My contribution to the “Last Word” relates to the notion of a system and what this might mean in practice. The notion that someone ‘has the last word’, can be very empowering for the speaker voicing their conclusions and possibly very disempowering if the voices of those who are affected by the decisions are not ethically represented.

C. West Churchman stresses there is ‘no such thing as an expert’. The last word of a conversation needs to be a pause or a full stop, to draw breath in an ongoing conversation. As policy makers decisions need to be made. But who and what is included or excluded in the process is vital. The notion that boundaries can be drawn as if they are without pores that open or close – according to context – is problematic, because the closest we can get to truth is through dialogue to support social and environmental justice.

As systems person might believe (as did West Churchman) that ‘the systems approach begins when we first (try) to see the world through the eyes of another’ and, if we believe that ethics involves establishing an ‘ongoing conversation’ in which ideas can be tested, then the last word needs to be a question about the consequences of any policy or governance decisions not only for our immediate friends and family but for others (including sentient beings) and the environment. This idea of ethics is called ‘expanded pragmatism’ and it is an extension of the work of West Churchman, who stressed the importance of considering the consequences for others in this generation and the next.

Closure leads to entropy, loss of energy and loss of creativity and enthusiasm. West Churchman argues that there is no such thing as a ‘total system’ or a closed system. All problems have an environment not just the ecological environment but the things that are excluded when a problem is framed. So decisions should be made on the basis of being prepared to learn in ongoing iterations or cycles about what is important and why certain perceptions are valued more than others.

The word is a means of communication based on shared meaning, generated by trust. Just as the signalling of a beloved companion animal leads to shared meanings developed over time across species. Closure leads to entropy, loss of energy and loss of creativity and enthusiasm. West Churchman argues in ‘The Design of Inquiring Systems’ and in ‘Thought

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