International workshop

Exploring and exploiting quality of life complexity

(QoL-exity)

Florence, September 9-10, 2011

The uninvited guest: ethics below QoL-exity

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FIRST DRAFT- COMMENTS WELCOME

The set of features associated with the quality of life has many elements of different sorts or dimensions: physiology (the dimension of physical health), economy, psychology, sociology, politics and ecology. Presently used "indicators" span a correspondingly wide range of topics, but our understanding of outcomes can't grow by just collecting more and more data. Here we meet three main sources of difficulties: 1) the listed elements are not mutually independent and, in fact, their massive interaction can produce threshold effects across dimensions; 2) there are many approaches to calculate scores and different sources assign different weights to features of one and the same dimension, 3) each list of features hosts items of different scale, so that indicators range from what is taken as universal to what is open to contextual parameters. Nonetheless, we are achieving an increasingly articulated taxonomy, as distinct aspects of each dimension are identified. To this aim, the variety of questionnaires so far produced

is helpful: our awareness of so many indicators and the manifold "metrics" at hand raise basic methodological questions. Present efforts to answer them may lead to reduce the spread between different values, obtained according to different methods.

"Well-being" is an indeed many-dimensional concept and, in principle, any political decision which affects economy at either national or international scale can no longer ignore the many-dimensional nature of QoL and in particular the side-effects affecting other dimensions from the intended one. In practice, however, politics is guided by means-end hypotheses, focused on a specific contingent situation and oriented to a correspondingly specific goal. Statistical investigations make the interdependence of features associated to QoL explicit and thus allow testing such means-end hypotheses in a cross-dimensional way. In this sense, questionnaires mimick the role of experiments in natural sciences.

Although explanation and prediction are risky enterprises, the term "science" can only be used if this risk is taken and, in order to justify any hope of success, the complexity of the system under analysis calls for suitable theoretical tools. Since present research on QoL is intended to be scientifically grounded, it is engaged in working out such tools, but it is also in need of a better understanding for what concerns the very meaning of QoL.

On this occasion I shall briefly address three issues: first, the definition of QoL; second, the way complexity enters our understanding of QoL-oriented strategies; third, the "phantom" dimension underlying the list of features commonly associated with QoL: namely, ethics.

1. *The notion of QoL*

Any theory T has its bunch of fundamental concepts, which enter T-principles and are used to define any other T-concept. As such, fundamental concepts are undefined within T and yet there is a recurrent effort to clarify them at best. Philosophers of science addressed the issues concerning the status of definitions extensively. It is useful to remind that there is a *theory of definition* as a branch of mathematical logic with applications to every scientific field. Blame on advertising, I presented the theory of definitions and its history in two books.[1] Here let me mention just one of the issues involved.

Karl Popper emphasized a sort of fixation of social scientists on the definitions of fundamental concepts – a fixation he denounced to be a fossil of Platonic attitude towards the capture of essence as a condition for the knowledge of truth. Popper also claimed that

[1] *Definizioni: la cartografia dei concetti*, F. Angeli, Milano, 1983; *Definizione*, La Nuova Italia, Sesto Fiorentino (Florence), 1987.

such attitude is responsible for the lower advancement of social sciences with respect to natural sciences. For, since Galileo, natural sciences adopted a conventional approach to definitions which, in the twentieth century, led to the idea that the set of fundamental concepts of a theory is implicitly defined by its very principles (axioms or laws). Today, this idea is part of the standard view of scientific theories.

Popper's claims raised a harsh debate. Though the issue seems to be by now forgotten, it is exactly in point when facing the definition of QoL. Suffice it to recall how frequent are apology-assertions about the difficulty of defining QoL and how many of them ascribe the difficulty to the "complexity" of the notion and to its inter-disciplinary status. For instance, when we are said that medical research is oriented to health-related QoL, the goal is meant as something all but conventional, which implicitly rejects any suggestion that, under the standard view of theories, the notion of QoL is a theoretical construct. Even when we are said that physical health does not exhaust the matter, what is to be added is taken as no less objective and theory-independent. Good to know, but the point made by Popper, be it right or wrong, is cheerfully bypassed. On this regard, research on QoL would benefit from taking epistemology more seriously and confront its unpleasant impact, rather than resorting to epistemology as just a make-up device which adds a touch of nobility to the daily practice of research in social sciences and, in particular, on QoL.

