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Learning with Locker: an appreciation

I would like to celebrate and commemorate the life and work of Alfred Locker by talking about key understandings and concepts I learnt from him.

I met Alfred Locker in 1978, at the vast, NATO sponsored conference on Cybernetics and Systems that George Klir organised in Binghampton, New York. I was a novice in the academic world from an almost entirely non-academic background. Alfred and I both contributed to a session focussed on the newly published concept of autopoiesis, which was creating great excitement and interest at the time.

We soon, as Milan Zeleny, the editor of the resulting volume noted, discovered a certain camaraderie. From Alfred's point of view, I am not sure what the attraction was. Perhaps it had simply to do with the expression of his essentially generous nature. From mine, there was much to learn from an older academic mentor. My professor, Gordon Pask, was such a mentor for many years, but it was good to have someone from a different background and with a new insight. Alfred gently stepped in and offered me support and guidance. He also introduced me to a different background and culture than I had come from: the German-speaking tradition.

One of the things you tend to believe (and get wrong) when you live as a native speaker of such an apparently dominant world language as English, is that that language encompasses everything. Alfred showed me, not by preaching but by the discourse in his papers, the lasting importance and distinctiveness of this German-speaking tradition. I found (and, I am ashamed to say, continue to find) some difficulty in much of what he wrote not so much because of problems in his use of English as in his mindset; the way of thinking and the references that form the backbone of the German academic tradition, in contrast to the Anglo Saxon. Alfred's contemporary, our mutual friend Richard Jung, has often commented that it is difficult to write about Alfred's work for an English speaking audience because of just these differences. I concur. Looking through Alfred's papers you will find as few English names as you will find German in mine! I remain woefully ignorant of the German tradition

Alfred made me aware of, but I have come to covet it. The Anglo Saxon tradition is in several ways quite different from the German: unless you know both this can remain unnoticed for a long time. There are advantages in each. Confusingly, there are also some strong similarities.

I have mentioned that Alfred introduced me to the German academic tradition. The word academic is also important to me. The way the Anglo Saxon tradition operates, and specially how it operated in Britain in the late 1960s and early 1970s when I was a student, meant that it was easy to overlook the explicit rigour and demanding standards of scholarship that are so desirable in academic work, regardless of tradition. The period around 1970 in Britain saw in a short flash a sort of renaissance and optimism that it was wonderful to be part of. It also meant certain ideas and expectations were given special authority and status, but often were not academic in either intention or value. In my case (and the case of many others), this meant that the academic world was treated with less respect than I later learned was appropriate. Alfred was one of the continental thinkers I encountered in the late 1970s who taught me the importance of understanding what it means, within the German tradition, to be an academic. I find this lesson of almost daily importance when I teach designers, whose association with the academy often remains as ill-formed as mine was around 1970. This is not surprising because the original background from which I came to study cybernetics was design.

So, from Alfred Locker, I learnt about both the German and the academic tradition.

I have so far avoided talking about Alfred Locker's work. In part this is because I continue to lack fluency in the German tradition (and language), and so feel less than well-informed, and reluctant to pontificate. Alfred, I think, also recognised this distance: he used to tell me about the German group with whom he could communicate in a manner that suited his thinking and his background, often at special meetings here in Baden, where he displayed in public his TransClassical Systems Theory. It sounded to me like his intellectual home.

Nevertheless, I do wish to make a comment, and it is as fundamental to my understanding as the lessons Alfred taught me about the German academic tradition.

There is one word that seems to me central to Alfred Locker's thinking. That word is *presupposition*. Going back over the papers I have, and bringing to mind our correspondence and our conversations, I find the notion of presupposition always present, suffusing everything, truly a background concept (for that is what presuppositions are) contrarily demanding the attention of the spotlight! From the time when we met, when we were both trying to get to grips with the concept of autopoiesis, until the most recent paper of his I have, the notion of presupposition is omni-present. The involved observer is also present, but one can suggest that this observer is, itself, a presupposition necessary for the notion of presupposition: for where do we find presuppositions if not in the observer? If you have an observer, I think Alfred would have agreed, you have presuppositions – and if you have presuppositions you need an observer to have them. I know Alfred would have insisted you always have an observer!

