

A (Cybernetic) Musing: Anarchy, Alcoholics Anonymous and Cybernetics: Chapter One

Ranulph Glanville¹

Introduction

This column may be one of the more unusual columns I have offered. I intend to develop an argument I made here and elsewhere some years ago (Glanville, 1998a, 2000) about the value of being unmanageable—out of control—and to relate this to the political “system” that I most value, anarchy. By this I do not mean the aggressive near-communist version of anarchy, but in a more literal translation from the Greek origins, an (without) + archos (ruler)—libertarian anarchy. Some, seeing this in terms of a reduction of hierarchy, believe this is an important aspect of second order cybernetics. Anarchy, in this sense, means that we chose for ourselves and take responsibility for our choices: It is not a licence to abuse others or to profiteer. Some believe this is a hopelessly romantic and unrealistic view, but I like to think of it as aspirational. I belong to this aspirational group.

Anarchy has an ancient and expansive history, touching many different areas. Commonly represented as destructive and violent (as in the phrase “descended into anarchy”), this is an extraordinary distortion, although some who call themselves anarchists do follow this destructive path. It refers to a society without publicly enforced government, aiming to avoid the use of coercion, force and authority as mechanisms of control and government. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* online has an extensive and fascinating article covering many aspects of anarchic thinking. Its terse characterisation is:

anarchism, cluster of doctrines and attitudes centred on the belief that government is both harmful and unnecessary. (Retrieved October 10, 2013 from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/22753/anarchism>)

Quoting Proudhon, it suggests that anarchy is the social equivalent of individual equality:

As man seeks justice in equality, so society seeks order in anarchy. Anarchy—the absence of a sovereign—such is the form of government to which we are every day approximating. (Retrieved October 10, 2013 from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/22753/anarchism>)

1. CyberEthics Research, Southsea. Email: ranulph@glanville.co.uk

Given cybernetics' focus on control, these aims probably seem strange enough. But I shall develop my argument through an example: Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). I shall introduce observations of how AA functions in a manner consistent with its therapy (hence making it self-consistent, in the way Margaret Mead requested [1968] that we should make cybernetics self-consistent [often taken as the point of origin of the birth of second-order cybernetics]). I shall explain how AA manages to maintain itself as the most anarchic organisation I know of, the devices it uses, and shall show how these are inherently second order cybernetic, even if they arrived about 25 years earlier! And I shall point out the importance of some aspects of AA's self-control that do not generally appear in second order-cybernetic accounts, from which we may become aware of limitations we currently (and, I believe, properly) accept.

Because of the length of the column, it is written in 2 chapters, each made of 2 parts. The first chapter appears in this issue of the journal. In it, I am concerned to set out some background and context, and to explain how AA functions—as an organisation (not as a therapy). Essentially, this is a preparatory chapter, briefing the reader, although I do include some tasters of the cybernetic links I will pursue in chapter 2. I have tried to address a wide audience. Regular readers of the journal probably know little of AA. Those interested in AA probably know little cybernetics. I hope, by the time we reach the end, that I will have accommodated both without oversimplifying or patronising those already in the know.

Part 1—Context

Control

Ever since Norbert Wiener gave the name *cybernetics* to a collection of ideas that were bubbling up together in a number of different fields, cybernetics has been associated with the concept of control (and the communication necessary for control to occur).

In previous columns we have explored the concept of control and discovered that, crudely put, there are two distinct concepts (control as facilitative and control as restrictive). Of these, the cybernetic use indicates facilitation, whereas popular use of the word is generally restrictive, which is one possible source of the difficulties that cybernetics faces in public understanding.

We have also considered the cybernetic concept most closely associated with control—variety, and have discovered that variety is a complex and perhaps ambiguous notion (Glanville, 1998a). And we have discovered that to be out of control, to find the world unmanageable, is not only on occasion inevitable, but has an upside: It can allow us access to more states than we could have if constrained by our own imagining (i.e., if the variety of everything were reduced to the variety we have). Further, as understood in the Twelve Step Program of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), it may allow us to free ourselves of an addiction to alcohol by giving up attempts to control, as I also explained in an earlier column (Glanville, 2004). These are benefits,

and are perhaps surprising: Control may be subtler and more interesting than we think! They indicate a way in which attempt to reduce control, as put into practice in AA, can cast a new, enriching and essentially an-archic light on that basic cybernetic concept.

