An Inquiry into the Historical Meaning of "The Fifth Discipline".

Roldan Tomasz Suárez[1]

This paper shows a possible way to unfold the historical meaning of "The Fifth Discipline". The thread of this way is the question about the new way to be human promoted by "The Fifth Discipline". It is shown that this new way of being is not modern and coincides at several points with the ancient one. This situation is given two opposed interpretations. The first one points to a sort of a returning of our cultural world-view to the ancient one. A critique to this interpretation leads to a second possibility, which points to a radicalization of the instrumental trends of high modernity. Then a second critique is articulated which shows that the shift in the idea of humanity manifested by "The Fifth Discipline" remains obscure and problematic for our current way of thinking.

KEY WORDS: historical meaning, "The Fifth Discipline", ethics, modern world-view, ancient world-view

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper tries to understand "The Fifth Discipline" in terms of its "historical meaning". So the first questions I should answer are: what does "historical meaning" mean?, and what justifies such a reading of this work by Peter Senge? I firmly believe that a comprehensive answer to such questions will only make sense after reading the whole paper. Nevertheless, I feel it is necessary to give at least an introductory clarification of both issues.

By "historical meaning" I understand the role an event plays within the context of the history to which it belongs. But in what sense does an event "play a role" in a history? According to the understanding of history that still dominates western culture —an understanding inherited from modern physics— social events are temporally related to each other by cause-effect relationships. History is the succession of social events that are the effect of past ones and the cause of future ones. Obviously, within such a comprehension of history, the question for the historical role of a particular event can only be answered in terms of an explanation of its causes and effects. But that is most certainly not the way in which I intend to pose this question.

The "physical" understanding of history has been criticized over a long

---

[1] Departamento de Sistemología Interpretativa. Escuela de Sistemas. Facultad de Ingeniería. Universidad de los Andes. Mérida. Venezuela.

period of time[2] and it is now widely accepted in the academic world that it belongs to a specifically modern world-view and also that it represents a theoretical position that is not appropriate for the nature of human affairs. This does not mean that the academic world has come to any agreement on an alternative theory of history or even a coherent alternative to the one rejected. Nor is it my claim that I have. But for my purpose in this paper it is enough to trace briefly what I take to be some key ideas concerning history on which there is actually a widespread academic agreement. And this agreement springs from the fact that these ideas are already present in the way "physical" history is rejected. Let us look at this in some detail.

First of all, the rejection of the modern viewpoint on history is partially moved by the mere fact that it is *just* the modern viewpoint. To say this is to say that despite its claims, it is not universal and it does not avoid taking for granted a set of assumptions about the world. So modernity shows itself as a historical period that is somehow dominated by a world-view different from, for instance, medieval or ancient times. This domination is made possible by a set of notions that serve as the cultural ground from which every modern discourse departs. The system of these notions is what constitutes the "world-view". On the other hand, we have said that the rejection of "physical" history is also prompted by its apparent inappropriateness to the nature of human affairs. Obviously this inappropriateness only makes sense on the basis of a "non-physical" comprehension of the sources of social events. Here the general claim seems to be that a merely mechanical view of human actions loses sight of what is essential to them: that they depend on the *meaning* they have for the actors. And the meaning things have for us largely depends on our previous experience or what we usually call the "background".

What emerges from the above ideas is a notion of history that could be called "interpretive". Within this interpretive purview *history is understood as a succession of epochs dominated by hidden world-views that give meaning, as a background, to the actions and events that take place in a given epoch*. So then, *to understand the role an event plays within its historical context is to understand how it relates to the world-view that dominates the epoch to which it belongs[3]*. To be sure, any action or event always expresses the cultural ground to which it belongs. But it can express it in two different ways. On the one hand, it can be an event that conforms perfectly with its cultural ground, granting in such a way the *permanency* of its dominion. Such an event usually passes unnoticed because it is not problematic in any way. But some events express a need to *change* the cultural

---

[2] Starting with Nietzsche and following with Heidegger and Foucault, western philosophy has been trying to liberate itself from the "physical" or "mechanical" understanding of history. More recently MacIntyre (1985) and Taylor (1989) have been working on an understanding of history as a "narrative". Also Fuenmayor (1995) tries to introduce some of Heidegger's ideas concerning history as part of an interpretive systems theory.

[3] There is no academic agreement on the ontological status of what I have called here the "world-view". Is it just a subjective projection on an objective world? Is it a metaphysical ground for beings? Nevertheless, for this paper it is enough to keep in mind that the world-view constitutes a system of notions through which we relate to the world, to others and to ourselves.

ground. A need that only can arise from some radical impossibility of this cultural ground to make sense of, or give meaning to, some problematic issues that are presenting themselves. In both cases, the event plays some role (conservative or revolutionary) within the world-view to which it belongs and within the history that has made possible this world-view.