The best way I can think of to articulate what Alfred taught me about presuppositions is through a personal example.

Second order cybernetics (the sort of cybernetics that most interests me) was developed to take into account not the possibility of the observer being involved in his/her observation, but the inevitability of this involvement. Alfred also took this position. However, as is well known, there are several problems associated with the position, one of which is primarily formal. Briefly, the problem is that, according to formal Systems Theory (based on the infamous theorem of Kurt Goedel), no formal system can be

described by itself in such a manner that the description is known to be simultaneously both complete and consistent. This argument has been used extensively in debates concerning A.I., and can be seen to go back at least as far as Lady Lovelace's argument that (in a programmed machine), any intelligence we may find is put there by the programmer and is thus the programmer's, not the machine's.

Gordon Pask (discussing Lars Loefgren's paper "An axiomatic explanation of complete self-reproduction") showed his doctoral class a way round this, which goes as follows. Say some system is described by another system so that the arrangement is of a describing meta-system looking down on a system being described. Now say that gradually the meta-system's description improves and the difference between the two systems decreases by a process of cybernetic error reduction or by slippage of both the system and the meta-system towards each other. It is not beyond our imagining that at some time the improvement will be such that the description is effectively both complete and consistent: as Pask explained it, the system itself becomes the meta-system to the system's meta-system: that is, the system becomes its own meta-meta-system.

My account of Pask's elaboration on Loefgren's theme is inadequate in many respects. Nevertheless, you will surely see both the appeal and the distastefulness of this manoeuvre: it is a practical work-around which scarcely concerns itself with Goedel's theorem at all! At the time, I found this manoeuvre exciting, probably because of the sort of person I am and my educational background.

It also initiated my thinking about such "untouchables" of the European tradition as logic, which I can summarise thus: if there is something we need from (in this case) logic, but it cannot be provided, then we have to choose between saying that what we require is an illegitimate requirement, or that logic needs to be amended, to change. For example, cellular reproduction seems to require that cells contain their own perfect – that is, complete and consistent – self-description, which Gödel's theorem rules out. This creates a problem if we are to deal with this phenomenon using logic.

For many, logic is unchangeable, and to propose changing it is a form of academic blasphemy. To me it is just obvious: if the logic does not work for what we legitimately need, change it (but change it sensitively). I see logic as a construct: consequently, I find myself not so worried about Goedel's Theorem as those who think of logic as some truth. However, I do not think Alfred thought of logic in this way: his is more respectful and, quite possibly, more deeply understanding. He wanted to find a way from within the classical tradition of logic: to transcend the problem.

To accept logic as a given, a fact in the background, is to make it a presupposition. I believe that, for Alfred, logic was a presupposition. I don't deny that he was prepared to modify logic, or, at least, to accept, in particular, the major reformulations proposed by Gotthard Günther which Alfred Locker himself extended. I believe the choice I have indicated does not concern truth, but is an aesthetic choice. I think for Alfred it was more like a truth, which is why he would sometimes refer to me (wittily and flippantly) as just being witty and flippant. As far as he was concerned, this was a matter of great seriousness, which may explain why he could get so irritated with colleagues who did not see it that way. I think (though we did not discuss it) that his vast respect for and love of the German tradition meant that he wanted to follow it and remain within it. My choice was to stand for a moment outside so that the tradition could be seen freshly. My experience is that when one does this, one attains an immense sense of freedom, release and relief – and one then finds that the stepping outside was not such a radical thing to do.

Thus, Alfred Locker worked from the traditional base, respecting and extending it, always hoping to find a way, in contrast to my more iconoclastic (and 1970 British) approach. He initially took the

logical limitations as absolute, and worked to find a way that transcended the limitations, imposed by Goedel's theorem, that faced Systems Theory concerning the matter of descriptions made by the present observer, to incorporate all observers together with their own presuppositions. His position led him to think of the observer not as a constructor but as a judge of what the supreme observer gave us.

