PRESS RELEASE

March 1997

Humberto Maturana,

One of the world’s most eminent and radical biologists, epistemologist and systems thinker, is in the UK in the week beginning March 10 for an interdisciplinary event hosted by the Systems Department at the Open University.  Maturana, Professor of Neuro-biology at the University of Chile is the central figure in what Fritjof Capra describes as the "Santiago School of Cognition".   Maturana's work challenges many of the everyday things that we tend to take for granted but which, it could be argued, are at the heart of some of our contemporary ills.  These include:

(i) Objectivity - Maturana's studies of cognition and his concern with the role of the observer, observing challenge notions of objectivity as currently held up by the scientific community.  Maturana says "objectivity is a means to avoid responsibility".

(ii) Information - we live amongst pervasive metaphors which suggest we are in the "information revolution or age" and that better communication is about "information transfer".  From a cognitive perspective these are unhelpful - information is derived from the latin *in formare* or "formed within".  Maturana's research reveals just this - that there is no information from an external world but through our cognitive processes we impose patterns on the stimulatory signals we receive from the environment.  Thus the environment triggers but does not determine what we call information.  These insights pose major challenges to professions ranging from advertising to family therapy and teaching.

(iii) Emotioning - Maturana argues that our cognition derives from a braiding of our languaging and emotioning.  Emotioning has a physiological basis.  If emotioning is central to our cognition then this challenges the notions, common in science, that emotions are outside its domain of practice.

(iv) Evolution - Maturana's book "The Tree of Knowledge" (with Francisco Varela) challenged the dominant paradigm of evolution when it was first published in 1988.

Maturana's visit to the UK is a rare opportunity to discuss these themes at a time when they are subject to renewed focus following publication of Capra's new book - The Web of Life.   Maturana is also recognised internationally as a radical epistemologist. His work has major implications for the ethics of action.  As such Maturana‘s work has offered thinking that has the power to change the way we interact with the world.

Maturana’s work also represents a radical expansion of the traditional concept of mind. Cognition, the process of knowing, becomes much broader than that of thinking. It involves perception, thinking, emotion and action - the entire process of life. Maturana’s great insight is that “Living systems are cognitive systems and living as a process is a process of cognition. This statement is valid for all organisms, with or without a nervous system.” From this came his invention, with Francisco Varela, of the term autopoiesis - to describe this process of the organisation of living.

Gareth Morgan has written “The theory of autopoiesis .......seeks to unite and transcend disciplinary boundaries using the simple but remarkably powerful notion that all systems look at themselves and regulate their functioning through a process analogous to thought”.

Maturana‘s work has wide reaching relevance for professionals involved in complex situations or complex decision making - including educators, environmentalists, family therapists, biologists, cognitive psychologists as well as management and systems practitioners.  Maturana is well known in the US and Australia where his workshops are oversubscribed.  He has been a consultant to major firms such as Dupont and others in the US.

Humberto Maturana has a doctorate from Harvard University, and is based at the Faculty of Sciences of the University de Chile. He is a member of the Chilean Academy of Sciences and, among other distinctions has been awarded the National Science Prize of Chile and the McCulloch Medal of the American Cybernetics Society. He lectures regularly in universities and research centres of the USA, Europe and the rest of the world. James Lovelock has described him as “the authoritative figure in the science of cognition”.

 Further details

Maturana will be at the Open University in Milton Keynes from13th - 15th March 1997