

Muddles and Metaphors: A Response to Keeney and Sprenkle

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The seeds I have sown have grown as dragon's teeth.

—Gregory Bateson¹

Bradford Keeney and Douglas Sprenkle, in their March 1982 *Family Process* essay, "Ecosystemic Epistemology: Critical Implications for the Aesthetics and Pragmatics of Family Therapy," warn that their ideas "may elicit criticism on the basis of obscurantism, idealism, or utopianism...." (3, p.4). Although I could hardly put it better myself, my range of objections can be stated somewhat more modestly.

As I understand it, the Keeney/Sprenkle (3) thesis is that too many therapists focus on technique to the exclusion of larger concerns, a condition they set out to rectify. In their words: "The argument of this paper is that therapy based on ecosystemic epistemology arises from a position that is responsive to issues of both pragmatics and aesthetics (p.3)". Further, they write: "Our concern is that the pragmatic be juxtaposed with the aesthetic. Our paper is purposefully biased in the direction of the aesthetic owing to the paucity given that level of ecosystemic epistemology...." (p.4) Fair enough. Such a caveat is not uncommon. Nor, however, does it grant license to abrogate standards of reasonable scholarly inquiry and debate, which is what I believe Keeney and Sprenkle have managed to accomplish. Accordingly, I present here three main points in response to Keeney and Sprenkle: (a) Their scholarship is unsound. (b) Their ideas are muddled. (c) Their cause is reactionary.

Unsound Scholarship

Beware the dreaded "pragmatists," clearly the enemy on what our authors call the "battleground of ecosystemic epistemology" (p.8). These "cookbook" creatures do not show proper deference to the "aesthetic-minded therapists," beings who dwell at "a higher level of abstraction" (3, p.5). Pragmatists, simpletons that they are, ask questions such as, "Are the patterns of therapy effective? and What is the problem to be solved?" (p.2), rather than more profound questions like "Are the patterns of therapy elegant?" (p.2) and "Is the interaction ecologically healthy or beautiful?" (p.5) Moreover, pragmatists are guilty of the sin of "reductionism," which "typically arises from a pragmatic perspective that is primarily concerned with reducing or simplifying phenomena for practical purposes (p.2), when all the while they could be doing something significant like teaching horticulture. (To wit: "The participation of all family members in growing a garden provides opportunities for sacramental experience in which members may experience being both parts of their family and the earth's territory" (p. 10)).

Time and again, in a writing style that gives redundancy a bad name, we are told that "pragmatists," with their "band-aid methods" and "left-brain discursive digital" interventions, sometimes lose sight of the forest for the trees, thus missing out on higher-order experiences such as "ecological humility" (p. 15) (an experience it seems that many of us could use more of). Worse yet, the situation has taken on Shakespearean proportions. Note: "One of the tragedies in family therapy is that some therapists use ecosystemic ideas to derive pragmatic strategies without any consideration for the aesthetic" (p. 14). Clearly, with this talk of battlegrounds and tragedies, something is terribly wrong.

Now, at the risk of being labeled pragmatists ourselves, we may ask: "What is the problem with scholarship here?" And the answer seems to me to be that nowhere, not once, in this pontificating battle cry do we find any documentation whatsoever to support the claim that the dreaded pragmatists even, in fact, exist. Nary a quote nor a footnote nor a direct reference establishes for us that anyone has ever taken the position Keeney and Sprenkle so forcefully attack. And with good reason. because, to my knowledge, no one ever has. Thus, at the outset, we have a classic straw man argument that is over before it begins—and the "ecosystemic" house built for the straw man is a house of cards. By conventional academic standards, one need go no further than this to dismiss the entire Keeney/Sprenkle case as spurious, but permit me to bracket momentarily this front-line refutation in order to pursue a few more points.

Muddles and Mistakes

Keeney and Sprenkle's lack of documentation makes it difficult to respond to their charges, so please forbear while I make some wild guesses. For instance, let us suppose for the sake of argument that "pragmatics" has something to do with Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson's *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (6), a hunch supported obliquely by Lawrence

Allman's assault upon the same work in his neighboring discussion of "the pragmatic error" (1, p.44). One need read only to page 22 of *Pragmatics* to learn that the term comes from the semiotic taxonomy of Charles Morris (4). Morris—following the lead of C. S. Peirce (5)—divided the study of language and symbols into three areas: syntactics (which studies the relationship of symbols and symbols as in grammar), semantics (which studies meaning—the relationship of symbols and referents), and pragmatics (which studies the relationship of symbols and behavior). Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson adopt this pragmatic perspective and take it one step further to focus upon "*the sender-receiver relation, as mediated by communication*" (p.22).

Now, to move from this conception of "pragmatics" to the "left-brained, digital" *bête noir* pragmatists of the Keeney/Sprenkle imagination who are "mucking up the ecology" (p. 14) with their "packaged cookbook cures" (p.16), takes a certain leap of faith as well as a misreading of the relevant literature. Of course, since we all know of therapists who seem excessively technique-driven, maybe I am wrong here. Maybe Keeney and Sprenkle are referring to some other work when they so liberally invoke "pragmatics." But, if so, their secret is safe, for they never tell us who (or what) they are talking about.