Now when a particular event gains widespread public attention in its times, it is reasonable to suspect that maybe it is expressing some cultural need for a deep change in the world-view that is dominant at that moment. Of course, not every issue that enters into public discussion must represent such a need for a cultural change. Actually, today there are many issues that are perceived as highly "polemic" or deserving of public discussion, and nevertheless they often express merely a surface disagreement concerning how these issues fit within one and the same cultural world-view that underlies the whole discussion. In these cases, the world-view is taken for granted by all the contending parties and is never problematic (which means that there is no radical impossibility to give meaning to these issues). So the question I want to pose in this paper can be also stated as follows: is "The Fifth Discipline" a relevant event that points to a cultural need to change the world-view or is it not? And, if it is such an event, what is the nature of the change it is promoting?[4]

This brings me to the second point, the one that justifies focusing "The Fifth Discipline" in terms of its historical meaning. The question is: why do I suspect that "The Fifth Discipline" is an event that expresses a need for a change at the level of our cultural world-view? There are two striking facts concerning "The Fifth Discipline" that make me think that this discourse could be evidence of a need for such a change. The first one is the mood in which this work has been written. A first reading of this book gives the impression that it only attempts to make available to the organizational world a set of tools that the systems movement (mainly systems dynamics) has developed in the last few decades. But a closer reading reveals that there is something far more important in this work. There is an attempt to present the use of these tools as part of a special (systemic) way of *living* that is somehow "higher" than other alternatives. To apply the ideas of "The Fifth Discipline" is not just to use circumstantially these tools, but to live a particular relationship to the world and others in every domain of one's life. This is why Senge's discourse sometimes becomes visionary or prophetic and speculates on a kind of utopic society of the future that will be completely pervaded by his ideas.

The second fact is that the public reception of "The Fifth Discipline" has gone far beyond what is usually the case of specialized works. My own experience is that the readers of this book are not only managers but also people that do not

---

[4] This means that "The Fifth Discipline" could be much more than a mere "fad", as it is claimed by Jackson (1993). The label "fad" makes us think that there is nothing worthy of inquiry in this discourse. Perhaps it looks like a "fad" if we consider it only in terms of its usefulness. But, as I will try to show in what follows, "The Fifth Discipline" looks like a rich and unexplored territory when we question it in terms of its historical meaning.

deal with management problems every day. And what they all seem to find in this book is an inspiring vision of what their lives could be if they commit themselves to the task of "learning" as defined by Senge. On the other hand, since the publication of "The Fifth Discipline" some terms of its language have entered into the political discourses of our societies (even in Venezuela, one of those "underdeveloped" countries, it is now common to hear politicians speak about "mental models" or "shared vision"). But the reason for such a widespread diffusion of these ideas remains enigmatic and thought provoking.

Now, these two facts suggest that "The Fifth Discipline" seems to be successfully introducing a particular vision of higher life in our culture. But our vision of higher life is obviously closely related to the system of assumptions that underpins our understanding of the world. A change in the former implies a change in the latter. So if "The Fifth Discipline" actually enables a new vision of higher life in our societies, it has to be related to a change in what I previously called the cultural ground. And this possibility seems even more interesting when we consider the fact that this vision of higher life departs from a field that, at first sight, has nothing to do with that kind of issues. Why does thinking about organizations lead Senge to trace a picture of what is a higher way of living?

So we are ready now to begin the inquiry into the historical meaning of "The Fifth Discipline". This inquiry runs through three stages. The first one (section 2) consists of an account of "The Fifth Discipline" that prepares and opens the question for its historical meaning. The second stage (sections 3 and 4) intends to show that "The Fifth Discipline" seems to be manifesting a historical change at the level of our cultural ground. Finally, the third stage (section 5) tries to clarify the nature of this apparent change.

2. APPROACHING "THE FIFTH DISCIPLINE"

According to Senge, the purpose of "The Fifth Discipline" is to offer some key ideas for the construction of a "learning organization". A learning organization is a collective entity in an ongoing process of learning, while "learning" means for Senge the maximization of the capacity to create some desired results. As we will see in what follows, there are five disciplines that enable any organization to become a learning one.

2.1. The five disciplines

The core of organizational learning is *Systems Thinking* (also called "The Fifth Discipline"). Systems thinking enables us to understand systems of great extension and complexity. It forces us to concentrate not on isolated facts and events but to see and model reality in terms of nets of extended (in time and space) processes which often include our own unconscious participation. It is precisely our unconscious participation in the reality surrounding us that makes it necessary to uncover our hidden assumptions or *Mental Models* according to which we think and act. Thus, systems thinking and the discipline of mental models help us to realize

the way reality works outside and inside the organization.

But this expanded consciousness of reality is not enough. The learning organization wants to act effectively in this reality by exerting pressure on the points of "highest leverage". The organization then needs to develop a capacity for acting like a highly coordinated unitary being. This coordination is achieved by practicing two additional disciplines: *Shared Vision* and *Team Learning*. The discipline of shared vision attempts to develop and maintain a unitary collective aspiration in each member of the organization. Shared vision is a kind of force that gives direction and unitary meaning to every activity of each member of the organization. The discipline of team learning is concerned with the development of the capacity to coordinate individual actions in order to "align" them in the direction of the shared vision.

Finally, Senge proposes one last and very important ingredient: a fundamental change of attitude in all members of the organization. The new attitude required for a learning organization is *Personal Mastery*. Personal mastery defines the essence of a "systems thinker": someone engaged in learning (i.e. in searching for the truth of reality to control it in accordance with his goals)[5]. Personal mastery is a *way of being* that defines "the spirit of the learning organization"[6].