An-archos

There is one large social body which has survived (for nearly 80 years), and which is essentially an-archic in the sense of the components of the original Greek: an = without; and arkos = ruler, chief (*Oxford Dictionary of the English Language*, Apple OS 10.7.5). This is Alcoholics Anonymous. I consider AA a very remarkable, and (to my sensitivities) admirable society. A strong hint of its an-archic position can be found in what is called its Ninth Tradition, which begins: “AA, as such, ought never be organized.”

Henceforth, I shall refer extensively to AA’s Traditions: All can be found on the website http://www.aa.org/bigbookonline/en_appendicei.cfm (I shall use the online version of AA’s Big Book, retrieved 7 July 2013). They will be referred to by the word *Tradition*, with the relevant tradition number.)

In this column, I intend to explore how the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous, founded in 1935 (and developed over the next decade or so into its present form) by the pair of suffering alcoholics known as Bill W. and Dr. Bob, continues to survive. AA has an estimated worldwide membership of 2,133,842, although members may be transient and there is no official sign up, so estimation is difficult and should only be taken as an indicator! I would guess that the number of people associated with AA is actually an order of magnitude greater. I shall explore how AA maintains itself, remaining true to its purposes and continuing to gain strength, without recourse to the conventional mechanisms of hierarchical control, but an-archically.

AA is no secret society, but it does not seek publicity, preferring to keep its own counsel. As it says (Tradition Eleven): “Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films.” Given the word *anonymous* is used in the fellowship’s name, this position is perhaps not surprising.

AA holds both open (to the public) and closed (members only) meetings, and I have been able to attend many of both, around the world, and to talk with many members. My experience in these meetings, enriched by reference to key texts (especially AA’s [n.d.a] *Big Book*) and by asking AA members for their opinion, is the source of this column (rather than conventional academic sources).

A Coming Together in General Attitudes—A Background

Readers will be familiar with the following quandary:

You take a liberal position that the view of each individual is valid and their right to that view should be respected (no matter how much you disagree with them). Another person, however, takes the view, that (s)he, and only (s)he, is right (no matter how much you disagree with that view). The familiar problem is that you will provide

space and legitimacy for his/her view, while (s)he will not provide space and legitimacy for yours. There is no reciprocation. You let him/her into your world, whereupon (s)he takes possession of it and throws you out. This is a familiar problem in, for instance, democratic countries, where extremists threaten this respect of the right of choice of all. We may consider this a key difficulty facing the liberals and, in my understanding, the an-archist. It is similar to the choice, in logic, between either/or (exclusive) both/and (inclusive) that I wrote about in Glanville (2006). When stated “Which is better, either/or, or both/and logic?” the choice has already been made, since the choice itself is structured in terms of either/or: *either* {either/or logic}, or {both/and logic}. Even the choice both/and is made with the guiding framework of either/or! The discussion of these different logics formed the basis of Gregory Bateson’s (1987) last paper, “Men are Grass.”

AA, as a fellowship, has to deal with this problem, which can be seen as fundamental to its general position. The question is, how do you maintain a fellowship so that each person’s experience is valued, each person is taken to be responsible for their thoughts and opinions, their actions and behaviours (i.e., within a both/and logic) when someone’s ego takes over and demands to command (applying an either/or logic)? This can happen in AA when an active drunk joins a meeting—from which they cannot be excluded since the purpose of the meeting is to help drunks recover—or when someone’s pride leads to an ego trip.

Thus, AA may be placed in the same camp as second-order cybernetics (see Glanville, 2004). Both face Mead’s (1968) question, how to maintain the consistency required between the message given, the courses of action proposed, and the way of describing and maintaining them. It is crucial to the success of AA that it both supports AA members and, itself, behaves in the manner it proposes as a (healthy) way of living for its adherents. I claim it succeeds in this, which means it has something to teach those of us interested in second order cybernetics. There is a more than strong analogy. This is why I write about it, and it’s an-archos.

