

# The Transcendence of the Observer

## Discussions at the Conference “The Ethical Meaning of Francisco Varela’s Thought”

**> Context** • At the conference “The Ethical Meaning of Francisco Varela’s Thought,” which took place on 28 May 2011 in Sassari, Italy, Humberto Maturana, Michel Bitbol, and Pier Luigi Luisi participated in two discussions. **> Purpose** • In this edited transcription of the discussions, the participants talk about several aspects of autopoiesis, the observer, ontology, making distinctions and distinguishing different domains, perception and illusion, and transcendence. **> Results** • The discussions shed light on how constructivist concepts are perceived by individual authors. Concepts such as “transcendence” and “objectivity” are understood in different ways. **> Constructivist content** • The concepts discussed are highly relevant for constructivist approaches. **> Key words** • Autopoiesis, observer, ontology, distinctions, objectivity, transcendence.

### Morning Session

The first discussion took place after Michel Bitbol’s talk (Bitbol 2012). The discussants talked for almost 20 minutes. The discussion starts off with a question from a woman from the audience who wanted to understand what Francisco Varela thought about what happens in a dialogue.

**Woman:** Who is the second person in dialogue with the first one, according to Francisco Varela?

**Bitbol:** Francisco Varela criticized many theories of cognition (especially those theories that construe cognitive processes in terms of representations, computation, and symbols) because they were, so to speak, limiting perspectives. They were extracting restrictive aspects of cognition out of the fully-fledged lived experience, which includes not only the possibility but also the actuality of being there with others. So, for Varela, the true axis of everything included the second person. The interesting thing is that when he worked with the first person experience, when he wanted to inquire into this area, he used – with some other colleagues with whom I’m now working in Paris – a method of inquiry which precisely made use of interviews and dialogue. Namely, you have an interviewer and an interviewee, and the interviewer tries to explore every item of a certain moment of experience. And through this dialogue there is a very precise way of disclosing ex-

perience, disclosing many features of a certain moment of experience which could not be reached otherwise, except maybe if you are a very good practitioner of meditation. So if you are not trained to stabilize your mind, the best way to get faithful access to your own experience would be to rely on an interview, on an exchange between two persons: in other terms, using the second person. So I think the second person was indeed very important for Varela.

**Maturana:** I have a question. Is the following question a philosophical question? Which is the relation between the process and the result of the process? Does this mean dualism?

**Bitbol:** No, it doesn’t.

**Maturana:** Is the result of a process part of the process?

**Bitbol:** I think so. The result of the process means that you have isolated something in the process. When you say “this is a result of the process” it means that you have somehow isolated something out of the process and you call that “the result,” but in the process I don’t think that there is something that can be intrinsically isolated as a result. There is a process. No beginning and no end. But maybe you don’t agree.

**Luisi:** This is the very principle of autopoiesis.

**Bitbol:** Exactly.

**Luisi:** In autopoiesis it is the process which is at the same time its own result.

**Bitbol:** That’s right.

**Maturana:** No. Let us think about going upstairs from the first to the second floor. The process of getting to the second floor is “going upstairs.” The result is “being on the second floor.” Is the result “being on the second floor” part of the process “going upstairs”?

**Bitbol:** Well, if you put things in this conceptual form, I agree with you, of course. There is a difference between “going upstairs” and “having reached the second floor.” Yet, you can also consider that the whole thing is an ongoing process, the ongoing process of living. In that case...

**Maturana:** Oh yes! I think I do that.

**Bitbol:** And, in that case, reaching the second floor is just a moment of this overall process.

**Maturana:** OK then, I will move to the question of autopoiesis. The notion of autopoiesis says that there is a molecular process the result of which is the same molecular process. OK. But if we look deeper, we see that the consequence of that is that an observer will see that autopoietic systems are living systems.

**Bitbol:** Yes.

**Maturana:** So is the living system as a living system part of the process or does the living system exist in a different dimensional situation than the process that originated it?

**Bitbol:** Ah, that’s an interesting question. Wonderful! It’s very interesting because I feel that it’s a dialogue of a very deep kind,

a sort of Socratic dialogue. You want me to answer in the mode that a disciple of Socrates' would answer!

