

Part One: Understanding Relationships

Chapter 5: Universality

*A universal point of view is not only the result of
the work of specialized groups; it depends to a
great degree on individual effort.*

Every advance in knowledge demands a reevaluation of our interpretation of the world and life. Human knowledge is constantly evolving. Each day we know more; discoveries are made continuously, opening up new frontier of knowledge. The history of humanity reveals not only the chronology of human events but also the process of the evolution of knowledge.

At first glance, this evolution does not seem to create conflicts but, in fact, it often does. Sometimes real revolutions result. Every step forward demands a change, for each discovery perfects the vision of everything believed to be known.

Some discoveries cause a restructuring of society. The invention of the printing press, and much later, telephone, radio and television communication precipitated enormous changes, the effects of which we are still experiencing. Free access to information and direct and instantaneous communication make the world smaller. Other discoveries oblige us to relocate ourselves within reality. Proof that the earth is neither flat nor the center of the universe, direct exploration of space, access to the world of the infinitesimally small--all this forces us to redefine our vision of the world and to reconsider our place in the cosmos. Every time we change the way we understand things for another, broader view, we also have to change the way we understand our surrounding reality, even the way we understand ourselves. For example, people of the Middle Ages had quite a different image of themselves and the world from the image we have of ourselves today.

In spite of the fact that we accept the idea that change is indispensable for progress, it is very difficult for us--not to say almost impossible--to recognize that the process of permanent change is a universal law and that it is, therefore, equally applicable to all the aspects of our lives, including our opinions and way of thinking. From the moment of birth on, we begin forming an idea of reality. Little by little we develop our opinions and vision of the world and life. While we are involved in this process we are eager to learn; we question, investigate and study. We absorb knowledge and each new piece of information enriches us and helps us to perfect our judgment and our understanding. When we reach the point where we feel sufficiently sure of what we know, we become less open and begin losing the capacity to change our interpretations. We are more inclined to defend our positions

than to broaden them. It becomes more important to us to prove that we are right than to seek a truth that could show us we are not right.

The readiness to impose our own point of view gives rise not only to individual conflict. The history of the different visions people have had of the world and life is also the history of the conflicts between different groups, with the object of making one of those interpretations prevail over the others. Yet up until the present, the struggles have been between visions with the same limits to their idea of reality. If one group thought the earth was flat, so did everyone else. History, however, does not stop. Confrontations continue, but now the life span of one particular point of view is much briefer. Each day brings new advances in all fields of knowledge. It becomes necessary to adjust our vision to conditions that are evolving at a fast rate. In this process, the different concepts of reality held by successive generations may be observed with growing clarity. Since the rhythm of change is accelerating, we are now contemporaneous with several of those visions. Today the youngest generation is forming its own way of understanding things, since it has richer sources of information than previous generations had at the time their interpretations were crystallizing. There thus exist two kinds of confrontation: one between groups of the same generation with differing opinions, and the other between generations that assign different limits to their realities.

What does all this mean for us today? Although we know that our way of seeing things is not perfect or final, many of us feel that "we are right," that our view is the most sensible, the most just, the best. It may be true that we tolerate different opinions and, ideally, give everyone the right to think and feel as he or she likes, but deep down we feel the need to justify our

point of view by imaging that it is the broadest. We think it is universal and therefore the best for everyone. This attitude, which seems innocent at first, is possibly at the root of humankind's tragedies.

It is now time for us to learn the great lesson of history. In spite of the tremendous determination with which, for centuries, each human group has struggled to impose its vision of life, not one has ever reached that objective. No vision of the world, no doctrine, has been shared by all human beings.

Of course, this does not mean that a particular viewpoint is pernicious or inferior. On the contrary, each has the possibility of being the best, within its limits. For example, my understanding of sickness may not be the most perfect. Nevertheless, it may be very useful to me if it helps me to cure myself. Moreover, if I accept that my understanding of sickness is imperfect, I am always alert to the new discoveries which might help me in the future. By remaining conscious of the limits of my knowledge, I have the opportunity to broaden it continuously. I do not become enclosed in my way of understanding. I desire to learn and improve what I already know. Therefore, although different schools of thought exist in all fields, as long as each recognizes the limitations of its point of view, every advance a particular school makes will be of benefit to the others, since all will be prepared to take advantage of it. In this way, everyone's work will be useful in generating a more universal vision of the world and life.

However, a universal point of view is not only the result of the work of specialized groups; it depends to a great degree on individual effort. If it does not happen in each of us, individually, it does not happen anywhere. Effort is fundamental. It allows us to develop our capacity to respond to a broader point of view than the one we have. Even if we are shown a more universal

point of view, we deal with it in the same way we do with any information we receive, we limit or expand it according to the scope of our interpretation of life. For example, if we learn that outer space is habitable, we may consider space as a possible place to take a vacation, or as providing an opportunity to develop a society that will have a more harmonious relationship with the universe.

It is not easy to broaden our viewpoint. However, if we were able to change our attitude just a little, that path would be clearer. If we realized how limited our view is, we could apply the lesson history has taught us. We could also place more emphasis on the need to examine and perfect our vision, instead of always struggling to impose it. From this standpoint, we are all in the same situation: we all need to broaden our point of view: This is a work that each person does within himself. It cannot be forced upon someone else. It is a victory that each person can achieve in his or her own heart. Perhaps this is the road to take toward a more harmonious and peaceful world.