When Rethinking Becomes a Must

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When you're stuck in a complex situation, feeling that there are no viable options left or feeling lost in intricacies and turning in circles, you must rethink. In this article, we will reflect on how the inherent – but often unrecognised – complexity of many business management situations can lead us to 'being stuck' and we will discuss how the required rethinking can be achieved. To this end, we will be studying the concept of cultural and ethical neutrality, as well as the value of neutrality – a phrase taken from a seminal article by Stuart D.G. Robinson – when dealing with the type of complex situations permeating senior management work. First, the nature of this complexity is outlined, with a nod to what have been called wicked and messy problems. Next, we turn to ourselves, the people involved in tackling these complex situations, and study pertinent cultural aspects, thinking preferences and behavioural patterns which fundamentally influence our perception and thinking, as well as how we cooperate with others to address the complexity surrounding us. Finally, the contribution of neutrality to our problem-solving endeavours is discussed: how it can support us in cutting right to the very essence of the complexity at hand, offering the possibility to fundamentally rethink and find a clear way forward.

Introduction

When I spent a year in Aberdeen during my studies, I repeatedly found myself at the receiving end of jokes about Swiss neutrality by my Scottish and Irish flatmates. The gist usually was that to my colleagues it seemed untenable not to have an opinion on a given subject. Without hitherto having given neutrality too much thought, these jesting and teasing statements – which nonetheless seemed to stem from some deeply held if implicit understanding – puzzled me, as I had never seen the Swiss as lacking in opinions and was at the time myself a rather opinionated aspiring engineer with a very clear view of how the world worked.

While writing this text in the course of 2022, Swiss neutrality has been more prominently featuring in the international news than it had for a long time. On 28th February 2022, Ignazio Cassis, President of the Swiss Federal Council and Head of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs announced that the attack on Ukraine by Vladimir Putin's forces was inacceptable under the law of nations, as well

as inacceptable politically and morally. As a consequence, he continued, Switzerland was matching recently imposed EU sanctions against Russian individuals and financial institutions (Der Schweizerische Bundesrat, 2022). Later in the press conference, after three other Federal Councillors had added details of the sanctions from their departments, Cassis took a question concerning whether Swiss neutrality had been impacted by the decision, and answered '*gemäss Auslegung der Direktion für Völkerrecht, die Entscheide, die der Bundesrat heute trifft, berühren unser Neutralitätsrecht nicht.*', i.e. that legislation governing neutrality – based on the Hague Convention of 1907 – was not affected. While this answer, delivered by a trained lawyer, is without doubt technically correct, it may have been seen as only a partial answer by the journalist, or indeed many Swiss nationals, as well as international onlookers, asking themselves the same question.

The Hague conventions, specifically Convention V '*Respecting the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers*

and Persons in Case of War on Land' (The Hague International Conferences, 1907) and its adoption as Swiss law of neutrality, regulate aspects such as a neutral state being required to refrain from engaging in war, ensure equal treatment of belligerent states concerning the export of war material, and not to supply mercenaries to belligerent states. In early 2022, there was little doubt that Switzerland was going to refrain from engaging in any of these activities and hence adhere to its international commitments, but the adoption of one-sided economic sanctions was promptly portrayed as breach of neutrality by Russian authorities, cf. e.g. the Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov's TV interview on 16th March 2022 (Botschaft der Russischen Föderation in Deutschland, 2022), where he was quoted as having said 'For example, Switzerland (...) is ready to mediate [in the conflict]. In this context, it is strange that mediation services are being offered by the countries which have joined the unprecedented sanctions against Russia and have proclaimed the goal (...) of setting the Russian people against the Russian authorities.'. Later in the same interview, Lavrov uses the term 'war of sanctions' to describe what Switzerland had become party to, thus attaching the label of warring party to Switzerland.

At the time, the pressure on Swiss authorities to join the international sanctions against Russia was substantial, both at home and by the Western powers having initiated the measures and seeking to make them as effective as possible (SWI swissinfo.ch, 2022). The consequences should Switzerland not have sided with the EU and not joined its sanctions, for its ongoing negotiations with the bloc concerning mutual relations remain speculation.

Early in the war, the events came thick and fast. In the course of the year, a heated debate followed, and direct democracy took its course with conservative parties launching an initiative to guarantee the perpetual armed neutrality of Switzerland by constitutional amendment, cf. e.g. (Fontana, 2022).

On the political stage, the dilemmata surrounding neutrality and what could oxymoronically be called a 'neutral position' is illustrated by the above example. To approach the more personal, cultural, and social facets of neutrality I shall outline in the following a reflection on neutrality which I have been going through due to a professional transformation at a time which coincides with the events unfolding in Ukraine.

The Value of Neutrality

During the last seven years, I have been increasingly closely associated with Stuart D.G. Robinson and the 5C Centre for Cross-Cultural Conflict Conciliation while offering consultancy services in the areas of corporate visions, strategy, culture, and ethics through bbv Consultancy, which is a unit of the software services company which I was working for in parallel. From the very beginning of this association, Stuart emphasised the value of neutrality for the particular kind of consultancy we were offering, with a cornerstone article of his bearing this very name (Robinson, 2007).

Two key phenomena which Stuart works with in this and other articles – and which, with growing awareness, became increasingly evident to me in many situations when working with clients – are those of multi-culturality and multi-ethicality, i.e. the fact that the way people perceive their surroundings, interpret their perceptions and act upon their interpretations is strongly influenced by their respective cultural and ethical backgrounds. Importantly, 'cultural background' does not refer to national cultures or their stereotypical traits (as possibly done by my Aberdeen flatmates when assigning me the 'neutrality' tag when I told them that I came from Switzerland) but is a concept describing the set of cultural premises and principles held in common by members of a given cultural community[1]. Without doubt, the reader

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[1] The term 'culture' is used rather diversely in literature and everyday life, sometimes also overlapping in meaning with 'ethics' and 'morality', cf. (Robinson, 2014). In this text, 'culture' refers to 'the way we do things around here', often expressed in an organisational

will recall situations where, in an organisational setting for example, different people or groups have displayed diverging patterns of behaviour stemming from their respective underlying cultural backgrounds and ethical values. Remarkably, the phenomena of multi-culturality and multi-ethicality are evident just as much within organisations which claim to have a strong and standardising corporate culture, i.e. a mono-culture, and which publicise a decidedly normative code of ethics, i.e. mono-ethics.