**Maturana:** No. It's a serious question.

**Bitbol:** I know. Socrates was also serious.

**Maturana:** I know that he was. But it is not so much a Socratic question as a philosophical reflexion. It is a serious question in the biological domain when one claims that "molecular autopoiesis" is what makes some particular dynamic molecular entity a living system. Molecular autopoiesis is necessary and sufficient to make a living being a living being, so that if I speak of molecular autopoietic systems I am speaking of living systems. In these circumstances it is not necessary to refer to cognition as a constitutive feature of living. Of course, if we are contemplating the behavior of a living being in its relational space we may wish to reflect about the presence or absence of cognition in it. Cognition is not a constitutive feature of living, even if we may say, poetically, that a living being that does not know how to live will die. Cognition is what an observer ascribes to a living being that behaves adequately in the conservation of its living.

**Luisi:** Yes. I always understood that you cannot have autopoiesis without having cognition at the same time. Does it make sense to talk about autopoietic systems without putting there, or invoking, or considering that there is an observer or there is an environment around them? Life without environment does not exist.

**Maturana:** Yes, but to speak about life you need an observer.

**Luisi & Bitbol:** Yes.

**Maturana:** To comment about what life is, you need an observer. So the more fundamental question becomes "How does the observer arise?" If there is no observer, there is no life, no cognition, nothing! Because, as nothing is spoken, nothing comes to exist. So the real question is the observer. How does the observer arise? And answering this question becomes central for philosophy and biology.

**Bitbol:** The only point is that we have to understand what you exactly mean by "observer." Namely, is it simply a second autopoietic unit which is capable of categorizing by its own functioning...

**Maturana:** No!

**Bitbol:** ... the first antipoetic unit? Or is it a sentient being; namely, a being which is primarily defined by the fact it has experience of the other antipoetic unit?

**Maturana:** In any case, if you speak about a sentient being in relation to the question of how the observer arises, and you put it as primary, a new question appears: "How does the sentient being arise?"

**Bitbol:** Yes.

**Maturana:** When one speaks about experience being primary, and some colleague experiences experience, are we talking about something different from making the following reflections: "Here we are all talking about us. Is that we are here talking, and talking about us that which is our concern? Are we concerned about how we human beings talk and operate as observers?"

**Bitbol:** How? Well, first of all, just because it's a wonderful question, let me start with a preliminary remark. I think that, in order to ask the question "How did or how does the observer arise?" you have to be an observer. You have to be an observer to say that!

**Maturana:** Yes, of course.

**Bitbol:** And so, you know, in some way, I have a problem here. I have the feeling that it's a non-question. Indeed, any answer I could now make would arise from that point of view, from the point of view of the observer, of the living (and not only living but also sentient, conscious, experiential) observer that I am. Even the question you are now raising has no meaning, except from the stand-point of the observer.

**Maturana:** But it is not a question about the stand-point of the observer. It is a question about what should happen such that an observer can arise.

**Bitbol:** I understand the question, but I think even that question only makes sense from the unique and extraordinary stand-point we are living now, as observers, and that's why I tend to claim that this (namely the fact of this privileged standpoint) is the most originary truth of all.

**Maturana:** It's not a truth!

**Bitbol:** It's more than a truth; it's what enables truth!

**Maturana:** It is where we find ourselves doing whatever we do, and this is the circumstance which is, in that sense, primary. That is not explanatory. It's just we-here-talking.

**Bitbol:** That's right.

**Maturana:** As we-here-talking, we ask "How come? What are the processes that take place while we're here talking?" or "What are the processes that result in that we find ourselves here talking?"

**Bitbol:** Absolutely, but any explanation of that fact would still be an act of consciousness for an observer, for this observer who is talking here.

**Maturana:** No, of course not.

**Bitbol:** Ah. Please explain.

**Maturana:** If you're asking this question "What processes result in that 'somebody' would be here talking," you enter in a process not of explaining you, but of showing me the processes giving origin to some entity that would be distinguished from you in what it does. It would be different from you. Now we human beings, along our daily living, have children. And these children grow, and speak as we speak, think as we

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think, and all do different things. So if you ask the question "How come that children arise and speak?" you will go to biology and find and observe the whole process of reproduction. Now if you ask this question, not in terms of the procreation of our children but in terms of

the processes that give rise to the processes by which somebody can be conscious of speaking, this is a different question that can also be answered.