2.2. The strange twofold role of personal mastery

We observe that whereas the goal of the first four disciplines is to develop some useful *skills* for organizational coordination and effectiveness, personal mastery seems to pursue something quite different: to develop a *way of being* in each member of the organization. "Personal mastery goes beyond competence and skills, though it is grounded in competence and skills."[7] The importance of this new attitude is already suggested in the expression "the spirit of the learning organization". In this context "spirit" seems to mean something like "the attitude that propels". Now, how can the development of a "spirit" be so important? If we listen carefully enough, "The Fifth Discipline" will offer us two different answers to this question:

a)   The first and most evident one: "organizations learn only through individuals who learn"[8], and "learning organizations are not possible unless they have people at every level who practice it"[9]. The peculiar intentionality of learning organizations arises from the coming together of the intentionalities of each of its members. To be sure, "people with high levels of personal mastery are continually expanding their ability to create the results in life they truly seek.

---

[5] Notice that, although the discipline of "systems thinking" is the core of organizational learning, "personal mastery" seems to be, in turn, the core of "systems thinking". It is a sort of "will to systems" in a Sengean version.
[6] Senge, 1990, p. 139.
[7] Senge, 1990, p. 141.
[8] Senge, 1990, p. 139.
[9] Senge, 1990, p. 142.

From their quest for continual learning comes the spirit of the learning organization"[10]. Let us note that in this case personal mastery clearly appears as a mere means to an end (that of sustaining the organization's ability to learn). It could be even said that having personal mastery implies having all the skills contained in the other disciplines. This is why personal mastery is so important for developing a learning organization.

b)   The second one: personal mastery is something already existing in every human being as a seed that wants to grow. In this sense, personal mastery is a distinctive way of being of the person who has developed his essential humanity. "Learning organizations are possible because not only is it our nature to learn but we love to learn"[11]. But if this is the case, learning organizations are not only *possible* but also *desirable* and *necessary* because they are the most favorable field for the complete development of the essential nature of human beings. It is in learning organizations "where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, [...] where collective aspiration is set free and where people are continually learning how to learn together"[12]. The necessity of building learning organizations seems to be grounded not solely on the will to organizational effectiveness but also on the will to "organizational models that are more congruent with human nature"[13]. Let us notice at this point that personal mastery appears now as an end in itself.

We are now ready to consider more deeply the importance of personal mastery within the "The Fifth Discipline". On the one hand, the development of personal mastery makes it possible for an organization to act effectively in its surrounding reality. On the other hand, it makes it possible for its members to achieve self-fulfillment and happiness as human beings. It is extremely important to notice that these two goals are not just separate effects of implementing the disciplines. Rather they are two inseparable sides of a whole that we can call "effective learning". Both human beings and learning organizations need each other in order to learn effectively.

But now the question arises: how is it possible even to think of such a perfect harmony between individuals and organizations? For some reason we tend to assume that the goals of the individual and the organization are opposed. An organization tends to demand from the worker the maximum effort for the minimum remuneration. The worker seeks the maximum remuneration for the minimum effort. Their interests and goals are clearly different. It seems that Senge's ideas about learning and personal mastery cannot fit into this traditional relationship between an organization and its members. We have to question further the shape of

---

[10] Senge, 1990, p. 141.
[11] Senge, 1990, p. 4.
[12] Senge, 1990, p. 3.
[13] Senge, 1990, p. 140.

this relationship within learning organizations.

2.3. The new individual-organization relationship

According to Senge, traditional organizations were built on the basis of a contractual relationship. The notion of a "contract" implies an interchange of goods between the parties in order to achieve their own goals. So inside these organizations labor was understood as something that enabled one to evolve in one's extra-organizational life. One would not enjoy organized work but the fruits obtained from doing it. In other words, the organization's goals were not the same with the individual goals of its members. These two kinds of goals were actually regarded as being opposed, and this was assumed to be a natural situation. Nevertheless, from the standpoint of "The Fifth Discipline" this opposition is only a kind of "degenerate" relationship between the individuals and their organizations. Let us see, therefore, how a "healthy" one could be deduced from the assumptions about human nature contained in personal mastery.

The fundamental premise of personal mastery is that the self-fulfillment of the individual as a human being is accomplished by learning. His natural tendency to adopt a systemic stance shows him the interconnected nature of reality and, particularly, the interconnected nature of human actions. So the will to increase his own effectiveness in acting and learning is necessarily related to a will to join other individuals under shared goals (collective action and learning under shared visions is more effective than individual action)[14]. *Let us note that this will to join other individuals in a coexistence under shared goals is a direct consequence of the initial assumptions about human nature.* It is a natural desire for human beings to feel "as if they were part of a larger creative process, which they can influence but cannot unilaterally control"[15]. The gap between individual and organizational goals disappears and the main goal turns out to be "effective learning"; learning to achieve the shared vision and achieving this shared vision to learn.

In Senge's terms, the "The Fifth Discipline" makes a shift from an "instrumental" view of work to a "sacred" one, where are found the "'intrinsic' benefits of work"[16]. These intrinsic benefits refer to the self-fulfillment achieved by expanding the capacity to pursue a shared vision. Thus the new individual-organization relationship will not be based on a "contract" but on a "covenant":

> To see people's development as a means toward organization's ends devalues the relationship that can exist between the individual and organization. [...] A complete relationship needs a covenant... a covenantal relationship rests on a shared commitment to ideas, to issues, to values, to goals and to management processes... Covenantal relationships reflect unity and grace and poise. They are expressions of the sacred nature of relationships. (Senge, 1990, p. 144).