Part 2—What AA Does: The Way of Working of an Anarchic Organisation

AA’s Suggested Path to Recovery

AA nowhere preaches that it has the only path to recovery from alcoholism. In its *Big Book* (Alcoholics Anonymous, n.d.b, p. 58), it offers “Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path.” Introducing the famous Twelve Steps, it continues “Here are the steps we took, which are suggested as a program of recovery” (Alcoholics Anonymous, n.d.b, p. 59). Notice the subtle lack of absolutism in the choice of words: *rarely* (rather than never) and *suggested* (rather than commanded).

The Twelve Step Program does not provide a cure: In my understanding, it is a guide for living composed by and for those who were unfortunate enough not to learn how to do this naturally, as they grew up. Following this path may provide respite from addiction, allowing addicts to live outside its clutches. The Twelve Steps is a collection of cumulative actions that help alcoholics recover from the prison of their

alcoholism by dealing with their past and living in a present free of stress. They are offered as a (major) part of a program that can, in many cases, lead to recovery—if adhered to. In other words, the Twelve Step Program is a way of living to be actively practised each day. This program provides means for release from, but not cure of, alcohol addiction, which in AA's terms is seen as a primarily spiritual (as opposed to mental or physical) disease.

The Twelve Step Program is complemented by the Twelve Traditions, a sort of informal guidance system which I shall refer to throughout this text and will discuss in detail below. There are two versions of the traditions: the original (long) version from 1946, and the short version distilled from this, in more general use. In this column, I also generally quote the short version. Note the use of the word Tradition—as opposed to rule or statute—suggesting a culture or context people join rather than a forcefully applied restriction.

AA refers to what it offers as a program. The program is more than the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, and other published material. In particular, it is a Fellowship finding its expression in its meetings. Almost as important is the notion of service, which takes many forms. The AA position is that you should “give it away to keep it.” It might seem, to the drunken, arrogant individualists with low self-esteem, who come to AA, that to follow a program and give up the personal freedom they so promote is contrary, until we remember that they have already lost their personal freedom to alcohol. To decide to ask for help and to blindly do what you are told is a last desperate step of at least some of those who have reached their rock bottom.

AA is a single purpose fellowship that denies itself any interest other than its “one primary purpose—to carry the message to the alcoholic who still suffers” (Tradition 5). At meetings it is customary to read a preamble which ends with the sentence “Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety” (AA Preamble, n.d., p. 1). To this end (Tradition 6) “An AA group ought never endorse, finance or lend the AA name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.”

At the start of AA meetings, members are reminded that they should only share matters relevant to their recovery. What is relevant to anyone's recovery is for them to decide. But the importance of focussing on the matter at hand is stressed. AA's single purpose is brought to the fore. AA does not offer a platform for other ailments except insofar as they are relevant to recovery from alcoholism. In cybernetic terms, the concept in use is constraint, for, as we shall see, AA's focus does not follow a single authorised line, but a wide pathway within a system of constraints. AA's are advised to find what works for them, and to stick with that.

AA's Language

AA uses a particular language, a language of conciliation. The Twelve Step Program is suggested as a path to recovery. Alcoholics Anonymous is a plural (we) rather than a singular: The totality of Alcoholics who meet anonymously is called a fellowship. The fellowship holds regular meetings. It does not have rules, it has traditions.

Two verbs used in meetings are, I believe, particularly telling. Participants do not talk, they share (their experience, strength and hope); they do not argue, correct or even agree, but identify with what others say. Each speaker offers what (s)he has to offer in a manner that only claims it is his/her experience: It is left open to others to learn what they will and construct whatever relevance they construct. No one is told they are wrong, even if sharing against general AA beliefs and conventions. Each person may offer their experience in case others find it helpful, without fear of correction or rejection, in a non-judgmental environment. (A share may often be a means by which a speaker comes to better understand his/her self.)

AA's words are chosen because they bring people together and reduce friction: AA meetings are models of tolerance of individual difference and of respect for the right of each of us to hold (and express) our own views. Meetings can be seen as situations in which to practise tolerance—something that does not come naturally to most alcoholics. Thus, AA's language can be understood as a way of realising the first Tradition: "Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon AA unity." I am reminded of Gordon Pask's great cybernetic conversational loop closer: that we may agree to disagree. I believe that concept is the basis on which AA's tolerance is based.