**Bitbol:** You think it can be answered, but in that case, you would have solved the "hard problem" of the origin of consciousness.

**Maturana:** I think so!

**Luisi:** Humberto, this is the first time we don't believe you!

**Maturana:** I'm delighted!

## Afternoon Session

The second discussion took place after Humberto Maturana's talk (Maturana 2012) and lasted for almost 50 minutes. The discussion starts off with a joke that Maturana makes.

**Maturana:** Do you know the conversation between the Big Ben and the Tower of Pisa? The Tower of Pisa says to the Big Ben: "If you have the time, I have the inclination!" (laughs) Well if you have the inclination, I can answer some questions or reflect on whatever matter that you may wish to ask me.

**Woman 1:** It's a question that came to me during the last speech. It's about the difference between you and Francisco Varela: that you wanted to reach transcendence. You thought that you could reach transcendence and he wanted a different question. I'm thinking about the difference that you made in the first statement. You spoke about constitutive ontology and transcendental ontology! I wonder if we think that transcendental ontology is also constitutive? So I want to ask if you would take the parenthesis out of this idea of objectivity. Not to think that it is reality but to use it as a tool – not of oppression but a tool. I would like to know what you have to say about this definition in this context you are speaking about. The definition is "Reality is a space that you postulate in order to acknowledge the existence of others." And I think that has something to do with what you speak of – of what you said first.

**Maturana:** First, I think that there is a confusion in relation to what I said. I am not interested in transcendence, but I think that Francisco Varela was. So we were thinking very differently. When I made the distinction between transcendental ontologies and constitutive ontologies, I was referring to two attitudes with respect to our reference to the notion of being and existence. When I speak of transcendental ontologies, I refer to a manner of thinking that assumes existence (the being, the "ontos") as occurring with

independence of what the observer does; and when I speak of constitutive ontologies, I refer to a manner of thinking that realizes that existence (the being, the ontos) arises with the operation of distinction of the observer, the act of distinction that brings into being a being (an ontos) that was not there before and about which nothing can be said other than what that operation of distinction presents. This means that the worlds that we live arise with our living them as realizations that arise in the domain of the operational-relational coherences of the realization of our living and do not preexist to our living them. And in order to be always aware of this we conceptually put objectivity in parenthesis, meaning precisely that we do not forget that we cannot say anything about anything supposed to exist independently of what we do in the realization of our living.

All this is grounded on the facts that we live as valid whatever we live, and that in the experience of living whatever we live we do not know if we shall later treat what we have lived as an illusion or as a perception when we compare it with another experience of whose validity we do not doubt. This knowledge and understanding are the fundament of all that I say, and of my trying to distinguish the different domains in which we live and operate.

**Woman 2:** While you distinguish the different domains, instead Francisco Varela searched for the view from within, the unity between the domains. So I would like to know how you relate those different perspectives with your well-known expression: "all that is said is said by an observer."

**Maturana:** Observing is an operation of distinction, an operation of bringing forth to existence an entity, a concept, a process, an idea, whatever it may be, that was not, did not exist before. Yet, one lives the distinctions that one makes, as if that which is distinguished existed independent of oneself. We may say that we have a good idea somewhere in our head. We can locate it. It's an entity, which is not us. If I say I have an idea in my head,

I claim that the idea is not my head. This is our ordinary feeling, as we do what we do as we make a distinction.

The operation of distinction is performed by a human being. A person, one of us, makes a distinction. So we have the observer and the observing, the operation of the observer, observing by the observer. The observer is a human being, but observing is an operation. And whatever we do, we shall do it as we realize our living as we operate as human beings.

And in doing whatever we do, one of the things that we discover is that we're living beings. If we die, then there is no more observing. If we become ill, our observing is altered. So this is our condition of constitution. It's our starting point.