2. *Complexity*[2]

Terms as "energy", "symmetry", "probability", have both a intuitive meaning in speech and a technical, precise, meaning in science. The same occurs with "complexity": there is the notion referred to in ordinary language and there is a technical definition of complexity, actually more than one from computability theory to physics and beyond. In each case, the formal concept pays its gain in precision with the loss of one feature or another usually encapsulated in the intuitive concept. This is the destiny of every concept as it enters scientific discourse and concepts of social sciences are no exception. The formal notion is obviously linked to the informal one, yet the appeal to both in one and the same sentence is methodologically inconvenient (to be generous). The risk of confusion is such that the use of one term in more than one sense should be carefully avoided.

I doubt social scientists appealing to complexity care for such a risk and are always consistent in the use of the term in one and only one sense (the doubts grow by reading papers and books which advocate "complexity" in educational and philosophical

[2] In this section I shall make use of some remarks from a previous paper, "Precisazioni", which is just an add-on to my book on semantic theory, titled *Il significato in-esistente*, Firenze University Press, 2004.

studies). What they seem to be mainly interested in is a bunch of aspects, such as massive interaction leading to unpredictability, amplification of differential effects leading to sudden phase transition, or the chance of *emergent*, stable or periodic, states in the evolution of a nonlinear dynamical system subject to a given set of constraints (among which, constancy of boundary conditions).

Complexity is a complex story, pointed with enthusiasm and denial, both lacking adequate support. There was Steven Wolfram's announcement of a new kind of science based on complexity, as well as there was a series of sceptical complains about the excessive, sometimes just rhetoric, use of the word. But there is serious research on complexity, on both the theoretical side and its applications to natural and social phenomena, and its relevance to understand systems with many interacting agents cannot be dismissed any longer as just hand-waving for what we don't understand, i.e., how it works – it cannot, provided the lack of care in using the term comes to an end.

A system in which agents have different, possibly opposite, goals can achieve "self-organisation" in more than one way: this means parallel paths in the phase space. It is fair to suppose the same hold for the paths related to "quality" states. As for stability, human societies provide a harder challenge than for example the case of simple prey-predator dynamics where boundary conditions are assumed to be constant and the same cyclic level of population means stability at best. In such a case, the global effect produced by local interactions occurs in the absence of any conscious attempt at preserving equilibrium. In the case we are concerned with, conscious attempt is present and it does not determine a unique line of action.

For a case in point, cognitive fitness is recognised as part of QoL, especially for aged people. Brain health calls for a strategy to reduce stress and depression as well as memory loss. The underlying hypothesis is: the more isolation, the more stress; and the more stress, the more accelerated ageing. Therefore we support long-life learning and volunteering in non-governmental organisations to increase social relations. Fine, but self-consciousness also matters and it is easier in moments of isolation rather than in the midst of an uninterrupted social forum. Participation is an old aid to skip the unpleasant face-to-face with our own self, but authentic well-being also passes through authentic self-friendship. If we stress only one of these features, it means our society is in need of therapy.

Now, complex systems allow for "emergent" phenomena. Here what matters is a special set of emergent phenomena: those associated with QoL's increase or decrease. We can't predict exactly what will emerge but we want emergence be constrained by QoL parameters: 1) the boundary conditions (say, the earthly environment) can be modified by agents as a massive result of their local interactions, 2) modifications can be consciously planned, 3) the goal consists of the best strategy to preserve or reach a "quality" state for agents (for all of them, ideally).

At one extreme lies the strategy of self-regulation: let the system act for itself, for the errors in global planning can be worse than the best intentions might envisage. Since there is a growing agreement that the very existence of the system is at risk, people normally bounce to the other extreme: the strategy of global control. We seem not to have learnt the lesson from twentieth century political economy where both patterns were adopted with devastating consequences for QoL, and so one or the other strategy is reproduced after suitable rewording. Actually, the former strategy is followed by agents who don't care about the environment rather than by agents who care about defective Aedipic predictions, whereas the latter is argued by agents who witness inverse distribution of care. I take as reasonable the hypothesis that there is also space for a more balanced architecture of our Quality-driven strategy along each if its dimensions, one which avoids the extremes and takes both the natural ecosystem and the social ecosystem into account. After all, such a balance is already present *within* our patterns of mind, thus our investment might be on a slide-up, in our mental ranking, of the associated values.[3]