---

[14] On the other hand, Senge assumes that the natural tendency of every human being to acquire a global picture of reality is related to a tendency to pursue goals important not only for him but also for other people.
[15] Senge, 1990, p. 142.
[16] Senge, 1990, p. 5.

A covenant is built around a commitment to some good that does not belong exclusively to the organization or to the individual but to both. Thus, the relationship between the members of the organization is one of comradeship and mutual help in the pursuit of this shared good. But there is more, the limits between the organizational and the individual domains become themselves unclear: "In the learning organization, the boundaries between what is personal and what is organizational are intentionally blurred"[17]. "The old world of sharp boundaries between work and family is falling away. A new world of blurred boundaries is here"[18].

So far, all we have seen suggests that the relationship between the individuals and the learning organization has the form of a *comm-union*, and consequently, that a learning organization is a kind of community living under shared goals (the highest of which would be that of learning). Surprisingly enough, this kind of social relationship conflicts seriously with modern individualism and presents some similarities with conceptions of socialness that belong to antiquity. So what kind of change is the "The Fifth Discipline" announcing? We have to go deeper into the question in order to understand the shape of the "new world" that Senge is talking about.

3. SOCIALNESS AND SELF-IDENTITY IN THE MODERN AGE

It is usually asserted that Modernity, from its very beginnings, assumes an "individualistic" conception of the human being. But this assertion immediately raises some difficult questions. On the one hand, what does "individualistic" mean? On the other hand, within modernity there is a wide spectrum of philosophical standpoints, often radically opposed to each other. Can we talk, then, of any common "individualistic" ground for all of them? An answer to both of these questions could be reached by examining the way in which modern human beings experience their social relationships.

Modern political and philosophical thinking in all its variations developed around the notion of *social conflict*. Social conflict appears in different shapes. On one side, as in Hobbes, it is postulated as a reality that gave rise to the State. On the other side, as in Kant, it is conceived as an always-present threat in the social space. The point is that the raison d'être of the State (or, more broadly, of every social organization) is always postulated to be the necessity of controlling violent social conflict. The State is thus a functional body capable of imposing order and restraining the arbitrariness of its people to guarantee peace. The explanation or justification for the existence of the State is given by the idea of an agreement among individuals who try to eliminate or minimize the uncertainty of the action of others. This agreement is nothing else but the Social Contract. The sense of every modern social organization takes roots and grows from the presence of social

---

[17] Senge, 1990, p. 311.
[18] Senge, 1990, p. 311.

conflict.

Now, what kind of hidden assumptions can we find in this sort of thinking? Let us note that here social organization is thought of as being activated by an act of *will* of a number of individuals. This means that humanity exists before the appearance of any social order. The individuals *associate* among themselves by a contract in order to create a social organization, which appears by means of a conscious decision. Why do human beings want a peaceful social order? Hobbes postulates that the reasons are absolutely egoistic: self-interest constrains individuals to yield themselves to a sovereign power and to limit their freedom in return for an unrestrained individual space in which they can do what they want to. Kant , unlike Hobbes, postulates a merely moral motive: that which is imposed by the duty to create conditions of respect for human rights, so that moral perfection may grow inside everyone. In both cases, it is a way of restraining social conflict in order to create conditions in which human beings can accomplish their goals. The important thing to be noticed here is that, in both cases, human beings have their own goals before they decide to build or to join a social order. These pre-social goals are actually the deepest raison d'être of any social order.

Once the individual finds himself within a particular social order he has to perform a series of duties which define his social role inside this order. It should be noted that the social role of the individual has to be experienced by himself as something circumstantial. It does not define his identity, it is just a kind of mask or clothing. The individual submits to the requirements of a certain role because he aims to achieve, in exchange, certain goals that are external and previous to his role. Obviously, his self-identity and self-fulfillment is much more closely related to these goals. Thus, the modern individual is continually forced to experience a tension between the goals that define his identity as an individual human being and the goals imposed on him by the role he plays. In this sense we can speak of modernity as an "individualistic" age.

Let us take a step back and think again of the question of the relationship between the individuals and their organizations under the modern perspective. There is a continuous conflict between the goals of the individual as a human being and the goals of the individual as a social-role player. The activity of the individual in his organization can never be a good in itself (an "intrinsic benefit" in Senge's words). Happiness or self-fulfillment of the human being is always outside the organizational space.

From this modern perspective we realize also how strange and alien is the conception of man presented by the "The Fifth Discipline". Sengean man wants to feel as a "part of a larger creative process" which is supposed to take place in an organization that acts coherently under one and the same vision. This organization may provide man with "the true enjoy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by [himself] as a mighty one"[19]. When man reaches this situation "the

---

[19] Senge, 1990, p. 148.

task [is] no longer separate from the self... but rather he [identifies] with this task so strongly that you couldn't define his real self without including that task"[20]. While the modern self-identity is pre-social, this new one is built around the social organization. The Sengean individual is one with the role he plays in the organization. His interests as a human being are no longer directed outside the organization; they become harbored by the shared vision. Participation in the organization is no longer a mere condition that makes self-fulfillment possible: it becomes, in itself, fulfillment. When "personal vision" becomes the same as "shared vision" the tension experienced by the modern human being disappears. It means that the modern human being himself disappears.