**Translator:** So you're saying that we are actually bound to distinguish as human beings?

**Maturana:** It's not that we are bound. We exist doing distinctions. It's not a limitation. This is our condition of constitution. If you have two bodies with mass, and Newton says they attract each other according to a particular law of attraction, he states that as a matter of fact of the world that he brings about with what he does in his living. And I would say that it's the condition of the constitution of the masses to attract each other. But then comes Einstein and says "No, it's not a force; it's the curvature of space. In fact, if you look at the equation of gravity you can show there that indeed you have to treat it as curvature." So gravity as attraction between masses towards each other is a condition of existence of masses as entities in a space that is curved. And if there is a curved space then you move according to the curvature of this space. That this happens is a condition of constitution of the worlds that we bring forth with what we do in the realization of our living.

And we distinguish domains exactly in the same way. The domain is something that we distinguish as a field of distinctions, which we distinguish from other fields of distinctions, according to what we do. Because when we speak about domains, we do not speak about something in itself. We speak of something that we call "domain," a space, a field in which certain things operate according to certain characteristics that we bring forth as we distinguish them.

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And we distinguish whatever we distinguish with our doings. So we never get out of the domain in which we do what we do in the realization of our living; and this is not a limitation because it is our condition of constitution that becomes apparent as we distinguish ourselves. Never.

Our operation of distinction is what we do as we bring forth that which appears with what we do.

[Maturana takes a glass] This is a glass to drink from ... no... this is not a glass. This is a paperweight. It depends on what we do with our body as we distinguish a glass or a paperweight. I mean, not something that is not done through our doing. This is why, if we want to reach into the domain of nothingness, what we bring forth is something that is of our domain of fiction. When a child goes to the beach and has a mold in the shape of a star, you could say playfully to the child: "My beautiful child, have you noticed that the sand is full of stars. I don't see any. Look, if you do this... [Maturana whistles and pretends to fill the mold with sand] ... you have a star of sand." The operation of distinction "star" brings forth a "star of sand" in that circumstance.

"Father, so I can show to my friends that there are stars in the sand?" – "Yes, take the mold, and you can go on, showing the stars that are in the sand, all along the beach."

The use of the mold is the operation of distinction that we perform that brings forth a star in the beach, or whatever it is that we are bringing forth with the operations of distinction that we perform in the realization of our living.

This is the beauty and the charm of respecting ourselves in our knowledge and understanding that we do not distinguish in the experiences that we live between perception and illusion.

**Bitbol:** I was very interested by the distinction you established between your position and Francisco's so I want to dig into it a bit more. In fact, according to you, when we study with our knowledge the very process of our knowledge, we discover that we cannot make a distinction between reality and illusion. Maybe even this discovery, even this discovery that we cannot distinguish between reality and illusion is such that we cannot decide between its being a reality or an illusion!

Now, there is something of which we are certain, which doesn't depend on whether what we experience is reality or illusion. It's the plain fact that we are living now this experience – whose content may be illusion or reality. Now, this experience is neither reality nor illusion. It's plainly real. It's there. And I think Francisco wanted to explore this fact, which is so real that it goes beyond reality and illusion.

**Maturana:** OK.

**Bitbol:** I think you also said that we cannot say anything about the transcendent. That's perfectly true: we cannot say anything about the transcendent. But we can *be* it. We can coincide with it. And I think here again, Francisco wanted to explore the coincidence of ourselves with the transcendent.

**Maturana:** Thank you. First of all, I am not speaking about reality and illusion. I am speaking about perception and illusion. So reality comes with the notion that you are talking about something independent. I could say that reality is what we are living. Then, of course, that is a word that I'm using to say that all that is, is what we live. But when we speak about reality in our culture, we are referring to something that is assumed as being universally valid. As we say that something is universal we are saying that it is so because its existence is independent from what we do.

**Bitbol:** That we live, that there is now something it is like to be living, is universal. Not the special thing that we are living, of course, because what I'm living now is different from what you are living, and is therefore particular. But that there is living experience is universal...