Once more, caution is suitable in order not to define a standard which, by a perverse slippery slope, soon becomes a sanctuary of new pharisaism. Example: eating right. There are by now solid statistical correlations between large intake of fats and red meat plus scarcity of vegetables in one's diet, and cancer insurgence (especially prostate and breast cancer). Other equally reliable statistical outcomes show the damages of being over-weight. No doubt a more balanced diet contributes to QoL, but I just feel surprised as Molière's *bourgeois gentilhomme* in knowing he had spoken "prose" so far, since my granny cooked that way with no knowledge of dietology. In other words, we should be conscious of the risks hidden in the lesson drawn at present, obsessively reported and advertised by media: those who do not conform even become targets of *moral* judgements. In the name of health, as orthodoxy wants, the old need of tribal identity produces quickly growing deseases (for instance, orthorexia) rather than quality.

Here we also touch a more general theme: one characteristic feature of QoL-exity is the simultaneous presence of both subjective and objective parameters (and corresponding indicators). To check the outcome of national health service, new drugs or hospital treatment, objective parameters are easily detectable, but also questionnaires are fed to identify what people feels as a urgent, yet unsatisfied, need. The necessity of taking into account both the subjective (the perceived, experienced, QoL) and the objective is not confined to health-care. The same occurs with economical and social indicators. In each case the objective and the subjective are "subtly" related. For, suppose a city has a top position in public order ranking and its inhabitants have a high sense of insecurity, or a top position in pollution ranking and its inhabitants are happy with their environment. Such scenarios cannot be easily excluded as inconsistent. They could rather shed doubts on the criteria used to rank, raise questions on justice

[3] This hypothesis is related to a philosophical standpoint I called "entwined naturalism".

administration or ecological consciousness of inhabitants. The "subtlety" mentioned above refers to the different (possibly opposite) consequences that can be drawn in each case. Needless to say, we are interested in qualitative features which we ascribe some value and the notion of value belongs to the realm of ethics.

3. *Ethics*

Since its very beginning, philosophy constantly puts the tenets of common sense into question. Questioning the most hardwired beliefs about what is real, right, good, true, makes humans beings conscious of their implicit presuppositions. The task of checking certainties is never welcome. This also applies to our beloved idea of QoL.

Sometimes the term "common sense" is used as synonymous with "wisdom" and common sense is wise indeed in not expecting philosophy answers the questions it raises, be they on QoL or anything else. Wisdom ends, however, in drawing the inference "no answer, therefore question of no import", as if critical analysis of concepts and values were vacuous. Common sense forgets that the same irritating attitude fed scientific knowledge and, if there will be any substantial advancement in our scientific image of the world, that attitude will be at work once again, this time towards scientific common sense. As for QoL, such an attitude can help us in being more conscious of commonsensical presuppositions and pave the way to a hopefully consistent view of inconsistent values (in the sense of being opposite to each other in practical choice), but it can also lead to a nowhere land in which the call for QoL is perceivable no longer. 2500 years of philosophy put in front of us a vast spectrum of ethical views, each one with its own idea of QoL. Therefore, the mere appeal to ethics says almost nothing, as soon as we exit common sense. Further considerations are needed, and since ethics is neither common sense nor science, we have to avoid another kind of conceptual confusion.

The classical dichotomy between subjectivist and objectivist ethics is in point. Subjectivists are divided into two parties. First, there is the party of those who claim that the inference from *x is personally or collectively believed to be right* to *x is right* is incorrect, for any *x*. Since nobody has access to the supposedly objective notion of *right* and, at the same time, personal or collective beliefs are different and even mutually inconsistent, the invitation is to scepticism. This means that there are as many notions of QoL as points of view, none of which can be preferred to another on a neutral ground. Second, there is the party of those who identify the right with what is *rationally* believed to be such. This means that there is a rational standard which allows for one precise hierarchy. Objectivists reject both versions and are sure that there are objective facts, related to human biology and psychology, which lead to define one notion of QoL, although it can be different from what pure rationality would say.