The line of argumentation in (Robinson, 2007) can be outlined as follows: our world – and in many cases immediate surroundings – is inherently and increasingly multi-cultural and multi-ethical, i.e. consisting of numerous, as well as situationally changing and overlapping, groups of people, each sharing a system of perceptions, values and cultural principles. If, given this background, a cultural conflict is defined as

> '*the manifestation of dissonance at the interface between two or more cultures at a given point in time.*',

it follows, that most conflicts have at the very least a cultural component. It can therefore be revealing and conducive for the resolution of many conflicts in organisational and personal life to view them as cultural conflicts, even if the involved parties would never frame them in such a way out of their own accord. Doing so, while being perceived by the conflict-parties as culturally neutral, is the contribution of an intercultural conflict conciliator, one which markedly sets the conflict resolution approach described above apart from the many often distinctly un-neutral and mono-culturally underpinned mediation approaches.

My own thoughts and reflections have wandered further afield from the resolution of intercultural conflicts and have been roaming the broader set of management topics and different cultural and organisational contexts within which Stuart and I have been working. It is these topics surrounding corporate visions, strategies, culture, and ethics which I am now addressing from the corporate entity named 'Essentis' which I founded together with my wife in late 2021. One important reason for taking this step into self-employment is to dispel the possibility of being perceived as non-neutral due to an affiliation with some employer – along the lines of '*who pays the piper calls the tune*'.

The contributions which I have been able to make to-date seem to come together in the form of contributing to 'Essential Rethinking' – a concept which we shall be discussing in the remainder of this article from different perspectives. We make a start by exploring some thoughts about what makes resolving common but complex situations in business management so challenging – to the extent that they have been called 'wicked' and 'messy' – and why we ever so often find ourselves 'stuck' in them.

Wicked and Messy Problems

Elements of thought which form the foundation of any organisation include the vision which gives it meaningful orientation, the strategy with which the vision is pursued, the culture in which the strategy is implemented as well as the ethical values from which the organisation can draw strength and identity. It lies in the nature of the beast that these foundational elements cannot meaningfully be considered and developed in isolation but need to be constantly and carefully aligned to assure congruence.

This is a task of inherent complexity, much amplified when one takes into account the social system in which and for which the interacting constituents are created, communicated, interpreted and operationalised. Anyone who has deeply engaged

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context by the term cultural principles whereas 'ethics' refers to the underlying values of the entity. As such, ethics and multi-ethicality are on a par with culture and multi-culturality in terms of their significance for the arguments which I will be expounding below.

with the above in practice has without doubt experienced the challenges involved, particularly when one leaves the realm of detached theoretical considerations and in reality one feels that no viable options remain or that one is overwhelmed by too many possible courses of action, with none of them seeming to carve a clear path ahead. In other words, one is 'stuck'. Constant time-pressure, which so much characterises today's world of business, makes matters even worse and can contribute to quite regrettable decisions. With hindsight, these are often situations which would have required one to fundamentally rethink.

In order to better understand how we have got 'stuck', it is advisable to comprehend the nature of the environment and how it is impacting on our predicament. The interrelatedness of factors in the environment is such that one is not facing isolated problems and decisions to be taken and is indeed well-advised to avoid succumbing to the illusion that problems and decisions can be isolated and tackled individually in a time-honoured '*divide et impera*' fashion² without suffering unanticipated consequences elsewhere. It turns out that the frequently non-linear and non-deterministic nature of the factors and their interactions as well as ever-changing social dynamics seem to be the norm. Problems in such an environment often preclude clear formulation, meaning that being able to precisely articulate the right question goes a long way in answering it. Furthermore, once it seems a solution has been found, it cannot practically be tested or verified, let alone optimised.

Such situations have been named '*wicked problems*'³ by Horst Rittel (Churchman, 1967) – and contrasted with '*tame*' problems often found in science and engineering where the mission is clear, and the resolution of the problem can be verified – and subsequently, studied from a systems perspective, cf. e.g. (Rittel, 1972) and (Rittel and

Webber, 1973). Given the characteristic impossibility to come up with well-defined problem formulations led the eminent organisational theorist and systems thinker Russell Ackoff to label this type of problem quite simply a '*mess*' (Ackoff, 1974).

Shortly afterwards, '*the nature of real world problems*' was linked to their inherent complexity (Mason and Mitroff, 1981) and consequently studied from the perspective of complexity theory (Stacey, 1996). If one considers just *how* unpredictable (in other words, *chaotic*) such a simple system as a double pendulum can be (Levien and Tan, 1993) – and as I am sure any engineering student who has tried to control an inverse incarnation of one of these simple devices consisting of just two rods and two hinges can testify – the sheer idea of attempting to control such a problem in the real world with similar methods becomes truly daunting and the futility or even absurdity of the attempt obvious.

Fortunately though, not all is gloom and chaos, since many typical business management problems lie solidly in the domain of complexity or the 'complex decision-making context' according to David Snowden's Cynefin framework, i.e. where one deals with the '*unknown unknowns*', contrary to chaos' '*unknowables*' and the complicated context's '*known unknowns*' which can be analytically tackled by experts (Snowden and Boone, 2007) with e.g. traditional engineering or management approaches. In Snowden's thinking, these '*unknown unknowns*' can be carefully elicited by means of experimentation, giving rise to emergent solutions which are approached in small steps, readjusting course as the unknown unknowns become temporarily a little less unknown. Equipped with this understanding, it is not surprising that, given the prevalence and relevance of such situations in the

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² Cf. e.g. (Kant, 1795) for an early mention of the 'divide and conquer' approach so widespread in science and engineering, cf. e.g. (Chmarra et al., 2008), but also in the social sciences, cf. e.g. (Posner et al., 2010).

³ The use of the term 'wicked' may appear surprisingly emotional for academic writing and can be speculated to stem from real frustration. Interestingly, in literature, there appears to be disagreement as to whether the problems in question are 'wicked' in the sense of 'evil' (cf. e.g. (Rittel and Webber, 1973): '*malignant*', '*vicious*', '*aggressive*') or just '*seriously devious*' (Ritchey, 2011).

realm of business management, numerous alternative solution approaches[4] have been proposed, a selection of which is presented below.

General Morphological Analysis is used by Tom Ritchey (Ritchey, 2011), whereby morphological models in the tradition of Swiss astronomer Fritz Zwicky (Zwicky, 1969) are applied with the support of dedicated software to explore multi-dimensional inference models of the complex situation being studied. Importantly, the wicked problems are tackled in a collaborative manner, involving stakeholders and subject matter experts in a series of workshops:

> '[Morphological Analysis] *is good for the process of stakeholders learning to understand the complex issues and interrelations of the wicked problems they are confronted with, and for helping these stakeholders to better understand each other's positions and rationales concerning these issues.*'.