**Maturana:** Yes.

**Bitbol:** It's definitely universal.

**Maturana:** When you say to someone "Look, this is real!" what are you saying?

**Bitbol:** If I were claiming that in ordinary or scientific context, I would say that this is objective.

**Maturana:** When you say "This is objective!" what are you saying? You are saying "This which I'm showing to you is inde-

pendent from my showing it to you. You can see it." This is what you mean by being objective, referring to something that is independent from what you do to show it to somebody else. According to all that I have presented here and in the lectures, what I'm saying is that the question that I'm addressing is not reality, but it's our living: how do we do what we do in our living? I am saying

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 .....

that in our living we do not distinguish between the experiences that we call perception ("capturing what is") and or illusion ("seeing what is not"). Both expressions refer to experiences that arise as we compare experiences. Illusions and mistakes are not in themselves, they are experiences that one lives as valid but which one invalidate later when one

compares them with another experience about which one choses not to doubt. At the same time, one calls perception a sensory experience that one accepts as valid as a result of comparing it with another experience of which one chooses not to doubt.

You say "We cannot reach transcendence, but we can be identical with it," but this is a distinction that we perform. Through a feeling, you may wish to say "I feel identical with everything, I, human being, speaking person, making a distinction that I'm in identity with everything." So it's a distinction. So it arises in our doings. The experience is very wonderful. I do not deny it. To live the experience, the happening, in which one feels one with everything, is very wonderful. But that's a distinction about how one is feeling. Some people say that it's pure consciousness. OK. But if one speaks about pure consciousness, the question that arises is: What are we doing when we distinguish ourselves to be in pure consciousness, and what do we say when we speak about pure consciousness?

To speak about pure consciousness you must first be able to speak. And to be able to speak you must be alive. So you must be a person in language. So the pure consciousness that you claim you are being is a distinction that you do as a human being, as a

person. This is exactly my point. I have had an experience of that kind, and it was an experience of becoming one with the cosmos. It was a very wonderful experience. But what I say about that experience it is not that experience, it's what I'm distinguishing that I felt. So, if Francisco wants to be identical with it, what is that he wants? Is it that he wants the experience in which he can distinguish himself in that experience when he says that he's identical with it?

**Bitbol:** I think it's the other way around. Of course, I can speak of being one with all this; I can speak of being one with the universe. This is a complex judgment about "experience." And you're right that this judgment arises from a distinction inside our experience. So what I was trying to evoke was certainly not that. Because in fact, when you coincide with it, it's not a word, it's not a sentence, it's not a judgment, it's not a distinction; it's just an all-pervasive experience.

**Maturana:** Yes, but you see, to refer to it, you have to refer to what you felt. "I'm identical with it" is what? It's a reflexive distinction of one's own being.

**Bitbol:** Yes, but this distinction of your being, of my being, is still an experience of certainty...

**Maturana:** Of course.

**Bitbol:** ... It's an experience of certainty that you live, that you feel: such a distinction is experientially felt and recognized as certain.

**Maturana:** No, it's an experience. You, human being, can distinguish yourself, doing the distinction that you are performing, because you exist in language, which is an operation in recursive distinction.

**Bitbol:** Even, for instance, when you have the certainty that a certain proposition is true, it's an experience, the experience of the certainty that something is true.

**Maturana:** Yes.

**Bitbol:** I think you are reversing the whole perspective. Indeed, I have the feeling that you say "Saying that a certain experience is coincidental is in itself a distinction in language," whereas I say exactly the op-

posite. According to me, a distinction in language is still an experience.

**Maturana:** When I say that we can make such a reflexive distinction because we are languaging beings, I am not saying that the experience "is mere languaging." What I am saying is that it is our operation as languaging beings is what permits us to make such reflexive distinctions. What I am saying is that languaging is the operational "instrument" that permits us to do so.

To talk about the experience of distinguishing oneself is an experience, but it is not the experience of distinguishing oneself itself; it's not the experience that one is distinguishing or connoting. You may have experiences that you did not distinguish when you had them, and when someone orients you towards something that you must have lived without noticing it, you may say "Oh now I realize that what I lived yesterday was what you say, but I was not aware of that then." So it happens that yesterday you lived an experience that you did not live because you did not distinguish it then, but now you are living distinguishing now what you lived yesterday but did not distinguish. This is our condition.

**Bitbol:** Perfectly right. But now let's ponder what you have just said. Let's try to live it. Let me live

now the fact that I am remembering that I lived my experience. Here we are, again in experience! Not in some verbal game. Experience is the condition for any conceptual distinction, not the other way around.

