

[*1] I'm now addicted to this term and the kinds of thinking it codes, courtesy of my daughter Bridget, who is expert at that way of examining complex cultural or institutional problems. I can see through our conversations that this has been my preferred way of both reading and thinking for as long as I can remember, standing above and apart from the immediate option at hand, trying to understand how it fits or doesn't in the array of other options that contend or cooperate with it, now or in the past, always looking for common ground, and where that is not possible, looking for what I consider a good through-path among those available.

An analogy: A year or two ago I saw a documentary on leaf photosynthesis. Researchers were baffled by the light-speed at which photonic energy seemed to be shared, leaf with tree. They finally concluded that the process had quantum properties in that as soon as a photon of sunlight entered the system at a specific point, the leaf (or the photon) was able to calculate every possible avenue for sharing its energy, choosing instantly from among them the most efficient. It would be as if a mouse entered a maze and instead of testing each corridor and turn willy-nilly until it found the right path, it could see them all at once and take the correct one directly to the exit. Were trees not capable of this mysterious mode of sharing, the scientists seemed to be saying, they would not be able to grow to their great heights. It would just take too long to move the energy necessary to do that from where it entered the system to where it could best be used.

Another analogy: the quantum computer. Traditional computers operate using a strict binary code, ones and zeroes arranged in linear circuits. So a complex operation involving many, many steps must be completed in its proper sequence, which takes time. Most problems are amenable to this method and can be "solved" relatively quickly, at least by such circuits operating in parallel arrangements. But many problems cannot. Quantum computers borrow the chimeric features of subatomic particles, each of which can be "up or down," the equivalent of one or zero, or both, or anything in between. Just a small number of these can therefore

perform in seconds or minutes calculations that would take a traditional computer decades or centuries to complete.

Systems-level thinking may not be quite that powerful compared to sequential thinking, what Keats calls “consecutive reasoning.” But it has the same effects. My favorite systems-level thinker of all time is Plato, who never records a single word in his own “voice.” I wrote half a scholarly book about his work earlier in my career (*Writing/Teaching*) with my general aim to reimagine his dialogical method in that paradigm, which requires thinking in new ways about the degree to which Socrates is/is not his ventriloquistic mouthpiece. Spoiler alert: In my opinion he is not, at least not in the simplistic way traditional scholars of philosophy, and most Western thinkers, have so blithely presumed. Plato and Socrates, the author who never speaks and the “character” who can’t stop talking, are more like those subatomic particles: either and neither and/or both all at the same time.

Walt Whitman is another good example, always above and outside of the many frays he enters poetically. As he says in “Song of Myself:”

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,
Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,
Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an impalpable
certain rest,
Looking with side-curved head curious what will come
next,
Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering
at it.

This describes the systems-level angle of vision exactly as I experience it. Then as the poem closes he asks:

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

It's from a systems level that apparent contradictions are in fact resolved, able to reside not just side by side but intimately together, two (or many more) merging (uncertainly) into one, the foundational mode of quantum duality. That is where one can be "large" and "contain multitudes" while still remaining entirely oneself.