Robert Horn proposes the application of his Visual Language, cf. (Horn, 1998) to address '*small to medium size social messes*', resulting in a methodology dubbed Mess Mapping (Horn, 2018). Horn describes a key learning in the refinement of the approach while addressing a mess spanning multiple organisations as follows:

> '*What we learned (…) is to make sure the key stakeholders were involved in the taskforce and to have them in the same room to tell us and each other how they saw the problems from their point of view. In subsequent mess mapping processes, our task force participants were Directors, Vice Presidents, CEOs [or] their key deputies of their organizations.*'

Jeffrey Conklin proposes Dialogue Mapping (Conklin, 2005), a technique which uses a dedicated argumentation scheme to evolve the ideas of workshop participants in form of questions and answers, as well as 'pros and cons', the results of which are visualised in an evolving 'map' of the conversation:

> '*The central thesis (…) is that what is missing from our social network toolkit is an environment or 'container' in which stakeholders can step back to see the Big Picture, the larger context in which they are all on the same team and they all want the same or similar outcomes.*'

Nancy Roberts contrasts different 'coping strategies' for wicked problems based on a case study of coordinated international aid efforts for Afghanistan in the late 1990s which showcases the success of collaborative strategies (Roberts, 2000)[5]. The successful collaboration is described unmistakeably in the language of complexity theory as

> '*participants created a "complex adaptive system" – one that developed its own rules of behavior, reflected on its behavior, and self-directed its interactions based on what it was learning.*'

and is used to drive a point home which is particularly valuable to keep in mind when faced with wicked problems in a management position and which will also be highly relevant when discussing how to contribute to dealing with such problems as a facilitator:

> '*less heroics, more humility, and a greater appreciation for experimentation, "groping along", and "muddling through" than we normally permit ourselves given the weight of our rational analytic tool kit and strategic management practice.*'

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[4] According to (Rittel and Webber, 1973), rather 'resolution' approaches, as '*social problems are never solved. At best they are only resolved – over and over again*', by which the authors emphasise the lack of optimal solutions – as in definitive and objective answers – to wicked problems. Russell Ackoff describes problem resolution as '*to select a course of action that yields an outcome that is good enough, that satisfices (satisfies and suffices).*' with 'dissolving' problems as viable alternative: '*change the nature, and/or the environment, of the entity in which it is imbedded so as to remove the problem.*' (Ackoff, 1981).

[5] The case study also illustrates the difficulties experienced when applying an experts' approach which, as we have seen, is in Cynefin terms better suited to 'complicated' problems, not complex ones as the coordination effort in Afghanistan.

In addition to these exemplifying approaches dedicatedly designed to tackle wicked problems, a plethora of business management schools of thought and consequently almost innumerable models and tools which do not explicitly consider the underlying complexity of the situation are often zealously championed by their proponents and applied in practice[6]. Such approaches can of course nonetheless be fruitfully applied along the problem resolution process, if they are well-suited to and applied in a way which supports the common denominator of the above authors' findings – namely, that it is the collaboration of different people, each bringing different contributions to the table, which allows one to successfully experiment and learn in complexity. Echoing this finding in the words of David Snowden's recommendations:

'Open up the discussion. Complex contexts require more interactive communication than any of the other domains.'

for which he goes on to propose the use of

'efficient approaches to initiating democratic, interactive, multidirectional discussion sessions (...) [with which] people generate innovative ideas that help leaders with development and execution of complex decisions and strategies.'

(Snowden and Boone, 2007).

Dialogue, Culture, Thinking and Behaviour

Obviously, not all exchanges which we call a 'dialogue' in everyday life have the quality required to successfully experiment at the edge of chaos and unravel the intricacies which keep us from adequately rethinking. Departing from a definition of

'a discussion between two or more people or groups, especially one directed towards exploration of a particular subject or resolution of a problem',

(Stevenson, 2010)

we call eminent theoretical physicist David Bohm – who worked in the field of quantum physics and, in his later life, propagated the use of dialogue to overcome entrenched personal beliefs (Bohm, 1996) – to speak. In a seminal workshop for the development of his thinking on dialogue he noted:

'It gradually emerged that something more important was actually involved – the awakening of the process of dialogue itself as a free flow of meaning among all the participants. In the beginning, people were expressing fixed positions, which they were tending to defend, but later (...) [, a] new kind of mind thus begins to come into being which is based on the development of a common meaning that is constantly transforming in the process of the dialogue. People are no longer primarily in opposition, nor can they be said to be interacting, rather they are participating in this pool of common meaning which is capable of constant development and change.'

(Bohm, 1987).

Following this line of thought, the described process of dialogic enrichment is no longer seen as a zero-sum game, where one party's gain is the other one's loss, but leads to the – at first possibly implicit – understanding that a positive sum can be achieved through collaboration and contributions from all parties to a common whole.

Returning now to our earlier observation concerning the increasing multi-cultural and multi-ethical nature of today's world and our immediate surroundings, we now turn to ourselves, the participants of such a dialogue, to better understand the impact of these facets of diversity. To this end, the concept of 'deep-culture' is used to denote the hidden aspects of culture, i.e. those cultural elements which are not immediately perceivable by our human senses, but which determine our motives, behaviour, and also ethical values – both at

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[6] For a small selection of widespread tools for decision-making and strategic thinking, cf. e.g. (Krogerus and Tschäppeler, 2011).

the individual level and at the level of a group which shares certain deep-cultural characteristics (Robinson, 2009).

What can be observed time and time again when we are party to collaborative problem-solving workshops is that we participants initially join with the very best of intentions, plenty of dedication and energy as well as a strong desire to resolve the issue at hand. Independently of the methodology or approach used in the workshop, we often experience how the group does not manage to enter the energising dynamics of dialogue which Bohm vividly postulated, as above. Not that the dialogue is not lively, but often, after hours or even days of intense engagement, it becomes clear that we are not making the desired and required progress.

1. Sometimes, despite the agreement of common objectives, the group does not seem to manage to overcome initial '*fixed positions*'.
2. Other times, these positions are seemingly overcome together with any reciprocal '*opposition*' having been harboured at the outset, but the pool of '*common meaning*' does not appear to be all that common after all, as the same topics need to be revisited over and over again, to the growing frustration of everyone involved.
3. Yet other times, the '*free flow of meaning*' is not awakened, initial '*fixed positions*' become more entrenched and conflictual dynamics become dominant.

Concerning the last case, we can turn to Stuart's article (Robinson, 2007), which thoroughly covers conflict conciliation with the contribution of cultural and ethical neutrality. Building on an understanding that, in all three cases above, the underlying phenomena of culture, thinking styles and behavioural patterns are all relevant, we can build

on the principles and findings in the above-mentioned article while focussing on the first two scenarios in the remainder of this text.