In present discussions about QoL, subjective judgments are considered as data, rather than as the ground for truth about values. This may lead to either an objectivist standpoint or a supposedly quality-free examination of QoL. Since the latter option is only accessible to aliens, which we are not, let's consider the former option. In the past, objectivists typically maintained that what is good (right etc.) for each is good for all, and vice versa, since values, as far as objective, are untouched by the number of subjects who share a given belief. If I had a duty, it would become automatically a collective duty, and vice versa: the moral subject is a generic one. Unfortunately, if everyone behaved the way asked by a specific moral principle – which one doesn't matter– the principle would become empty.

But no ethics was designed as a ladder to be thrown away after climbing. For an instance related to literal rather than metaphorical climbing, climbers love mountains and manifest the value they find in them. Now, suppose their whole audience is persuaded to follow their example. The effect would be, first, that their pleasure to climb would decrease, disturbed by the continuous noise of thousands of other new climbers on the same path; second, the mountain landscape would be destroyed in a few decades. So the *tacit* supposition was that the principle taken as general would be unobserved by someone, or even by the majority, in order to have a sense. This was the paradoxical situation of a complexity-free ethics.

There are game-theoretic puzzles which are telling indeed: they show that what a generic individual (with limited access to information) would find as the best strategy, so judged from within a given scenario is not such collectively, i.e., judged from outside the scenario. Other puzzles serve as case-studies for the contrary, for they present scenarios in which there is coincidence rather than divergence in judgment, and in a more interesting way there are scenarios in which the personal judgment depend on what is supposed to be the judgment of others. As a matter of fact, social problem-solving instantiates any of such cases, thus another face of complexity, of relevance for QoL-strategies, shows up here and its source is not so much the number of interacting parameters that prevent prediction but rather the simultaneous presence, in one and the same agent, of competition and cooperation patterns.

Once we acknowledge our rationality is in trouble with itself, it would be hypocrisy to ignore a basic issue: what relationships exists between QoL-index, life-satisfaction and, ultimately, happiness? There is general agreement that both our self-image and the sense of shared values (cultural identity) matter to this regard and both rely on self-consciousness. Education also matters but education affects the sense of belonging to a specific community and the resulting interference is not necessarily constructive. Moreover, one can doubt that (more) consciousness, by itself, implies (more) quality, as far as the above relationships is held as a rule of thumb. Suppose future computers progressively achieve self-access to every tiny subroutine and to every component of

their interface with the "environment". Suppose they are also given a sense of satisfaction for their working. Can we claim that increasing self-access warrants increasing satisfaction? Brains are more complex than cpu's. Does greater complexity make easier the warranty? Caution is suitable in either case.

The Greek dispute between eudaimonistic vs rational ethics, as well as the modern one between utilitarian and deontological ethics, are still with us behind the curtains of technicalities about QoL-index, so far as we care for what we want to measure. Doubtless, the notion of quality is value-laden in ways we would prefer to ignore. As for the experienced QoL, the square zero question is *how do I feel about my life*. Both positive and negative "feels" have motivations of very different sorts and, in order to understand their meaning, we stand back. But how much can we stand back? Only for alien researchers neutrality is at hand. Thus we can't skip another question: if we intend to put results of QoL-research to use, is the *type* of answer irrelevant to QoL? Suppose I say I feel good about my life. You ask why. Well, I own the t-shirt of my football team, autographed by the best players, I have the most trendy schoolbag, my hair are strong enough to be styled according to the standard of my clan, my work allows me to keep earphones on and disco's volume with me all day. Or suppose I say the expected length of my life is not important at all, I don't care about it, for what only matters is that it is devoted to my faith in some transcendent realm and death is just a door to a better life.

For each item in whatever proposed list of QoL-features, we can find a percentage of human beings who don't take it as part of their QoL. If we search for an intersection, identified by a sort of minimal QoL for all, we risk finding an empty intersection. So what?

If the *type* of answer is relevant and we intend to put results to use, we can't skip committing ouserselves to change the answer. Right here investments on education and ... (fill the dots at best) can prove their utility. If we are honest, we must admit our "objective" notion of QoL has an in-built set of presumedly objective values. We can't stay happy for long by just recognising that the observed values are different from the observer's values. Otherwise, we have to be consistent and claim that our wish, in the name of science, is to become aliens. I suspect many people working in the field of QoL are convinced to keep both halves of the cake: they pay attention to avoid any interference between the two points of view and at the same time they keep a non-minimal idea of QoL – a both ingenuous and canny conviction.

