Chapter 14

TOWARDS A
‘DISCLOSEIVE SYSTEMS THINKING’

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 6 it has been pointed out that one of the principal distinguishing features of modern society is modern technology. By that I do not mean that in their everyday world people are surrounded by countless material artifacts, for that was the case even in pre-modern societies. Nor may the epithet ‘technological society’ be taken simply to indicate tools, machines and technological things as separated objects that confront human beings in their habitat. The reference is rather to the habitat itself. The multiplicity of technological things and processes that surround us form together an entirely new environment in which human life now unfolds in the world. Technology as a distinguishing feature of modern society means that in their everyday activities people have become dependent on numerous technological-organizational systems for communication and transportation, food production and distribution, health care and much more.

In Chapter 12 the idea of a systems ethics as an ethics for our technological society has been discussed. This society confronts us in many areas with questions of design and management of the technological-organizational systems or infrastructures within which modern life unfolds. At issue are questions like: What societal agents are responsible for particular developments? How are the different responsibilities of the agents related to each other and how are they coordinated? What are the norms for action by the various agents?

The present chapter turns attention to the approach or methodology, which is applied in the mentioned processes of structuring or restructuring
of our technological world. The following section starts with an evaluation of current systems methodologies focussing on the relation between systems ethics and systems methodology. Against that background, a proposal is made in section 3 for a 'disclosive systems thinking' leading to four normative principles guiding its practical application. Finally, section 4 offers some concluding remarks pointing to further research in 'disclosive systems thinking.'

2. AN EVALUATION OF CURRENT SYSTEMS METHODOLOGIES

With respect to the question of the connection between systems methodology and systems ethics, one might all too easily be led to say that it is external. Underlying this answer is the notion that the field of systems methodology is located next to but apart from the field of systems ethics. These two fields are thus entirely separate and distinct, and systems methodology, thus regarded, is viewed as an (ethically) neutral matter. In the continuation I want to advocate a different perspective, namely, that any systems methodology implies, whether conspicuously or not, a particular normative idea of systems ethics. According to this view, systems ethics is thus not just added on afterwards but is implicit from the outset in whatever systems methodology one may adopt. To make this clear, I want to begin in 2.1 by saying something briefly about systems methodology. What are we to understand by that? Next, I will investigate in 2.2 the relation between systems ethics and the different strands of systems thinking. To what kind of systems ethics are these strands oriented, and how is that justified?

2.1 Systems methodology entails systems ethics

In the first pages of his book *Systems Methodology for the Management Sciences* (1991) Jackson presents an explanation of the term 'systems

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1 What is here called 'disclosive systems thinking' has a family relationship with 'multimodal systems thinking', discussed in other chapters of this volume. Both have borrowed fundamental ideas of the philosophical work of Dooyeweerd. However, there is a crucial difference. Multimodal systems thinking merges Dooyeweerd's theory of modalities and Stafford Beer's cybernetic theory of management. Disclosive systems thinking follows a more radical strategy by focusing on the underlying ontology and philosophical underpinnings of systems methodology. It is rooted in Dooyeweerd's notion of disclosure.