Let us start with observing that many people – and especially business managers[7] – are conditioned to base their thinking on causal determinism, which departs from cause-effect relationships determining the outcome of current circumstances and thus being a sound basis for determining ones' actions to influence the unfolding events, i.e. holding

> '*the view that every event or state of affairs is brought about by antecedent events or states of affairs in accordance with universal causal laws that govern the world.*',

(Audi, 1999)[8].

In this thinking, chance is negated and unanticipated consequences are attributed to incomplete understanding of the governing cause-effect relationships and the current situation from which the outcome was derived. Immanuel Kant went as far as to promote universal causal determinism to a necessary condition of all scientific knowledge, cf. e.g. (Gigerenzer et al., 1989). Conversely, the American writer and Civil War veteran Ambrose Pierce pokes fun at such an absolute form of determinism and our incomplete understanding of the relationships involved when he writes in his Devil's Dictionary:

> '*Effect: n. The second of two phenomena which always occur together in the same order. The first, called a Cause, is said to generate the other — which is no more sensible than it would be for one who has never seen a dog except in the pursuit of a rabbit to declare the rabbit the cause of a dog.*'

(Bierce, 1911).

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[7] The training and selection of people who in 'Western' cultures end up holding senior management positions may or may not introduce a bias compared to the overall population, but this is a discussion to be led outside this article, cf. e.g. (Robinson, 2010).
[8] Some philosophical schools of thought go further in their usage of the term 'determinism' to include human actions, hence leading to predetermination, sometimes involving a deity as determining entity.

Thinking, linear and non-linear

A clear preference for causal determinism can be an important indication about the thinking style of the person in question, as it often goes hand-in-hand with a preference for linearly-structured logic (Robinson, 1995) and an aptitude for analytical thinking, logical reasoning and rationality. People with the opposite, non-linear disposition display preferences for synthesis and interconnectedness of thought, cf. e.g. (Herrmann, 1989). In scientific discovery, analysis and synthesis form a cycle, and progress is made by iterating such cycles, always taking into account new findings – as Tom Ritchey phrases it

> 'Analysis and synthesis, as scientific methods, always go hand in hand; they complement one another. Every synthesis is built upon the results of a preceding analysis, and every analysis requires a subsequent synthesis in order to verify and correct its results.'

> (Ritchey, 1991).

In a given situation either analysis or synthesis may prove to be the more conducive for progressing our enquiries, but it is inadvisable to deduce that one is superior to the other in general. In any group of people who are collaborating to deal with a complex situation, there are bound to be differences in terms of such thinking preferences. While everyone is capable to an extent of both modes of thinking, personal predilections do constantly manifest themselves in real life, and this can prove to be valuable to the group as a whole as long as the differences are recognised and appropriately handled in order to avoid misunderstandings and dissent concerning the course of action.

Universalism and Particularism

From a cultural point of view, cause-effect logic – just as other conceptualisations – can be applied either from a global, *universalistic* mode of thinking or from a *particularistic* one. In the latter, different contexts are discerned and causalities are evaluated in each case independently, without the need to derive generalised 'laws of nature' of universal applicability as is the case in *universalism*. The debate between proponents of *particularism* and *universalism* has been raging at least since Aristotle stated in his Nicomachean Ethics that while the law lays down a general rule, when a case arises

> 'which is not covered by the universal statement, then it is right, where the legislator fails us and has erred by over-simplicity, to correct the omission – to say what the legislator himself would have said had he been present.'

> (Aristotle, 2009).

Morality is until the present day a field in which I feel the relative merits of *particularism* and *universalism* are debated with vehemence, exemplified by a short excerpt from an essay by Jay Garfield:

> 'Particularists (...) emphasise what [has been] called the "thickness" of the morally relevant descriptions of actions: their saturation with cultural and social meanings which render them non-transportable from context to context. A "thick" description cannot be cashed out in culture- or context-neutral terms, but rather implicates a rich set of values and commitments, which inform, guide, and motivate action. Particularists argue that universal descriptions – those that abstract from this particularity and from the specificity of the situation of individual moral subjects or actors – necessarily fail to be morally relevant or action-guiding precisely because they abstract from the very semantic connections that render moral descriptions relevant to action and to criticism.'

> (Hooker and Little, 2001).

The fundamental impact of different predispositions towards *universalism* and *particularism* in an intercultural conflict is illustrated by Stuart in (Robinson, 2007). This dichotomy can be seen as forming a dimension along which the cultural disposition of people, e.g. in a workshop situation, interact. Indeed, differences along this dimension

often hinder the rapid establishment of what Robert Horn calls a 'common mental model of the mess', and of possible solutions to the situation being dealt with.

Atomism and Holism

Frequently observed in correlation with a predilection for causal determinism is the inclination to apply a 'divide and conquer' approach – as mentioned above – to situations which seem too large to tackle as a whole. This expression of atomistic deconstructivism is indeed an integral part of science and engineering, cf. e.g. (Chmarra et al., 2008), and very explicitly of software engineering, where it is classically applied to algorithm design. In a fascinating development from such algorithmic thinking, human problem-solving approaches have been derived, cf. (Knapp et al., 2016) in what feels like the wheel having turned full circle.

'Divide and conquer' approaches are intrinsically rooted in reductionism, the philosophical view by which

> 'reducing a property or a proposition is giving an explanation of it that shows its equivalence to another or several other more fundamental properties or propositions.'

> (Houdé et al., 2004).

In science, reductionism can be understood as the

> 'position that claims that a complex system is nothing but the sum of its components and that an account of it can be reduced to accounts of its individual constituents.'

> (Kricheldorf, 2016),

a position which has enabled significant scientific advances – but has throughout history also been strongly criticised:

> 'To call someone "a reductionist", in high-culture press if not in serious philosophy, goes beyond

> mere criticism or expression of doctrinal disagreement; it is to put a person down, to heap scorn on him and his work.'

> (Kim, 1998).

If we have reductionism in mind, and wish to understand the pertinent dynamics in a multi-cultural and multi-ethical environment, the dimension we can consider is the one spanned by *atomism*, defined in (Robinson, 2010) as

> 'used here to denote a Cartesian, essentially dualistic, mechanistic, positivistic conditioning of the mind; it is one which creates and values clear-cut distinctions and which is to be found at the core of western scientific thinking.'

and *holism*, a view by which

> 'the properties of the whole cannot be predicted or explained from the properties of the parts.'

> (Houdé et al., 2004),

but which can also be taken a step further to also include that

> '[a] whole cannot be reduced to its parts [and a] part cannot be understood apart from the whole to which it belongs.'

> (Bunnin and Yu, 2004).