**Maturana:** Yes, but let us look at something else: leaving a bottle on top of the table. What is happening to the bottle as it is being on top of the table? That is something that I cannot describe. I can only speak about what I think is happening to the bottle on top of the table. Then, should I say that the being on top of the table of the bottle is something transcendental?

**Bitbol:** Of course not.

**Maturana:** OK, but the same happened with the other experience. Whenever you live an experience, of course it's something that you lived or are living. And in the moment in which you spoke about it, it was not the experience you lived; it was something else. Yes.

**Bitbol:** You say, and I agree, that the bottle's being on the table is not transcendent. Claiming that the bottle is on the table derives from a little act of analysis within our experience. But the fact that there is experience now, the fact that there is experience of all these things surrounding us, including the bottle, "this" is the transcendent.

**Maturana:** Yes, of course. We, Ximena Dávila Yáñez and I, have also said that human existence is continuous transcendence.

**Bitbol:** Exactly.

**Maturana:** Yes, but it's different from the mystical transcendence. The continuous transcendence of we, human beings, is that we human beings exist not in our bodyhood but in the dynamical relations in which we participate with our bodyhoods. This is what it means, saying that human existence is continuous transcendence.

**Bitbol:** Yes.

**Maturana:** When Francisco asked me "Do you think that one can reach the transcendent?" he was not speaking about continuous transcendence in the manner in which we, Ximena and I, had. He was speaking about something that did not

arise into existence through his operation of distinction. Of that one cannot talk.

**Bitbol:** There is too little time to develop on that, but let me just say that the type of transcendence he was looking for, the type of transcendence that Buddhists are looking for, is not something extraordinary. It's just the direct, immediate, sensitive perception of what there is such as it is. Nothing more.

**Maturana:** Precisely.

**Bitbol:** It's the direct perception of what there is prior to any analysis, prior to any distinction, prior to any conceptualization. Just sensing the original flavor of what there is.

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**Maturana:** Yes, hence it something of which you cannot speak.

**Bitbol:** It's nothing more than that.

**Maturana:** Because when you speak of it, it is not it.

**Bitbol:** Yes, because when you speak of it you are already one step further with respect to the experience you are trying to refer to.

**Maturana:** Yes, exactly.

**Bitbol:** You are no longer in it.

**Maturana:** Yes, this is what I say: when you speak of an experience, it's not it. But the "it" is the problem when you want to speak about transcendence, saying that you are identical with it, or that you speak about it.

**Bitbol:** Of course, there seems to be a contradiction. Because when I try to convince you that there is an "it" to be experienced, I obviously use language and I'm already out of the process I am trying to speak of. But what I use the language for, is not, of course, to speak of "it;" it's to invite you to make the movement of coinciding with it.

**Maturana:** Yes, but you see the problem is not that I may have or not have that experience, because it's ordinary.

**Bitbol:** You have it...

**Maturana:** It's the character that we give to the "it" with the words that we use. If you say to someone "Just do it," or "You are right! How wonderful it is" or "I'm going to do it again because it's wonderful," you may be giving an invitation to the experience of acting without effort. But that way of talking does not constitute a special characteriza-

tion of having access to the transcendence, although you may want to evoke it. It's the expression of having access to what it's transcendental that is misleading.

**Bitbol:** You are right, the expression "having access" is misleading because having access means that we are not now in the transcendence, and there is something out there that we may access.

**Maturana:** Exactly. This is what it means.

**Bitbol:** And this is wrong, of course.

**Maturana:** Of course it is wrong.

**Bitbol:** This is wrong, but, you know, saying that there is a way to access transcendence is just an approximate way to say that there is a way to coincide with transcendence. And this is right.

**Maturana:** Let us please speak differently. Ximena has done very beautiful work on what she calls the "paradise of doing without effort" and the "hell of doing with effort." This you can experience. Whenever you do something without effort and before doing it, you are in that of which, perhaps, you do not even want to talk because if you talk about it, it will disappear. We call it paradise. Well if you call it paradise, either you are evoking something which is an experience, or we are addressing a place. And this is the very delicate thing with the naming as "paradise." But the same is with transcendence. And this is why when we use the "it," the problem arises.

**Bitbol:** So, let's drop the word "it"!

**Maturana:** So let us do it.

## Acknowledgements

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