What is the meaning of the appearance of this new human being? The change that seems to be announced by the "The Fifth Discipline" is not totally discernible so far. However, all these non-modern ideas look astoundingly similar to the way antiquity conceived socialness within the polis. Is the "The Fifth Discipline" uncovering a process of returning to the sources of western culture?

4. SOCIALNESS AND SELF-IDENTITY IN ANTIQUITY

According to Aristotle, in the ancient Greek polis human life is guided by a will to live a "good life". Ethics is the science that studies how the "good life" should be understood and how it can be reached by human beings. MacIntyre (1985) distinguishes three elements in the general structure of Aristotle's ethical thought:

1. *Man-as-he-happens-to-be*: An uneducated human being does not know the truth about his real destiny. This ignorance of his destiny is the cause of his "going nowhere" or, which is the same, of his being guided solely by passions and desires that put him close to the animals. He cannot be excellent in any way nor can show any virtue in his actions. Only through a correct education he can realize the truth about his Highest Good and so understand the sense and direction of his life.
2. *Man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-telos*: the Highest Good for man lies in an excellent accomplishment of his function. The function of man is to express virtue in his actions. The virtuous man lives a good life and can achieve *eudaimonia* (supreme happiness or blessedness): synthesis of well-doing and well-being. The climax of the good life is studying: contemplation of universal order. Now, eudaimonia is possible only within the polis. On the one hand the human being is such only within the polis because he is a "political animal". On the other hand the good life requires some material goods only obtainable in the polis. Actually, *the sense of polis is that of a community ordered around a shared conception of good and virtue* (which is related to eudaimonia).

---

[20] Senge, 1990, p. 208.

3.   <u>The means for the transition</u>: The transition from one state to another is possible by means of practicing virtues. Virtues lead to good life in three different ways. Virtues are (a) the chisel for sculpting uneducated passions and (b) integral parts of the *telos* of a good life. The final result of practicing virtues is man's disposition to virtuous decisions and actions. Besides these two functions, virtues are (c) the features of man's character that preserve harmony in the society and so favor the common project.

We can now see how the notion of "virtue" is closely related to a kind of "functional" account of the nature of human beings. According to MacIntyre, this functional account is inherited by Aristotle from "heroic societies" depicted in Homeric poems. Let us then turn to see how socialness and self-identity is experienced in these societies.

Ancient man cannot conceive of the birth of socialness in terms of a rational decision. Social relationship is thought of not as something subsequent to the individuals but as constitutive to them: when the individual appears it happens on the basis of an already-existing socialness. As part of a community, the self-identity of ancient man is not abstract (pre-social) but is defined by the social role or function that he plays in his community. The individual *is* his actions within his community and according to its order. His natural end is, thus, to achieve excellence in his *being-in-community*, to evolve perfectly his function.

On the basis of such a conception of man it is not possible to think of social conflict as a primary social relationship. If that were the case, the arising of humanity would be totally inexplicable (because humanity, as we have seen, arises only in a community). Friendship has to be the fundamental relationship that gives life to humanity. On this basis grows the meaning of the social organization of polis as a community. Contrary to the modern State, the polis is not a way to stop social conflict and assure everyone an individual space for his self-fulfillment. The self-fulfillment of humanity is not to be accomplished in any individual space but in the *being-in-community*. The polis is an order that gives every individual his corresponding function and enables him to live it in an "excellent" manner. Let us note at this point that citizens sustain the polis because it is a good in itself (in the same way that virtue is a good in itself). There is no tension between what is good for the polis and what is good for the citizens. The good of the individual lies in his virtue and virtue shows itself in good actions for the polis. The good of the polis, in turn, lies in the growth of virtues in its citizens.

Aristotle inherits the general structure of this ethical thinking but, because of certain historical reasons adduced by MacIntyre, he introduces some changes in it. The main shift is at the level of the legitimacy of the order of the polis. During the heroic epoch this legitimacy is given by tradition, is confirmed poetically by the Homeric poems and is not questioned at all. Aristotle tries to establish this legitimacy on rational grounds, by means of a never-ending process of revealing the truth about the good life and the polis. Because of this he introduces the idea of

11

"studying" or "contemplation" as the climax of the good life: it is through contemplation that this uncovering of truth happens. So, in Aristotle's ethical account, the polis is both the order teleologically oriented towards the unconcealment of truth and the good order unconcealed by reason. But it still preserves, of course, as in earlier ages, the status of the order that gives everyone their corresponding function. Thus, we can say that, in Aristotle's account, the polis is understood as a *realization* of good order. By "realization" we should understand, on the one hand, the unconcealment of truth about the universal order and, on the other, the accomplishment of a community living according to that truth —*living-together-in-truth*— therefore, living a good life.

If we compare now "polis" and "learning organization", "disciplines" and "virtues", "contemplation" and "learning" we can observe some disquieting coincidences between these terms:

a) The learning organization is a good in itself and not solely a means to an end. This is because, as in the case of the polis, learning organization pretends to be a *community*, a shared space where human self-fulfillment happens. We could say that the learning organization makes it possible to synthesize well-doing and well-being.

b) The threefold function of virtues in the accomplishment of a good life could be compared with the function of the five disciplines. Disciplines are "ways of training", integral features of a "systems thinker" and practices that sustain the unity and coherence of an organization's activities.

c) The climax of the good life in the polis is contemplation: the search for the truth about universal order. In the case of "The Fifth Discipline" it could be said that "contemplation" corresponds to the sort of "learning" that strives for the truth about interconnected reality. In the same way as the case of "contemplation" concerning the polis, "learning" makes possible a reordering of the learning organization so that it can learn more.

