is that "If you do right, you'll be rewarded." It is always a promise. Happiness is always a promise; who's going to keep it? . . .

If the members are not happy, the system has to

be changed. I've heard it three times these past three days, totally unmaliciously, syntactically hidden behind nice words, that "If we could socialize mankind, our society would look better." I think we should socialize our society, so that *man* can, who wants it, have liberty. . .

I have here a little piece of writing I would like to offer.

The helplessness of rational thought facing argued mood requires that rational thought argue through composed unreasonability. The thesis to be investigated for its merits proposes that thoughtful absurdity responding to argued mood might incite the latter to correct and admonish the former and thereby loosen the link between mood and argument in exchange for loosening the link between rationality and reasonability.

The difference between composed unreasonability and condescending humoring (therapeutic, well-meaning, charitable, babying, double-talk) is crucial and must be understood and rigorously maintained. Unless I diagnose the argued mood as a mental disease, I have to recognize it as an argument, albeit both, the recognizing and the treatment, have to find logic, coherence, consistency within, and according to, the universe wherein the mood resides.

Every time I have a mood, or am in a mood, or find a mood, or speak about a mood, I argue with it. You would never tell somebody "I am in a mood" unless you would like to argue either to be left alone, or to be treated in a special way. It is always in a kind of argument.

All art can be described, among other possibilities which I won't take away from you, as an attempt to compose unreasonability meeting argued mood. Very often the mood is argued by the composer; much oftener, however, the mood is argued by the listener. The composition of a piece of music, or of a picture, or of a poem, is usually composed unreasonability, because were it *reasonability*, who would have had to compose it? Since the reasonability of a sentence rests on its having been said before, or already residing in the reasonable repertory of the listener, it is not a creation . . .

[At this point, the tape reached the end of 'side A' and turned off; about 20 seconds were cut off before the tape started again]

The initial response to a work of art, "It doesn't make sense", is quite legitimate and describes cor-

rectly the attitude of the composer, namely to meet an argued mood with composed unreasonability . . .

The continuous appeal among educational systems to the problem of communication has taken an important line of argument too far. That is, it hints that 'to communicate' means really to convey a thought. That is now being believed.

Originally this was no problem: if somebody didn't understand, one beat him. If you whip a person, he will probably understand very quickly. That was abandoned, and meanwhile other ideas were had: now one coaxes people, the concept of pedagogy has been invented, some psychological ideas have been found.

Now all this is confused with the problem of communication when conveyance is meant. It is the question of the message much rather than one of the communication. As long as one communicates, one does not say anything . . .

If I want to prove something, I probably have to commit suicide. That means, I have to communicate so flawlessly, so objectively, so absently, that what I have said stays in the room even when I leave. That is, a truth says that this is true without me, and I consider everything that is true without me, murder. If somebody asks you, "Well, is it *true*, what you're saying?", you are challenged to make a decision: do you want to argue for what you are saying with its *truth*? or with your preference? That is a question I would like to become more acute.

So the chain from argued mood and composed unreasonability, via floating hierarchies, to the question of whether a statement is argued for by its being true or rather by its being desirable: all this belongs in a particular field in which the dynamics of society are run by the language spoken, and not necessarily, as one believes, by the facts. The power of a sentence rests actually on its lack of truth. So, truth is not the proof for a sentence: the proof for a sentence is its social desirability.

We don't have to improve mankind, we have to improve society and its rules and its paradigms and its common-places. And that's why I wrote a piece called *i toLD YOu so!* I do hope in such a piece to take one parameter of a linguistic fiction that is intimately related to the commonplace world, to incor-

porate it into a composition, and repeat it and let it become a component of that composition to such an extent that it becomes influential on people's memories. So that it be remembered, that sentence:

I Told You So! I TOLD YOU SO! I told you sooo!

The curse of the sentence is almost exclusively in the melodic line. The sentence itself is not so bad. I could say to him, "Well, I told you so." But he hates it. First of all, he can tell himself. Second, when do I say that sentence? At a time when just *that* sentence should *not* be said. That is actually an *uncomposed*, an improvised unreasonability meeting an argued mood. I want it composed.

I thought if I can *compose* it, it will become, not harmless, but it will become what I call 'buried alive', just as this idiotic theme



has been buried alive in the 5th Symphony by Beethoven, and some other stupid ideas have become indispensable components of some respectable whole, where we forget that before the composition this was dynamic garbage thrown into one another's faces. This is one possibility of trying to get rid of a bacteria.

[Brün's composition *i toLD YOU so!* was played. The piece lasts 13 minutes]

If instead of telling the legend, the eternal love stories, the conflicts of social discourse; if instead, we could take the tragedy of the *human* discourse, if we could take language as it is spoken and as it has consequences, and incorporate it into compositions, so that it be taken out of circulation, so that people suddenly find themselves singing tunes that they heard yesterday; if people could become aware that they don't think while they speak, so that this eternal "You can't say that!" and so on, that these sentences stop!; if one could take these sentences and become observant, fish them out and jot them down and give them to poets, composers, painters, and poster-makers, and let them use them— all over the place, all the time — until the speaker really notices; maybe, then, it would be a help, and it might be a little more entertaining than hearing it again and again and again about "the triangular situation", or "stories of mishap enterprises", or what has "all been said and done".

What I want is that there be peace. But when I say that, nothing happens: it requires more thought to establish peace than saying "Let's not make war." All of this I have said, is so that argument be used for the creation of floating hierarchies rather than for the establishment of truth. In the absence of friction, differences, and conflict, there is no need for peace.