Occasionally, meetings fall short of this ideal. If someone is very disruptive (s)he may be asked to leave: The sobriety of the many may outweigh the wish to reach out to the one. After all, if those in recovery do not remain in recovery they will not be able to help others. There are also those who appoint themselves as leaders, valuing their own opinions and experience particularly highly. Such people are called, in AA parlance, *Bleeding Deacons*. On occasion Bleeding Deacons will set up on their own with their band of followers and their own truths. Then, wise AA members will turn their backs and get on with their AA meetings!

Anonymity

At first, the concept of anonymity seems simple: People with terrible pasts (few, if any, of those attending AA do not greatly regret past behaviours—some of which are criminal) need protection if they are to speak openly, especially in a group that may include members who are still practising alcoholics as well as those in less robust recovery. Anonymity is a way of assuring this. Members are known by whatever first name they chose to use. In the case of popular names, some prefix will often be used to distinguish between them. Thus, Gypsy Mary, Bookish Barry, and so forth.

However, the founders of AA and the early members who developed and defined the Twelve Steps discovered anonymity has a much deeper meaning and a much wider reach. They noted that alcoholics tend to behave in a manner that can only be described as arrogant: a practising alcoholic's response to getting drunk again is to insist they'll manage to drink normally, next time. As I explained in an earlier column (Glanville, 2004), believing you can control your drinking provides a logically irresistible challenge to drink again, with the same unfortunate outcome (but one that, for the drunk, is reported to get worse each time). The belief you can beat something

you have persistently failed to beat is one definition of insanity, and requires an arrogance in relation to the substance you are addicted to—an arrogance found time and again to be ill-based. (It also requires near suicidal courage.) Alcohol humiliates those addicted to it, and the AA way out is to give in to the superior power that alcohol holds over the alcoholic: “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol,” as Step 1 states (Alcoholics Anonymous, n.d.b, p. 59). Thus, humility is part of the AA path to recovery: Be humble, or you will be humbled.

Humility is not sustained by adulation. To remain humble (as AA founder, Bill W., reported from his own experience) may be really difficult. In the end, AA made sure that it has no leaders, embracing personal humility (and its consequence, equality) as its path. Anonymity is the means to such humility. It is for this reason, I believe, that the Twelfth Tradition reads: “Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.”

Many famous people recovering from alcohol problems decline to discuss their experience. The second half of the Eleventh Tradition tells us: “we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films.” It is a difficult matter for members of the fellowship to decide if, when and how to speak about their experience in public. It is difficult because the motivation must not be to build the alcoholic’s ego. In AA, ego, arrogance and pride (about which Bateson, 1971 wrote in his study praising AA), along with resentment, are deemed the greatest dangers to an alcoholic remaining in recovery. These may be countered in several ways, of which service (to AA and to other alcoholics) is probably the most important.

Confidentiality is seen as a complement to anonymity, AA meetings regularly end with the reminder “Who you see here, what you hear here, when you leave here, let it stay here.”

Individual Responsibility

Accepting, as AA does, that the experience and understanding of each of us is our own, and in this respect necessarily different, AA has no option but to insist that responsibility for actions is personal. Each alcoholic is responsible for his/her own addiction and what to do about it: they must lead any action to help, themselves. While we cannot control what life serves up to us, we can and should control how we respond to it. Much cosseted caring for alcoholics is understood, in AA terms, as enabling alcoholics to continue their addictive behaviour and is counter-productive—which many find counter-intuitive and difficult to accept.

Alcoholics, especially when practising their alcoholism, often try to deny responsibility for their behaviour. Typically, they blame everything and everyone but themselves: There is always an excuse. They also get others on board—for instance, a partner phoning work to say the alcoholic has flu when (s)he has a hangover. Such behaviour by the affected non-alcoholic is called co-dependency and makes a fascinating study consisting of a circle of positive feedback we will not pursue here. Taking responsibility, a major element in recovery, implies no longer blaming other people for events or actions one takes oneself, no matter what the circumstances. In

meetings, members will often report the benefit of accepting responsibility, and the spiritual release and freedom it brings. As with so many things in AA, this may seem counter to so-called common sense.

As well as the individual responsibility of each alcoholic, AA understands that each group is responsible for itself: group responsibility remains local. Tradition Four says "Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or AA as a whole" while Tradition Six states "Every AA group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions." Self-reliance and self-regulation express acceptance of each group taking responsibility. For instance, if a meeting group cannot pay rent for the hire of its meeting room, the meeting will go under. AA accepts neither bequests nor gifts.