These coincidences seem to suggest that we are witnessing a historical change that makes a shift from the modern conception of the human being (torn between his abstract self and his social role) to a conception that defines the individual within the "functional" context of his community. In addition, this community seems to be oriented towards the search for truth. But we have to question further now for the grounds of this apparent "new communitarianism". In other words, what does this strange shift we have found concerning the conception of humanity mean?

5. EXPLORING THE HISTORICAL MEANING OF "THE FIFTH DISCIPLINE".

The path we have followed has shown that "The Fifth Discipline" shapes an idea of humanity that is not modern but resembles the ancient one. Now the kind of

reading of "The Fifth Discipline" proposed in the "Introduction" to this paper begins to make sense. "The Fifth Discipline" could be expressing a historical change that not only goes far beyond a mere fad, but also transcends the idea of a simple improvement in dealing with organizations. Actually, it would be fruitless for this inquiry to ask questions like "does 'The Fifth Discipline' work or does it not?". Our concern is with this historical change that "The Fifth Discipline" seems to be manifesting and that seems to be happening on a very fundamental level: one that determines what it means to be a human being.

So we have arrived at a stage where it is possible and necessary to ask for the meaning of this apparent historical change. Is it a real change or is it just an illusion? If it is real, where does it point? In what follows we will examine two radically opposed interpretations of these issues.

5.1. The "neo-antiquity" interpretation

If we follow the lead suggested by the similarities between "The Fifth Discipline" and Aristotelian ethics, we could conclude that the former is announcing a sort of return to the ancient way of experiencing humanity. In few words, it would mean that learning organization is becoming a sort of contemporary polis. The life of the members of the organization would evolve completely within the organizational domain. Individuals would build their identity around their function in the organization. This would enable them to exercise their virtues-disciplines, to gain higher levels of systems thinking and to accomplish their goals (identical with the organizational ones) with growing effectiveness. In other words, this kind of life would enable them to realize their natural goal as human beings: learning.

But this "neo-antiquity" interpretation does not take into account the fact that there is a major difference between Sengean "systems thinking" and that of the ancients. This difference becomes plain when we focus on the notion of "truth" as it is understood in "The Fifth Discipline". Let us consider the following quotation:

> No one could prove or disprove the statement that human beings have purpose. It would be fruitless even to engage in the debate. But as a working premise, the idea has great power. (Senge, 1990, p. 148).

What does it mean? Obviously it means that for some reason Senge assumes that there is no possibility of thinking seriously about the sense of human existence. No statement on that issue can be proved or disproved. Then, speaking of "learning" as the essential nature of human beings cannot have the status of a claim for "truth". So, what is its status? It is a "working premise" that has "great power". This "great power" consists in the possibility of synthesizing effectiveness with self-fulfillment, achieving an identity between good working organizations and human happiness. It seems that the Sengean way of being a human being and of understanding the sense of human life, is invoked simply as a means necessary to

ensure a bent towards effectiveness, and that it is not pertinent to consider it in terms of any claim to truth. Actually, as we will see in what follows, within "The Fifth Discipline's" ontological assumptions —unlike the ancient ones— there is no possible claim for truth about the purpose and sense of human existence.

What is the difference between the ancient understanding of "truth" and that of "The Fifth Discipline"? In the case of "The Fifth Discipline", the conception of truth is subordinated to the will to effectiveness: it points to a kind of knowledge that allows reality to be controlled. This notion of truth is based on an ontology that reveals reality as a set of forces susceptible of calculation, prediction and modification by the human will. In contrast, for the ancients truth was related to the will to *live-together-in-truth* and it pointed towards a form of knowledge that sought the whole meaning or *sense* of things, and particularly of human existence. Now the question about sense is necessarily a question about the role something plays within a whole. To *live-together-in-truth* means thus nothing other than to realize the *communion* with the whole, to *engage* with the whole. Thus the notion of wholeness is essential for the ancient *living-together-in-truth* and is a condition of possibility of the question about sense. The ontological conception present in the "The Fifth Discipline" (under which the notions of "efficiency" and "effectiveness" make sense) cannot harbor such a notion of "whole". It means that the ontology of "The Fifth Discipline" cannot harbor any will to realize the sense of human existence. Let us explain this in some more detail.

In Senge's discourse we find words such as "global", "whole", "interconnected reality" or "systemic reality" continually recurring. These notions seem to correspond to the notion of "whole" that we introduced above. However, in "The Fifth Discipline", the idea of "interconnected reality" means a simple interconnection among objects in terms of cause-effect relationships. This "whole" gives no sense to any particular thing; it is just a set of things capable of modifying the behavior of a particular thing changing its state. On the contrary, "whole", in the ancient sense, cannot be a thing nor a set of things because it is actually the condition of possibility of *whatever-is-the-case*; the foundation of its permanency. In this sense, the whole has a suprasensory or metaphysical status that makes possible the sensory or physical. In the ontological conception of "The Fifth Discipline" the notion of a suprasensory ground of the sensory can only be a nonsense[21].

