

# Preface

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## Prologue

This volume is the tangible (and extraordinarily belated!) record of the workshop on *Autopoiesis & Perception* held in Dublin City University in August 1992.

The workshop was a small and informal affair, organized jointly by myself and Noel Murphy. We first conceived of the idea early in 1992. At that time I had only recently come upon the work of Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana more or less by accident and had experienced something almost akin to *revelation*. I felt that here was a body of theoretical ideas of enormous generality and power, with the potential to solve some very difficult problems with which I was just then grappling. For his part, Noel had had some small exposure to these same ideas through his contacts with David Vernon of Trinity College Dublin, who was striving to apply Autopoietic Theory in the field of computer vision.

While we felt that Autopoiesis was extremely interesting, and of great potential application in our own respective fields, we were also both acutely conscious of the fact that this theory was radically different from our familiar conceptions or philosophies; that, in short, we would need expert help if we were to tackle it seriously.

Fortunately, the members of the Computer Vision group in DCU were, at that time, participants in an ESPRIT project funded by the European Commission (BRA 3325). Thus, Noel and I made a proposal, within this project, to hold a workshop specifically focussed on the relationship between Autopoietic Theory and *perception*. This was approved, and discussions ensued with Francisco Varela and David Vernon; David also introduced us to his colleague in TCD, Dermot Furlong, who had been exploring the significance of Autopoiesis in the field of *aural* perception. These people all responded with remarkable interest and enthusiasm. Thus the stage was set, and the call for participation in the (first?) Dublin workshop on *Autopoiesis and Perception* was published far and wide.

## The Workshop

We had originally envisaged the workshop involving perhaps 15–20 participants. In the event, the interest was sufficient that we felt justified in extending this to somewhat more than 30. This was an extremely diverse and international group. Furthermore, in addition to the original promised presentations from Varela, Vernon and Furlong, several others (rashly including Noel and myself) volunteered additional papers. This led to a final programme of one and a half days of quite concentrated oral presentations combined with extended time for discussion and debate.

Late draft versions of most of the papers were distributed during the workshop itself; draft copies of the remainder were circulated shortly afterward. The final papers as they now appear here generally differ only in minor respects from the draft versions.

It is somewhat customary in these prefatory remarks for Editors to briefly review each of the papers in advance; however, after some consideration, Noel and I have elected to forego this in the case of these particular proceedings. We can rank ourselves only as editors (with a small “e”). Our editorial functions certainly involved extensive soliciting and encouraging and sometimes even downright nagging; we gladly took on the functions of formatting, typesetting, and at least superficial proof-reading; but we could contribute very little of review or criticism. After all, our motivation in promoting in the workshop was to facilitate our own education in this difficult field.

Indeed, we did learn very much from the workshop, though it would be silly to pretend that we are now expert! Instead, we are content to let these papers stand on their own merits. We commend them to you, of course, for we have found considerable stimulation and enlightenment in them, and they provided a focus for very lively and active discussion during the workshop itself; but for any more detailed evaluation, you must study them yourself.

This final, formal, publication of the proceedings from the workshop was delayed by a variety of factors, only some of which were within our control; nonetheless, I feel I should apologize, particularly to the authors, that the delay eventually extended out to two years from the date of the workshop itself. I promise to do better next time!

## Epilogue

In the final discussion session of the workshop, and with only very little prompting, Randy Whitaker raised the issue of an *electronic* forum to facilitate continuation of discussions relating to all aspects of Autopoietic Theory. In what was possibly the first (and last) outbreak of complete unanimity of the entire workshop, the assembled company immediately agreed that:

1. No satisfactory such forum was known to currently exist.
2. It would be very nice if one could be set up.
3. Randy, having raising the issue, was obviously the perfect person to pursue this further.

With excellent good humour, Randy acquiesced in all this, and has since devoted very considerable time and energy to the project. This came to fruition early in 1993, with the launch of an electronic newsletter, moderated by Randy, and christened **The Observer**. This has already been the focus for some very interesting exchanges, and we would encourage anyone with an interest in the field to become actively involved in its future development. For further information, please contact Randy, as:

`rwhitaker@falcon.aamrl.wpafb.af.mil`

I should also mention that, more recently (and not directly triggered by the workshop), several unmoderated, interactive, discussion groups bearing on topics related to autopoiesis have separately been established by Kent Palmer:

`palmer@world.std.com`

You can see what lists Kent has made available by sending the message `lists` to:

`majordomo@world.std.com`

The message `help`, to this same address, also works if you want to see what commands are available.

## Acknowledgements

The workshop could not have taken place without the wholehearted support of many individuals and organisations. As already noted financial assistance was received from the DCU Computer Vision Group, as part of ESPRIT BRA 3352. Francisco Varela, David Vernon, and Dermot Furlong were generous and enthusiastic in agreeing to provide the invited papers which made the project viable. The staff and research students of the School of Electronic Engineering provided a wide range of organisational support. Other agencies within DCU were also extremely supportive and helpful with all the myriad ancillary aspects of the workshop.

And of course, above all, we are grateful to the participants who travelled to Dublin to attend the workshop. It was they, and only they, who ultimately made it the very stimulating and enjoyable event which it turned out to be.

Barry McMullin.  
*Dublin, August 1994*