What tenets could guide us? In order to reach more "rational" decisions, more knowledge, hence more education, is required. Who dares to deny this? However, for what concerns social aspects of QoL, good outcomes in sense of belonging and self-satisfaction seem to have been obtained also in communities with a low level of "knowledge" in our present sense. Current option is maximising knowledge (as know-

that, rather than know-how) and "formal" education: though unrecognised, this option is just a by-product of an old tradition in Western philosophy. Is it the only option?

If we care for "well-being", we have to explore other directions and search for a more "natural" philosophy of life. But, if we find it, we can't expect such a gestalt-switch becomes a matter of conscious decision to be repeated every day, for it simply wouldn't work. Nor are we obliged to worry just for physical and social "fitness". We can also worry for engineering a different way of life, rather than bending to hypocrisy as it is custom in stressing the importance of both physical activity and verbal communication for QoL: we are becoming merely linguistic agents and the growth of internet speeds the process up.

This is the first time in history human beings worry for the QoL of future generations and it is the first time the tension between short-term and long-term benefits (either on the individual or the social side) is perceived so strongly. Here too the morally uncomfortable face of complexity is at work. On one hand, since we lack a reliable theory of ethical complexity, specific predictions of long-term QoL should remain out of a scientifically oriented talk. On the other hand, we can't just sit on the bank and wait. Our action plans for QoL might turn out to be incorrect, due to ignorance of some tiny side-effects. They might even turn out to be correct, but through a causal sequence of events different from the one we hold as truth-like. Either one of our presuppositions is wrong or some data are missing. Be as it may, we must do something, we need more knowledge and we can't bypass commitment to values, hence to ethics.

Such remarks can sound unpleasant towards the efforts of many and even frustrating, in comparison with the rational faith of those who advocate the Seventh Generation Standard and propose a corresponding Amendment to the Constitution of USA: a noble aim, guided by such a deep moral sense, I can't but admire. But the need of self-approval for finally worrying about people we'll never meet is not any insurance of objectivity. Once again, consciousness of our bounded rationality should suggest some caution and caution is consistent with the acknowledgment that we have to change something in present Western life-style and in its economy. The question is *how*, of course. In this connection, there is plenty of prophets and and blinkers-wearers as well, thus the exercise of caution is two-sided.

This is also the first time in history we realize, in a dramatic way, the divorce of ethics from economy at planetary scale can't last. The priority assigned to economy led to the association of QoL with a "standard of living": more income, more quality. This inference proved to be unsound and will remain such even when universal democracy had removed the need of a well-known remark: that the well-being of few can't be paid by the contrary being of many. In a nutshell, we could join the components, and their corresponding indicators, in a sort of equation, as PROGRESS = DEVELOPMENT + QOL.

The right side of this equation is taken as an algebraic sum of two terms in each of which the parameters have, so to say, the same sign. I suspect the situation is less simple (though it is by itself not simple at all). We need some first-order wisdom (renamed optimisation, or efficiency and efficacy in present lexical fashion), as much as we need some second-order wisdom in reminding that for any objective x there is another objective y such that the more x is achieved, the less y is, where both x and y are intended as features of our QoL. In other words: the weight of some QoL-indicators can hide a price to pay in terms of the weight of other QoL-indicators.

In order to estimate the fairness of the price to pay, we can't rely either on common sense or a science to come. We are in need of entering a complexity-laden ethics to replace one that turned out to be inadequate but it also seems that our knowledge is deficient, and we must take into account that our mind is not prepared to accomplish such a task. Perhaps, it has in-built biases that no argument or future knowledge will change (as if we were in front of a Müller-Lyer illusion about ouserselves, which is no illusion at all). Any QoL-politics has to come to terms with this bound.

We are able to realize the uninvited guest was always there and we still don't know how to deal with it. Yet the latter admission might be part of the solution rather than the problem. By making a virtue of necessity, the admission contains a drop of that sort of second-order wisdom which, after *slow food*, can be baptized as *slow thought*. This point should be better argued, of course. But let me close with a directly connected remark: if we are not content with just defining QoL and investigating the statics and the dynamics of QoL, both kinds of slowness, are features to take into account in order to act for a QoL, at the individual's and community's level as well, which is philosophically informed.