All this shows the weakness of the "neo-antiquity" interpretation. "The Fifth Discipline" is underpinned by an ontology that is totally alien to the ancient word and thus makes it impossible to conceive of truth in terms of the latter. Senge's "systems thinking" seems to be an expression of a will to gain instrumental control over reality and because of this it does not allow us to judge about sense in terms of truth. Accordingly, speaking of "learning" as the sense of human life seems to play

---

[21] See Fuenmayor (1994) for a broader discussion about the notion of "whole" —as the suprasensory ground of the sensory— and about its impossibility within ontological conceptions similar to that of "The Fifth Discipline".

a merely instrumental role. So a second possibility of understanding the historical meaning of "The Fifth Discipline" is opened up. As we will see in what follows this possibility shows an interpretation radically opposed to the first one.

5.2. The "extreme instrumentality" interpretation

The discussion presented above points to the idea that "The Fifth Discipline" does not manifest any epochal change but simply a deepening of the well-known tendencies towards instrumentality proper to high modernity. In order to articulate this interpretation we will use some ideas of Fuenmayor and López-Garay (1991) concerning the meaning of organizational systems thinking seen through the habermasian account of modern instrumentality.

According to these authors, the kind of organizational systems thinking that dominated our century until the 60's can be considered as the main representative of what Habermas has called "instrumental rationality". More precisely, this systems thinking represents a "hard" instrumentality, one which considers organizations as machines that can be mathematically represented and controlled. Under this purview, the members of the organizations are nothing but "cogs" that have to be adjusted to achieve the desired results. But this situation gets more complicated in the late 60's, when suddenly the systems movement begins to understand people working in organizations as *subjects,* i.e. as beings that make interpretations of their surrounding reality according to their ends and values. This discovery has two important implications. The first one is that human behavior cannot be properly understood without reference to the subjective comprehension that guides this behavior. The second one is that studying and practicing within organizations is not a value-free activity, as used to be thought, but an activity that poses ethical questions. These are human beings we are dealing with and not just "cogs".

With this discovery begins a split in systems thinking which leads to the constitution of two main currents in practicing systems in organizations. The first of them, labeled today as "critical systems thinking", tries to take as far as possible the concern with interpretivism and ethics. The outcome of this is the rejection of the dominion of instrumental interest and the claim to build a new systems theory and practice grounded on an emancipatory interest. This tendency focuses on a critique of the power structures underlying organizational life in contemporary societies and seeks for a kind of intervention that would be liberating for those involved in these power structures. The second current, that could be called "managerial systems thinking", approaches organizations from a viewpoint that is still instrumental, although in a new way. It is now a "soft" instrumentality, concerned with the development of methods that would manipulate human subjectivity so as to obtain a behavior adequate to the needs of the organization. The common feature of these methods turns out to be the use of ethical language for speaking about the meaning of working in organizations. Thanks to this, organizations are presented as the preeminent domain for human self-fulfillment.

As we can see, the meaning of "The Fifth Discipline" can be easily

interpreted within this simple framework. According to this interpretation "The Fifth Discipline" is grounded on a "soft" instrumentality and the only role of its discourse is to manipulate the individuals working in organizations. Moreover, "The Fifth Discipline" would exhibit a particularly powerful manipulative discourse because of the fact that it recurrently uses notions similar to those characteristic of the critical current of systems thinking (as, for instance, the claim to "free" human aspirations). Nevertheless, by exposing the contradictory way in which these terms are mixed in this discourse we would be able to unmask its real intentions. For example, what we have shown above, the fact that Senge is taking "learning" just as a "working premise", would be considered a proof of the instrumentality underlying all his work.

But this interpretation confronts a major problem, namely, that instrumental rationality is definitely a characteristic feature of modernity. This is evident in the work of Habermas himself and also in the works of other contemporary writers such as MacIntyre (1985) and Taylor (1989). What they suggest is that instrumental stance towards the world is closely related to the "individualism" of modernity. The general shape of the argument that sustains this affirmation could be sketched as follows. For the world to become a domain of *objects* of control it is necessary for the human being to become a *subject*. To be a "subject", in turn, means to be able to take an "objective" stance towards *whatever-is-the-case*. An objective stance is one in which we do not get involved with the thing in front of us, we deprive it of any circumstantial meaning it has for us. From this *disengaged* stance[22], the thing shows itself as an essentially meaningless piece of matter and "meaning" appears as something created by the subject[23]. Only when things become essentially meaningless objects is there the possibility of considering them as value-free instruments that may serve any subjective purposes. But this disengaged stance that constitutes the object and the subject also shapes the way in which the latter defines his own identity. The subject identifies himself only with that abstract ability to take an objective stance and project purposes and meanings. And this means that he *is* pure rational consciousness and nothing else. His social roles do not constitute what the subject *is*. They are just clothes that the subject wears circumstantially to accomplish his individual purposes. Hence modern socialness and self-identity as described in section 3.

So then, only a modern disengaged and individualistic subject can take an instrumental stance towards the world. But the problem is that, as shown before, "The Fifth Discipline" seems to be stepping outside this modern and individualistic understanding of the human being. But if this is the case, how can it keep any instrumentality in its discourse? The paradox also could be stated as follows: if

---

[22] Compare this "disengaged stance" with the ancient will to "engage with the whole" as discussed in section 5.1.

[23] Notice that this notion of "subject" is precisely the one "discovered" by the systems movement in the late 60's. This means that both currents of systems thinking (the "critical" and the "managerial") belong to the specifically modern world-view.