He talks (in “The Present Status of General System Theory, 25 Years after Ludwig von Bertalanffy's Decease – A Critical Overview”) thus:

In order to detect isomorphic structures in several realms of reality the *observer* – or judge of the situation (in particular: the systems theorist) – has necessarily to assume a *position above* the domains whose structures he compares one with the other. Would he belong to these structures he could not discern them! This fact means that he has to place himself into a proper domain of his own. The difference between him and the object he observes (or more correctly: judges) has to be interpreted as a difference between (a) *objects* – which must by no means only be physical bodies, but also can be formal structures or relations – and (b) *presuppositions* which allow for figuring out these very same objects.

And, again:

...[although] the author has the privilege to belong to the group which continues Günther's work – some objections must be made. The critical question has to be posed whether (or not) this approach restricts itself unnecessarily to formal methods whereas a real turn towards *trans-classical* view should incorporate non-formal methods, too. The resulting break-through towards recognition of non-formal entities – called presuppositions – would connect to von Bertalanffy's approach.

Here Alfred expresses both the view of the position he took when he and I met, and the developments that came later in his life and allowed him, he believed, to transcend the problem of presuppositions.

In Alfred Locker's world, as I understand it, there are always presuppositions that will always limit us (or, equally leave us open – the trade off is to limit in order to understand at least something). Because of these presuppositions, we all see differently and the observer's presence cannot be ignored. Of course, arguing this, itself, can give rise to presuppositions.

Thus, what I might call an interest and sensitivity which Alfred brought to me when he first raised the matter of presuppositions, enables the involvement of the present observer, as a result of which much of my world makes better sense. I have therefore enjoyed learning to live with presuppositions. And I have enjoyed the fact that Alfred's presuppositions and mine were different and, thus, lead to the enjoyment one can gain from such differences.

In my paper “The same is different” which appeared in Zeleny's book, *Autopoiesis*, and that marks the start of my association with Alfred Locker, I argued that every time we say two things are the same we are inevitably saying they are different. This is a point so obvious that it is normally ignored. If this is not a presupposition, it is very close to being one! In the light of my affirmation of Learning from Locker, it is nice to see a circularity that suggests a reciprocity. In the same late paper I have quoted from, Alfred talks of the shared common and the individual difference. Once again, there is at least a resonance, just as there is in the views we arrived at concerning presuppositions and the observer. The respectful way that Alfred developed his position, remaining within, yet extending the range of the German academic tradition, was different, and I have learnt much from that. But where we ended up is, while not being the same, at least similar enough to be recognisable to this observer.

An appreciation by one human of another cannot really exist without some sort of interaction. The pretence that the author who is eulogising is not part of the eulogy would be as alien to Alfred as it is to me. It is inevitable, in my way of understanding, that my appreciation is not only biographical (of him) but also autobiographical (of me). I am sorry that my person is so visible in my attempts to eulogise Alfred Locker, and apologise if it appears I have somehow usurped what should (and is intended to) be his.

I am glad to have known Alfred Locker, to have been able to call him my friend, and to have shared a long part of my life with him. Of later years, I used to meet him in a modest restaurant in the Schottentor in central Vienna called, by Alfred, Kupferdachl, but more generally known as Zum Leupold (Both names are correct.). Some of you may know it.

This restaurant has a special place in my personal Vienna, being the first restaurant I went to, and the restaurant where Gordon Pask used to meet friends and colleagues. I last met Alfred 15 months ago, in the same place and eating (of course) a Wienerschnitzel. When Markus Locker did me the honour of asking me to talk about Alfred on this occasion, I downloaded the email invitation in the same restaurant, using their free wifi internet service. For me, receiving this invitation at the Kupferdachl closes a circle – actually, a double circle, including not only Alfred, but also Gordon – a circle which connects varieties of cybernetics and years of relationships. I hope to be in Vienna in November at an event held in the name of another of Alfred's friends, his fellow Viennese Heinz von Foerster, and I will return to the Kupferdachl to remember my mentor and friend, Alfred Locker, and to eat a Wienerschnitzel in his honour.

I would like to thank you all, but specially Markus, for allowing me to take part in this celebration, even if my presence has had to be verbal rather than actual. I would like now to say goodbye to my good friend Alfred. May you rest in peace.