There is another mechanism by which groups formally take responsibility for their own behaviour: the conscience meeting, in which members of the group raise matters of concern, giving feedback from group members to group members about how the group is functioning and making corrections. Cybernetics!

Finally, remember Tradition Eleven starts: "Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion," which implies a similar sort of self-reliance.

Plurality

While AA recognises and acts to welcome the anarchically extreme individualism of members of the fellowship, it understands each member's individual freedom to exist within the context of AA itself. After all, AA has brought salvation to those who follow its program allowing them to return to a life of joy, worth and creativity. I wrote above about the desperation of the drunk who holds on to his/her individual freedom while becoming more and more alcohol's slave, his/her life totally dominated and determined by alcohol, eventually giving up the freedom to enslavement to follow a proscribed path. Following this path leads from the slavery in which they have lived to a renewed freedom, enjoyed more and more as each becomes secure on the path of recovery. Another paradox!

This regained freedom exists within a context provided by AA. Many an alcoholic who has lost connection with their AA context has started drinking again. A return to the "delights" of drink, is generally reported to be a dreadful experience. For the alcoholic in recovery in AA, recovery gives freedom, but also requires acceptance of the concomitant context which admits this freedom: a context recognised in AA's chosen words (e.g., share, we) and in the way in which speakers at meetings introduce themselves; "I'm Sally-Peter. I am an alcoholic."

Because those who sober up in AA do so within this AA context, AA is protective of its own existence. This is made explicit in the First Tradition: "Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon AA unity." This tradition asserts recovery depends on AA hanging together, and, because those who achieve some recovery through the AA program value both AA and their recovery, it is generally not hard for them to keep in mind that AA works: There is no reason to create factions. We have already examined the general behaviour (ethos) at AA

meetings, and some of what AA calls *defects of character* that are commonly found in alcoholics and which seem strongly connected to the course of their addiction. In the end, these concerns lead members to behave with tolerance, care and respect for others; even those who, or whose views, they don't like. In the context of second order cybernetics (Glanville, 2005), I have used words such as generous, open-minded, tolerant, giving. Plurality is an approach that clearly brings together AA, anarchy and cybernetics.

Meetings of Meetings

AA meetings do not exist in isolation. AAs meet to co-ordinate their actions, for instance, times and places of meetings, through what is called *intergroup*. Each recognised group within an area should have a representative at intergroup. Apart from aiding co-ordination (and other things such as the area telephone answering service), intergroup provides guidance, describing the collective wisdom of the various groups meeting, through their representatives. Representatives report back to their home groups whenever necessary. The intention is to hold a meeting of groups of groups (meetings of meetings)—the sort of self-similarity, meta-description and self-organisation which can be found at the heart of second order cybernetics. Often intergroup will organise weekend conferences when large crowds of AAs assemble for a festival of non-stop meetings.

Intergroup itself co-operates with others, and with the General Service Office of AA in New York City. This is responsible for AA publications such as the *Big Book* (sales of which help fund the office) and for providing structure and finance to pay for such matters. It provides advice down the chain to individual groups. It is responsible to a board of trustees, several of whom are not alcoholics and not AA members.

While there is thus a hierarchical structure for co-ordinating meetings of meetings, this is a light structure which is seen as the servant of individual groups, with the intergroup representative shuttling between home and intergroup meetings bearing news and offering opinions. Indeed, being an intergroup representative is one of the most highly regarded forms of service that individual AAs can give.

Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the idea that Alcoholics Anonymous and cybernetics, specially second-order cybernetics, have much in common; that what they have in common is an anarchic quality; and I suggested this is worth exploration. This is particularly clear in how a cybernetic appreciation of control might reflect the AA attitude to control. I have also suggested that both are essentially an-archic, in the libertarian sense of the word.

