

# BASIC PROPOSITIONS OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS THINKING

F. Emery, January 1984

1. Living systems are 'open systems'.
2. Open systems can only be characterized if we can characterize their environments; conversely, environments can only be characterized if we can characterize the living systems they environ. (otherwise we are defining the physical world from the viewpoint of the outside observer, the physicist, chemist or geologist, not a potential adapting agent).
3. We cannot seek to characterize these environments unless we assume the epistemological position of direct realism. (Otherwise we could have as many different "environment" as there are living systems in the environment).
4. The position of 'direct realism' is untenable if 'thing-ness' is taken to be substance, not function. For a consistent epistemology of direct realism it must be that Peirce's First, Seconds and Thirds are directly perceivable.<sup>1</sup>
5. The only root metaphor that meets these requirements is Contextualism: the only formal model that maps the synthetic and analytical requirements of contextualism if that of directive correlation, neither the cause-effect nor the producer product models do so.
6. The meaning of Thirds must remain indefinite (subject to infinite regress) unless Fourths, the focal conditions of directive correlation, are specified.
7. The focal conditions must be objective dimensions of the ecosystem combining both the system and its environment.

## PEIRCE'S LEVELS

**FIRST.** The reference here is to qualities that are being perceived or are present in the environment to be perceived. The distinction that is made in the Mechanism metaphor between primary and secondary qualities is rejected. Unlike the Formist metaphor similarity of qualities is not the primary category; change and novelty are.

**SECOND.** The reference here is to what we perceive, or can perceive in the interaction of things. Peirce's concern, and the concern of contextualism, is what

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Peirce chose to label the different levels of perceived reality as First, Seconds and Thirds in order to cut across the Babel of labels that had been attached to them over time. I.e. Quality, Interaction, Transaction.

powers of functions are disclosed e.g. hardness as a power to scratch other things or resist scratching. It is not the mechanist's concern with what an interaction reveals of an underlying substance. Nor the Formists concern with how change in a thing occurs, sui generis, by some innate, teleological process.

THIRD. The reference here is to interaction of part-part within a whole. It is not a level with which Formism or mechanism are concerned. Organism is primarily concerned with this level but in treating the organism, system, in isolation from its environment seem hardly to get beyond the teleology, vitalism, of the Formists.

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