As you may recall, "Why Do Things Get in a Muddle?" is the title of Bateson's first "metalogue" in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Bateson defined a metalogue as "a conversation about some problematic subject. The conversation should be such that not only do the participants discuss the problem but the structure of the conversation as a whole is also relevant to the same subject" (2, p.1). Thus, for a simple instance, the metalogue about "muddles" becomes itself a muddled conversation.

This in mind while reviewing my many marginal notes on the Keeney/Sprenkle essay in search of another salient example of a muddle, I found "?????" next to the following sentences:

The trick and the art lie in the simultaneous influence of epistemology on clinical practice and clinical practice on epistemology. *A more metaphorical way of saying this is that the shape of the interaction should be seen as more a metalogue between the aesthetic and pragmatic, rather than a combination of lineal effects* (emphasis mine). [3, p.6]

What do you suppose this means? That pragmatic interaction should be shaped aesthetically? That aesthetic interaction should be shaped pragmatically? That in a metalogue 2 + 2 cannot equal 4? That Keeney and Sprenkle meant to write "dialectic" instead of "metalogue" but were sabotaged by a Batesonian typesetter who liked to sneak in Bateson's words at every gratuitous opportunity? Maybe it means that when one frames a sentence by writing "A more metaphorical way of saying this is..." then what follows does not have to make sense.

You are familiar, of course, with the famous metamessage "This is play" (2, p. 179). We now have a new metamessage meaning "This is a muddle," which should be a great aid to all unpublished writers and not a few who were published but should not have been. Keeney and Sprenkle could have gotten a lot more mileage out of this technique themselves. For instance, the puzzling sentence:

On the other hand, the pragmatists have long demonstrated the utility of checking theoretical hunches in the context of stubborn data. [3, p.6]

could then become the respectable:

A more metaphorical way of saying this is that, on the other hand, the pragmatists have long demonstrated the utility of checking theoretical hunches in the context of stubborn data.

And this sophomoric notion:

Therapists embodying the aesthetic perspective tend to speak of their work in terms of a journey or pilgrimage in which their principal concern includes their own growth as well as their clients or colleagues. [3, p.2]

could be elevated to:

A more metaphorical way of saying this is that therapists embodying the aesthetic perspective tend to speak of their work in terms of a journey or pilgrimage in which their principal concern includes their own growth as well as their clients or colleagues.

Even this banality:

From the level of aesthetics, the therapist's participation in therapy has more to do with being alive than creating specific outcomes. [3, p.16]

might be rescued by reading:

A more metaphorical way of saying this is that from the level of aesthetics, the therapist's participation in therapy has more to do with being alive than creating specific outcomes.

Thus, with the flick of a phrase, the reader is warned that "This is a muddle" and the writer is off the hook of communicating clearly.

At a general level, in a splendid demonstration of recursive self-disqualification, Keeney and Sprenkle construct a mythical dualism between aesthetics and pragmatics that then proceeds to devour itself with such statements as: "Ecosystemic epistemology attempts a nondualistic conceptualization of cybernetics...." (p.6) and "This perspective attempts to avoid any overemphas'm upon dualisms...." (p.6) and "Ecosystemic epistemology, embodying nondualistic cybernetics, attempts to mend those static dualisms...." (p.7) and (once more for the slow learner) "Ecosystemic epistemology attempts to avoid static dualistic formulations...." (p.16)

What we seem to have here is an advanced case of the "Ouroboros Syndrome," a pathological metalogue in which the snake not only bites its own tail but also swallows it, hence disappearing into the infinite regress. (This syndrome is known colloquially as "biting the hand that feeds.rdquo;)

Two Steps Backward

If, as we can safely suspect, Keeney and Sprenkle wish to address the limitations of what are variously called brief, structural, strategic, interactional, problem-solving approaches to therapy, then they should do so clearly and directly. But to accuse the "pragmatists" of the very sort of "lineal, monadic, digital" thinking that "they" have spent a quarter of a century working against, often in the pages of this journal, seems strange indeed. The family therapy movement began, at least in part, as a reaction against the monadic mystifications of psychoanalysis, and here we are with Keeney and Sprenkle back to such lofty notions as "sacramental experience" and "ecological humility."

Mystification is one way of keeping people in their place—and keeping them in therapy indefinitely. Although the proper domain of therapy is surely an open question, one need not dismiss the vision of Bateson's "esthetic preference" to believe that the first task of therapy is to alleviate human suffering. Bateson did not turn his back on psychiatry for aesthetic reasons—he left because his grant money ran out. Further, his recondite prose style does not fare well by imitation.

It seems to me that what we are most in need of is a demystification of Bateson's thinking, yet what we are presented by Keeney and Sprenkle amounts to precisely the opposite. And I am especially saddened, even somehow ashamed, to see Bateson (so conveniently beyond reply) pulled out at every turn to bear witness to work that neither carries his searching tone nor stands upon its own merits.

"Dragon's teeth," indeed.

REFERENCES

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I begin with a play upon Greek mythology, told to me truly by Bateson whilst sitting in the Esalen baths, partly because it is relevant to my argument and partly to comply with the guidelines suggested by Carlos Sluzki for "staking a territory in the field of family therapy by shining in reflected glory."