"The Fifth Discipline" maximizes modern instrumentality it goes to such extremes that it ends with a non-modern notion of human being. Obviously this surprising transmutation cannot be explained by the "extreme instrumentality" theory alone.

Once again we find here some signs of a surprising historical change that may be making itself known through discourses as "The Fifth Discipline". If there is such a change, its scope and meaning would remain obscure as long as we keep questioning managerial technologies only in terms of effectiveness. That is the kind of questioning proper to the ("hard" or "soft") instrumental current of organizational systems thinking. But now we can add a new element to this observation. It is possible that also the critical current of systems thinking is losing sight of this process. And that is because of its characteristic seeing-instrumentality-everywhere, a sort of obsession that tends to obscure other aspects of the discourses under critique. Moreover, the emancipatory interest that is claimed by this current is thoroughly modern and expresses the well-known ideal of the autonomous subject. From this modern stance it must be highly difficult if not impossible to see a process of stepping outside modernity.

6. FINAL REMARKS.

Let us resume briefly the path we have followed in this paper so as to see better the problematic space that now lays open for future inquires.

We have found that "The Fifth Discipline" manifests a notion of human being that is both non-modern and that resembles the ancient one. We have also found that this does not mean a complete return to the ancient engagement with the whole: the sort of systems thinking proper to "The Fifth Discipline" is underpinned by an ontology that makes it impossible to ask seriously the question about the truth of the sense that something has within the whole (e.g. the sense of human life). Thus "The Fifth Discipline" still harbors modern instrumental interest. Therefore it seems that "The Fifth Discipline" promotes a notion of human being that not only cannot be grounded on the ontology it presupposes but is also completely incompatible with the instrumental interest associated with this ontology.

If we look at this situation in purely logical terms, we shall inevitably see a major theoretical inconsistency in the discourse of "The Fifth Discipline". If we look at it through the eyes of the critical current of systems thinking, this inconsistency will show itself as a proof that what is important to this discourse is not coherence but its manipulative power alone. But if we look at it through historical eyes, maybe we will see there the first symptoms of a historical transition towards a new kind of thinking that tries to synthesize instrumentality with a re-engagement of the human being with the world. That hypothetical kind of thinking would have to rest on an ontology that could harbor simultaneously two definitions of "truth": as uncovering of sense and as uncovering of cause-effect relationships. Nevertheless an ontology of this kind has not been yet articulated and we do not even know if it is possible at all.

But there are some elements that suggest that we are beginning to experience

a historical need for a change of this kind. If the picture of the human being traced by "The Fifth Discipline" is socially attractive (and it is despite its theoretical consistency), it must be because the modern experience of humanity is vanishing in our culture and we are beginning to recognize ourselves in a different humanity. And it must be so because no matter how powerful we think the manipulative capacity of this discourse is, it would be naive to suppose that it can impose notions that are completely incompatible with the ones already present in the culture. (Just imagine what would be the social reception of "The Fifth Discipline" if it were presented to the eighteenth century European public.) On the other hand, while every historical change probably must happen as reaction they also conserve some elements of the previous epoch. Every epoch inevitably builds on the grounds of its inheritance. In this particular case the reaction against modernity would consist of a re-engagement of the human being with the world while the conservative aspect of this would be the place where this re-engagement is intended: organizations, i.e. the domain where instrumental interest and disengaged stance have been at home until now.

In view of all this, what appears as one of the most urgent issues to think about is the following: to what degree can organizations become the preeminent space for an authentic reappearance of a human being engaged with the whole? In other words: is it possible to conceive of an ethic in which "organization" takes the place previously occupied by "polis"? I believe these questions are unavoidable, at least for those who recognize their work as moved by something else than mere "improvement". It is possible that the future of our western "humanity" depends on the implicit or explicit answers we give to these questions.

REFERENCES

Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Hackett Publishing Company.

Fuenmayor, R. (1994). "Systems science: addressing global issues" —the death rattle of dying era? *Systemist* 16, 110-157.

Fuenmayor, R. (1995). The will to systems. From making sense to Enframing. In *Critical Issues in Systems Theory and Practice,* Plenum Press, New York and London.

Fuenmayor, R. y López-Garay, H. (1991). The Scene for Interpretive Systemology. *Syst. Pract.* 4, 401-418.

Heidegger, M. (1954). Science and Reflection. In The Question Concerning Technology

and Other Essays, Harper Torchbooks, 155-182.

Heidegger, M. (1955). The Question Concerning Technology. In The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays, Harper Torchbooks, 3-35.

Hobbes, T. (1651). Leviatán, Madrid.

Jackson, M. (1993). Beyond The Fads: Systems Thinking for Managers. University of Hull. Working Paper No. 3.

Kant, E. (1785). Fundamentación de la Metafísica de las Costumbres, Colección Austral, España.

Kant, E. (1797). Metafísica de las Costumbres, Tecnos, España.

MacIntyre, A. (1985). After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, Duckworth, London.

Senge, P. (1990). "The Fifth Discipline", Century Business.

Suárez, T. (1993). La Quinta Disciplina en el Contexto del Proyecto Social de la Modernidad. Universidad de los Andes. Working paper.

Suárez, T. (1996). Sentido y Sinsentido de la Reforma Carcelaria en Venezuela, M. Sc. thesis, Universidad de los Andes, Mérida.

Taylor, Ch. (1989). Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.