In his study of the non-duality of subject and object – seer and seen – David Loy reaches a similar understanding which emphasises and elevates the all-encompassing 'whole' as in *wholism*, a variant spelling of holism. This understanding also leads us to the insight that atomism forms part of holism, an insight which obviously cannot be inverted, hence illustrating the asymmetrical relationship between the two concepts, and consequently the dynamics of people culturally tending towards one or other of them:

'*It is due to the superimpositions of dualistic thinking that we experience the world itself dualistically (...) as a collection of discrete objects (one of them being* me) *causally interacting in space and time. The negation of dualistic thinking leads to the negation of this way of experiencing the world. This brings us to* [a particular] *sense of nonduality: that the world itself is nonplural, because all the things 'in' the world are not really distinct from each other but together constitute some integral whole.*'

(Loy, 1999).

David Bohm, whom we have already met above, reaches a similar point in his dialogue with fellow theoretical physicist Basil Hiley, while ascertaining the possibility of finding an ontological interpretation of quantum mechanics, as laid out in their book 'The Undivided Universe' finalised at the very end of Bohm's fruitful life:

'*we see that each human being similarly participates in an inseparable way in society and in the planet as a whole. What may be suggested further is that such participation goes on to a greater collective mind, and perhaps ultimately to some yet more comprehensive mind in principle capable of going indefinitely beyond even the human species as a whole.*'

(Bohm and Hiley, 1995).

Individualism and Collectivism

When we consider the primary frame of reference within which people think and act, two further deep-cultural predispositions can be recognised, which significantly influence the manner of interacting between those addressing a complex situation. People with a strong *individualistic* disposition socially engage from a position of the endorsement of psychological independence which means that individual opinions are valued and

sought after, just as is the pursuit of self-actualisation. By contrast, people of a strongly *collectivistic* disposition endorse the primacy of the group over the individual and an attitude of interdependence within the group. In terms of decision-making – and by extension problem-solving – individualists can be predisposed to seek compromises within themselves and with others, often negotiating to their own personal advantage, followed by commitment to what they agreed to – but not forgetting their original position. Collectivists on the other hand tend to seek and contribute to a consensual outcome in the common interest, followed by co-responsibility for the implementation of the decision which has been reached – with no individual position-taking.

Uncertainty Avoidance

Addressing wicked problems – and more generally those typically encountered in the business of business management – involves dealing with incomplete information and needing to take decisions without having all the facts on the table, and without the benefits of sufficient time. In his thought-provoking book 'Conceptual Blockbusting' on how to expand one's 'thinking vocabulary' when solving problems, James Adams writes that

'*In a sense, problem-solving is bringing order to chaos. A desire for order is therefore necessary. However, the ability to tolerate chaos is a must.*'[9]

(Adams, 1986).

He goes on to describe an '*emotional block*' to successful problem solving as an '*inability to tolerate ambiguity; overriding desire for order; "no appetite for chaos."*'. The ability to tolerate ambiguity and operate in the lack of clarity while still seeking the essence of a complex situation can be linked to the deep-cultural dimension of *uncertainty avoidance* which describes how different cultures vary in the extent to which they seek to avoid uncertainty and

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[9] In Adams' book, the term 'chaos' is not used as in this article, but rather in the general-language usage as in 'disorder', or 'confusion', which can of course be the result of chaotic environment in the sense used here.

ambiguity[10], e.g. by applying carefully internalised behaviours and mechanisms to either circumvent or feel in control of uncontrollable situations[11].

When we collaboratively address a complex problem, the choice of the next 'experiment' to be conducted or method to be used is influenced by our cultural conditioning including our 'tolerance for ambiguity'. At times, it can be valuable to allow more ambiguity in order for us to reach what could be called the sweet spot for creativity, right at the 'edge of chaos', see (Stacey, 1996) and also (Eisenhardt and Brown, 1998) for an application in the field of corporate strategy:

> '*Traditional strategy begins with plans and ends with actions. But for many executives, too much is happening too fast for a "strategy first" approach in markets where change is measured in months, not years. Rather, strategy becomes successfully navigating at the "edge of chaos" between structure and anarchy. In this kind of agile organization, there are a small number of very tight rules – that is the rigidity – but flexibility otherwise – that is the chaos.*'

In other constellations it can prove more beneficial for group dynamics and the well-being of everyone involved to strive for more certainty and consolidation.

Frame of Reference

Geert Hofstede was an early advocate of the usage of various deep-cultural dimensions as discussed above in understanding diverse thinking and behaviour. He created the corresponding model of national cultures in the 1960s and 70s originally containing four such dimensions, based on a large-scale survey of IBM employees (i.e. removing other demographic factors given a standardised recruitment process) across the globe, cf. e.g. (Hofstede, 2003).

Some dimensions introduced above, e.g. *individualism* and *collectivism* or *uncertainty avoidance* have consequently been extensively studied from the point of view of national cultures, cf. e.g. (Hofstede et al., 2010), and numerous others, e.g. (Triandis, 2019). Some authors even invoke a 'Western'- versus 'Eastern'-thinking dichotomy[12], cf. e.g. (Parker et al., 2009) or (Chiang and Birtch, 2007). In this article, however, we focus on the fact that human beings differ in their deep-cultural dispositions[13], which while stemming from the cultural background in which they were brought up, need not remain close to that culture throughout their lives, as the deep-cultural disposition can evolve over time. Whilst thinking preferences (e.g. linearity and non-linearity as discussed above) and behavioural patterns in terms of personality structure may also differ between people, they tend to remain immutable after childhood (Robinson, 2009).

The aspects of deep-culture, thinking and behaviour outlined in this section can naturally in no way form an exhaustive – let alone 'complete' – description of such a rich and evolving field riddled with possibly more than its fair share of academic debate and dispute. The selection of dimensions is much rather intended to illustrate the diversity in terms of cultural dispositions, as well as manners of thinking and acting often found and almost always relevant in groups of people collaboratively addressing and possibly getting stuck in complex situations. This diversity on the one hand constitutes an additional level of complexity which may

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[10] 'Uncertainty avoidance' is not to be confused with 'risk-avoidance': risk loosely is the probability that something undesirable occurs, while uncertainty is the property of something being unknown or indefinite, i.e. referring to faulty or missing information.

[11] With a clear nod to the application of heuristics, as discussed in the next section.

[12] In particular, a proportion of texts on *individualism* and *collectivism*, often emanating from writers with U.S. affiliations or associations, also uses the terms with a strong political connotation, i.e. focussing on how much the collective institutions of the state should influence or interfere with the life of individuals. In some cases, such a political connotation seems not to be explicitly intended, but cultural dispositions in terms of *individualism* and *collectivism* can nonetheless be intuited when studying many such writings.