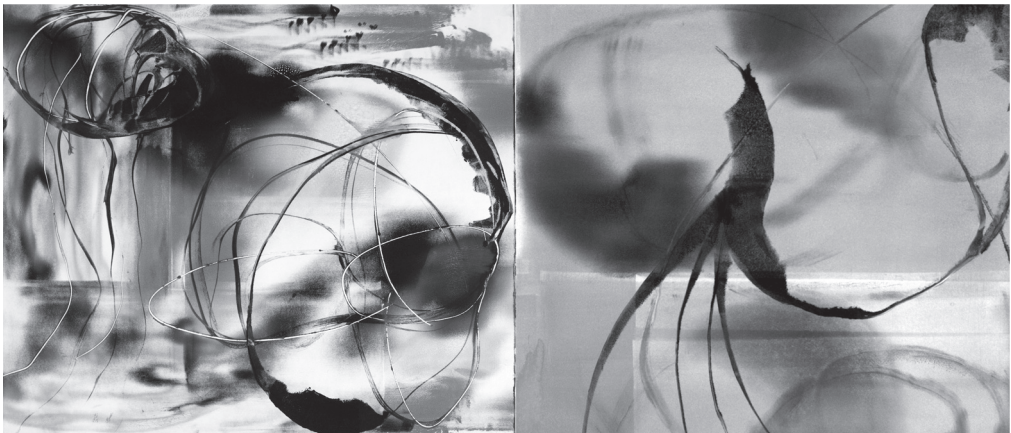
I also introduced the liberal difficulty faced by those who are pluralist (living in a both/and logic) and those who live in either/or logic, explaining how difficult it is to retain both/and in the face of either/or. Both/and is, I will argue in the second chapter

(along with Bateson), the essential logic of (second-order) cybernetics. AA, I wish to claim, has found a way in which both/and logic may survive in the face of either/or, a way of living in both/and from which cybernetics may learn.

In this first chapter, I have written about how AA functions, believing that most readers, as I, will not initially be familiar with this. I have hinted at the cybernetic connections and the anarchic surroundings. If I had to chose one single statement that brings together AA, anarchy and cybernetics it would be the second part of AA's Second Tradition: "Our leaders are but trusted servants: they do not govern." In the second chapter I develop the parallels between cybernetics, anarchy and Alcoholics Anonymous.

References

- AA Preamble. (n.d.). Retrieved 7 July, 2013 from http://www.aa.org/en_pdfs/smf-92_en.pdf
- Alcoholics Anonymous. (n.d.a). *Big book* (web version). Retrieved 7 July, 2013 from http://www.aa.org/bigbookonline/en_tableofcnt.cfm
- Alcoholics Anonymous. (n.d.b). *Big book*, chapter 5. Retrieved 7 July 2012 from http://www.aa.org/bigbookonline/en_bigbook_chapt5.pdf
- Bateson, G (1971). The cybernetics of 'self': A theory of alcoholism. *Psychiatry*, 34 (1).
- Bateson, G (1987) Men are grass: Metaphor and the world of mental process. In W. Thompson (Ed.), *GALLA: A way of knowing*. Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Press.
- Foerster, H. von (2003). Ethics and second-order cybernetics. In *Understanding understanding*. New York: Springer.
- Glanville, R. (1998a). A (cybernetic) musing: Varieties of variety. *Cybernetics and Human Knowing*, 5(1).
- Glanville, R. (1998b). A (cybernetic) musing: Variety and creativity, *Cybernetics and Human Knowing*, 5(3).
- Glanville, R. (2000). The Value of being unmanageable: Variety and creativity in CyberSpace. In H. Eichmann, J. Hochgerner, & F. Nahrada (Eds.), *Netzwerke*. Vienna: Falter Verlag.
- Glanville, R. (2004). A (cybernetic) musing: Control, variety and addiction. *Cybernetics and Human Knowing*, 11(4)
- Glanville, R. (2005). Cybernetics. In C. Mitcham (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of science, technology, and ethics*. Woodbridge, CT: Macmillan Reference USA.
- Glanville, R. (2006). A (cybernetic) musing: The IFSR, diagrammes and inclusive logic. *Cybernetics and Human Knowing*, 13(3-4).
- Mead, M. (1968). The cybernetics of cybernetics. In H. von Foerster et al. (Eds.), *Purposive systems* (pp. 1-11). New York: Spartan Books.
- Wiener, N. (1954). *The human use of human beings: Cybernetics and society* (2nd ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.



Fox, D. (2012). Two images: *Untitled*. Monotype; 22 x 18 in.