[13] While studiously avoiding the word 'individual' in this context, which might be taken to imply an individualistic understanding.

prevent the group from effectively dealing with the situation they find themselves in. On the other hand, it is precisely this diversity which can hold the key to fundamentally rethinking by applying cultural and ethical neutrality in order to make the differing perspectives perceivable, understandable and usable to everyone involved.

Heuristics and Biases

Heuristics – etymologically related to the ancient Greek '*εὑρίσκω*' / '*eurisko*', i.e. to find or discover, and hence the renowned exclamation '*Eureka*!' attributed to Archimedes – are experience-based problem-solving techniques which often efficiently provide approximate or satisfactory solutions where it may be impractical or impossible to find optimal ones. Heuristic approaches are widespread in engineering, including algorithm design in software engineering, cf. e.g. (Martí et al., 2018) and (La Rocca, 2021). As a mental process, internalised heuristics are similarly used by humans:

> '*our cognitive system is fast and frugal. It specializes in mental shortcuts. With remarkable ease, we form impressions, make judgments, and invent explanations. We do so by using heuristics – simple, efficient thinking strategies.*',

which in evolutionary terms have proven to be of great value:

> '*The speed of these intuitive guides promotes our survival. The biological purpose of thinking is not to make us right – it's to keep us alive.*'

(Myers, 2021).

While our heuristic mental shortcuts may have ensured our survival as a species in a world of natural selection, nowadays, survival in the metaphorical sense of successfully tackling some highly relevant complex business situation may conversely actually depend on '*being right*' – whatever that may entail.

All the more ominous is the – per se unsurprising but nonetheless determining – word of warning which immediately follows the above explanation:

> '*In some situations, however, haste makes errors.*'.

Heuristics seem therefore, on the one hand to provide valuable experience-based strategies for rapid problem resolution, but on the other hand come at the price of incurring the risk of becoming blinkered if followed all too slavishly or worse, unwittingly – '*ignorance is bliss*'.

More generally, the need and potential benefits of becoming aware of and overcoming deeply engrained patterns of thought when striving to discover novel solutions, paired with the opposite human tendency to rely on just such patterns, have long been known and scientifically studied, e.g. by American psychologist Abraham Luchins, who argues in (Luchins, 1942) that

> '*Mechanized responses have a place in one's behavior. They possess the advantages of releasing one from the bother of finding anew responses to recurring everyday situations, they equip one with precise, ready, and speedy responses to certain aspects of his environment; and they free the mind so that it can more adequately deal with complicated tasks.*',

but then immediately goes on to warn us about the flip side of the coin, namely

> '*When the individual does not adequately deal with problems but views them merely from the frame of reference of a habit; when he applies a certain habituated behavior to situations which have a better solution or which, in fact, are not even solvable by the just working habit; when a habit ceases to be a tool discriminantly applied but becomes a procrustean bed to which the situation must conform; when, in a word, instead of the individual mastering the habit, the habit masters the individual – then mechanization is indeed a dangerous thing.*'.

If heuristics threaten, it seems, to become the proverbial hammer to which all problems are nails, their devious relatives are cognitive biases, a term used to denote effects which cause human judgement to depart substantially and systematically from normative standards such as probabilities or simple logic (Haselton et al., 2005). The field of research studying cognitive biases and specifically a research program named 'heuristics and biases', grown from a seminal publication in Science *'Judgement under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases'* by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974) has discovered a substantial body of such biases, cf. e.g. (Kahneman, 2011). While there is an ongoing debate in the scientific community as to whether cognitive biases genuinely represent judgement errors or are rather rational decisions not to adhere to '*content-blind laws of logic or optimization*' – as argued by Gerd Gigerenzer, director emeritus of the Centre for Adaptive Behaviour and Cognition at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development (Gigerenzer, 2008) – it seems self-evident that, whatever the precise nature of such phenomena, their being displayed in possibly differing manners by some or all people tackling an already complex situation can be highly detrimental to the effective discovery of its essence and its resolution.

If we understand cognitive biases as distortions of our judgement about some entities or relationships being considered, there is an often more elementary level of notions on which they may be based, which – without wishing to provoke an epistemological debate – are taken or presented in dialogue as something akin to axiomatic truths. implicitly or explicitly portrayed as unquestionable facts. In the words of Russell Ackoff,

> '*More often than not self-evident and obvious signify facts whose truthfulness we are not willing to question, not facts whose truthfulness is unquestionable*'

> (Ackoff, 1987),

resulting in a form of 'tunnel vision' which, he continues, extends right to the results of our efforts:

> '*Our conception of possible outcomes affects what outcomes we desire. Our ability to solve problems is thereby limited by our conception of what is feasible.*'.

Such often unconscious constraints lead to a myopic view limiting our solution space to just a subset of all otherwise conceivable problem resolutions, and thus risk shrouding the essence of the matter by implicitly and unwittingly placing it out-of-bounds.

To conclude this section, we tangentially touch upon the contrast between intuitive understanding and conscious reasoning which has been lurking at the side-lines of this text for some time. This contrast is, for example, noticeable in the distinction of the 'innate' heuristic behaviour of biological interest and its cognitive, almost algorithmic counterpart, but also in the differing views of Kahneman and Gigerenzer concerning the nature of cognitive biases. The one point I wish to make from this transcendental field is how, in organisational environments, at least in 'Western' cultures, there is a noticeable tendency to prefer conscious, rational, thinking over intuitive thought, engendered, at least partly, by the 'Zeitgeist' emphasis on evidence-based management coming in the wake of evidence-based medicine, cf. e.g. (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006) or the 2005 presidential address to the Academy of Management Review by Denise Rousseau (Rousseau, 2006), stating that

> '*Through evidence-based management, practicing managers develop into experts who make organizational decisions informed by social science and organizational research (...) moving professional decisions away from personal preference and unsystematic experience toward those based on the best available scientific evidence*',

a contribution which later the same year, in the same journal got commented on as follows:

> '*while Professor Rousseau acknowledges the formidable implementation problems that evidence-based management might face, her apparent faith in the efficacy of science for solving organizational*

problems is challenged by rather more complex and deep-seated issues (...) both theoretical and political that she does not directly address.'

(Learmonth, 2006).

With such debate ongoing, it is not surprising that studies have been conducted which show how, in practice, management decisions are to an extent[14] taken on the basis of intuition, a hunch or 'gut-feeling', only to be painted later with a thin veneer of rational analysis or evaluation, as being required by the organisational context, cf. e.g. (Agor, 1986), with ample anecdotal evidence such as

'the original decision was on the gut feel I guess, after that you've got to make sure you've got some evidence to back it up'

(Hensman and Sadler-Smith, 2011).

Far from feeling the need to attach any particular, let alone universal, value-judgement to either intuitive decision-making or analytical, rational approaches, I have found that it is immensely valuable to consider, when engaged in a group addressing a complex situation or environment, how the individual contributions are made and also to bring to the surface cognitive biases and hidden assumptions which may otherwise lead the group astray.

Essential Rethinking

Deep-cultural dispositions, thinking preferences and behavioural patterns determine the way we perceive, think, and communicate. They form the basis of how we contribute when collaborating with others; they are indeed what makes our perspectives we share different and valuable, especially when collaboratively engaging with complexity. In practice, we have all also acquired personal experience-based thinking shortcuts which allow us to make rapid progress and reserve cognitive energy for seemingly more worthwhile situations; the crux lies in the undiscerning or unconscious application of such heuristics, or similarly, being influenced by undiscovered cognitive biases.

The selection of aspects of these phenomena discussed earlier in this text obviously raises no claim to completeness[15], but is intended to illustrate the rich underpinnings of collaborative efforts to tackle complex situations which many people are not aware of. These diverse dispositions and inclinations of all contributors can be of great benefit to the search for a way ahead when perceived and employed fruitfully, or conversely form an additional and at times impenetrable layer of complexity, misunderstanding and discord when remaining obscured. Symptoms of the latter case include situations in which

- everything seems clear to all people involved, and decisions are taken accordingly, but no progress is made in a frustrating sense of 'gooiness',
- one keeps returning to the same point which seemed resolved a long time ago,
- implicit and tacit agreement takes hold that with the people currently involved in tackling the situation at hand, progress as desired or required is not possible because some participants seemingly '*just do not understand*'.

To avoid the reader being stymied in such a highly detrimental and potentially frustrating impasse, we now turn to the contribution of cultural and ethical neutrality in such a situation and hence to a mode of interacting which Stuart and I have come to call 'Essential Dialogue', first derived in jest from 'essential work', then, with the validity of the metaphor sinking in – for the possibility it can offer for fundamental rethinking.

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[14] The under-reporting of which may be speculated about.

[15] It is valuable to keep in mind how different schools of thought approach similar observations and notions such as deep culture, thinking preferences, behavioural patterns, heuristics and biases from different angles, possibly with different vocabulary, and often with their own partisan agendas within the rich academic dialogue surrounding the overlapping pertinent fields of research.

In '*The Value of Neutrality*', Stuart defines cultural neutrality as

> '*the art of (being perceived as) feeling no personal leaning to any of the manifestations of perception- or value-systems pertaining in a given situation.*'

(Robinson, 2007).

At this point, it is worth pointing out the absoluteness of neutrality in Stuart's understanding, as he explicitly differentiates cultural and ethical neutrality from the meaning of neutrality in general language usage:

> '*cultural neutrality goes beyond the sort of neutrality which many Western cultures understand, i.e. positional impartiality. Cultural neutrality involves the art of taking no personal stand on any one perception or value-system and of flowing with those present in the contextually most appropriate way.*'.

For those of us brought up in a 'Western' society, feeling no personal leaning to any distinct perception or value is unusual at least and at times immensely hard to achieve. This is exacerbated by the fact that many curricula from various fields of study and professional training encourage or even require having and defending an opinion and taking a personal stand. When transitioning to professional life, rapidly having an opinion on all sorts of matters – especially in one's perceived area of expertise – and being seen to clearly know the way ahead in any given situation is often a sought-after and reinforced trait[16], increasing with the level of seniority and management responsibility in an organisation.

Conversely, it is the quite contrary notion of cultural and ethical neutrality which allows one not only to partake in a problem-solving dialogue in the commonly understood sense of being part of

the discussion – or depending on the requirements of the situation in the role of a facilitator or moderator – but also to perceive all the cues which reveal the deep-cultural dispositions, thinking preferences, and behavioural patterns of the people interacting. The contrast with convincedly voicing opinions, dedicatedly debating and steadfastly negotiating one's interests could not be greater. It is precisely not having the need to attach value-judgements to everything said, but instead being able to empathetically listen, which can give access to a level of richness of the dialogue which is not apparent to participants unaccustomed to this practice.

The ability of '*flowing with those present*' in whatever way is most appropriate in a given context – which includes the timing and manner of sharing such perceptions with the group – characterises the contribution of someone facilitating the resolution of a complex situation based on cultural and ethical neutrality. The potential value of such a contribution becomes obvious when engaging with wicked problems in practice and experiencing first-hand their reticence to yield themselves to rational analytical methods and top-down plans – in the words of Nancy Roberts:

> '*By necessity, the designer/facilitator's role had to* [be] *highly flexible and adaptive – a role that constantly co-evolved in relationship to participants' needs and understandings.*'

(Roberts, 2000).

To illustrate how this manner of contribution differs from that of a skilled moderator who switches techniques along a problem-solving process, or readjusts plans in what could be called an agile manner, we can consider the following experience of Stuart from his work in conflict conciliation (Robinson, 2007):

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[16] In German-speaking Switzerland, for example, people tend to have less *atomistic*, *individualistic* and *universalistic* backgrounds than is the case in countries like the US, UK, France, but also Germany – but the reinforcement and partial acquisition of these deep-cultural traits by influence of teachers, lecturers, authors, colleagues and managers, e.g. from such countries can readily be observed, cf. (Robinson, 2010).

'*Not uncommonly, I have found that people have been fighting an intense conflict but, because of their differing perception-systems, lacked a common perception of what they were actually fighting about.*'

Applied to the situations which are described above, a very similar observation can be made, namely that people have often been intensely engaged in attempting to resolve a complex situation, but due to the differing perception- and thinking-systems rooted in their deep-cultural and ethical dispositions lack a common notion of

- the problem itself, keeping in mind that wicked problems by definition cannot be precisely formulated
- what has already been attempted (and how) in terms of resolution approaches,
- progress having been made towards a possible way forward,
  and
- promising next steps to be taken.

At this point it is worth explicitly mentioning that the potentially diverging interests, motivations and agendas of those involved – either overtly disclosed or attempted to be concealed – cannot be ignored in this consideration. Apart from any contextual or organisational background influencing them, these aspects can – just like the ones discussed above – be rooted in or influenced by a person's deep-cultural disposition, thinking preferences and behavioural patterns. Drawing again on Stuart's experience, we find that

'*in order to resolve conflicts sustainably*',

or, in our case, effectively address a complex situation collaboratively,

'*it can often be helpful to recognise not only where the values clash but, first of all, where the perceptions diverge.*'.

For everyone involved in a complex problem-solving situation to gain a better understanding of the

other participants' potentially diverging perceptions is, in itself, a valuable step towards reaching a common notion as outlined above. Taking it from there to the level of all perspectives involved – i.e., additionally including the thoughts, ideas, conceptualisations, and mental model-making, but also intuitions and feelings – cuts right through the layer of potential misunderstanding and discord created by the participants' different perception- and thinking-systems and allows the group to effectively hone in on the very essence of the situation, including cases in which diverging interests, motivations and agendas are at play.

While this description of the intention and potential benefits of such a contribution may appear alike to what is proposed in various approaches to resolving wicked problems outlined above (e.g., '*helping stakeholders to better understand each other's positions and rationales*' (Ritchey, 2011) or '*form a common mental model*' (Horn, 2018)), working at the level of deep-culture, thinking preferences and behavioural patterns goes well beyond those methods, which can a fortiori prove to be valuable instruments for structuring the '*flow*' of the group. In fact, having the possibility to determine as a group which approaches are most appropriate for the situation at-hand, given the characteristics of the collective experience of everyone involved and the progress which we think we have made so far, is a further potential benefit of the contribution of neutrality, as personal preferences become relativised in favour of what benefits our metaphorical survival.

Such survival does not end with reaching the essence of the situation one was stuck in and finding a clear way forward after potentially having been able to fundamentally rethink, but extends to

- communicating the discovered essence of the situation, the results of any fundamental rethinking, as well as the newly discovered way ahead,
  as well as
- operationalising this clear path into the future.

Crucially, both communication and operationalisation can draw on the perspectives of all those involved and seamlessly build on the established '*flow*' with those contributing.

There are two caveats worth mentioning at this point: Firstly, some participants may feel uncomfortable, threatened or alienated if a dearly-held position is undermined by the revealing of underlying assumptions and biases, let alone undisclosed interests, motivations or agendas in an inappropriate manner. Even more so is this the case should elements of a person's deep-cultural disposition, thinking preferences or behavioural patterns be revealed to others inappropriately[17]. These are aspects to which a facilitator must pay particular attention in order to ensure that their contribution does not end up causing the very opposite of what is needed.

In the development of one's intercultural and interethical competence, and hence cultural and ethical neutrality, Stuart uses an understanding of empathy as

> '*feeling one's way non-self-referentially and non-judgementally into the idiosyncrasies of other people's mental and emotional states*'
>
> (Robinson, 2014).

It is such empathy which allows one to perceive another person's dispositions in terms of deep-culture, thinking preferences and behavioural patterns. It is also this empathy, which enables a neutral facilitator to constantly keep growing a notion of what the contextually most appropriate way of '*flowing with those present*' and contributing to the resolution of the situation may be. Citing Stuart concerning the fears of conflict parties feeling their initial positions of strength being dismantled and losing face, coupled with insecurity about the process itself:

> '*In my experience, these fears begin to disperse once the parties realise that they are not being judged by the conciliator.*',
>
> (Robinson, 2007)

which I have again found to be applicable to working collaboratively at the resolution of complex situations or facilitating such exchanges.

The second reservation follows directly from the first: as the above descriptions illustrate, facilitating the search for the essence of a complex situation, allowing one to fundamentally rethink – if required – to find a clear way forward incurs a special understanding of responsibility. It turns out that '*flowing with those present*' makes it incompatible with resorting to a stack of templates or methods in a 'toolbox', or even to defining one's own role in the problem resolution process statically: contributing appropriately requires the ability to constantly redefine the form of one's interaction with everyone else involved in the process, aided by one's increasing awareness about the pertinent, salient aspects of their perception- and thinking-systems. Furthermore, being perceived as neutral by all parties at all times is an acquired art in its own right.

Turning to the outcome of a complex problem-resolution process supported by cultural and ethical neutrality, and quoting Stuart one last time to again transpose his findings from conflict conciliation to collaboratively dealing with complex situations,

> '*I find that this very special form of interaction brings about a more holistic solution more efficiently, with the significant advantage that it is self-generated.*'.

Many readers are doubtlessly familiar with the satisfying feeling of discovery and insight when finally solving a problem in the manner sometimes

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[17] Given cultural and ethical neutrality form the background to the described mode of contributing, it is self-evident that intrinsically no desire can exist to make use of insights gained in any non-neutral, i.e. positional or partisan manner.

called 'outside the box thinking' – or indeed thinking inside an appropriately sized box (Coyne et al., 2007), or, when at long last exposing a persistent cognitive bias which had been blinkering one's thinking and exacerbating the blindness in which one was with hindsight operating. The feelings often experienced when the very essence of a complex a situation is found, allowing one to fundamentally rethink, are often akin to the above, magnified by the significance and wickedness of the predicament. A posteriori it appears almost unthinkable that the essence was not manifest earlier and inconceivable that the way forward was not obvious from the outset. Also, after such rethinking has taken place, the breakthrough thought tends to be permanent in its effect by enriching future thinking and hence decision-making[18].

Conclusion

We set off into this article in Aberdeen and explored the term 'neutrality' as used in general language and politics, using Swiss neutrality in the Ukraine war as illustration. This use of 'neutrality' stands in contrast with the definition of cultural and ethical neutrality used by Stuart Robinson in his work in intercultural and interethical conflict conciliation and which forms the basis for our consultancy work. When working with clients on organisational visions, the strategies with which those visions are pursued, the culture in which those strategies are operationalised and the ethical values which underlie an organisation, the application of such a radical form of neutrality has proven to be immensely valuable to rapidly grow an understanding of the underlying premises, deep-cultural backgrounds, thinking preferences and behavioural patterns of the people involved. Working in such a way involves a form of exchange with which it becomes possible to cut right through all seemingly important and urgent issues at hand, straight to the very essence of a situation of fundamental importance.

At the outset, one may feel faced with a lack of viable options, at other times, it is typical to experience a bewildering and unsettling complexity of seemingly inauspicious options and intricacies involved. This predicament is often related to uncertainty and the lack of reliable information, as well as to distractions which constantly claim one's attention and to time-pressure which prevents the required focus and clear thoughts. With hindsight, one realises that the complex, 'wicked' or 'messy' situation in which one was stuck would have required fundamental rethinking in order to find a way forward, a need not recognised or acknowledged at the time. That's precisely where the value of neutrality can become apparent by helping one to discover tacit and implicit assumptions, cognitive biases one may not be aware of, as well as cultural and ethical premises and understandings of all those involved. Becoming aware of these elements in a dialogue addressing a complex situation and making them transparent in a contextually appropriate way enables those involved to reach the very essence of the problem together and gain the very viable option to fundamentally rethink.

Alan Ettlin, 18th December 2022

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[18] All the while keeping in mind the risks of becoming overly attached to the newly found resolution approach when addressing new situations, cf. the discussion of 'mechanised' problem solving above.

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