

What's Love Got to do With Philanthropy and the Social Sector?

Ken Hubbell

This essay is my first attempt to articulate an intuitive feeling about a reformation that is underway in the world of social change. My thinking has been influenced by nearly two decades of field experience facilitating change efforts for private foundations, nonprofit organizations, tribal governments, and sometimes intermediary institutions like health centers, community colleges, universities and state agencies. Along the way, I have been assembling a point of view (and a set of provocative insights and quotes) that I'm just now beginning to articulate.

I have a profound sense that the field has run into a couple of major blind spots. These are largely generated by our own incomplete mental models of how change occurs and can be sustained and by our own inability to examine the deeper sources from which systems operate.

To borrow a simple observation from Ronald Heifetz's insightful work on leading change, we have applied technical know-how to complex situations without clear rules that are constantly changing and adaptive, and thus, can't be solved merely through known, linear solutions. Heifetz advances a notion of adaptive work as the learning required to address conflicts in the values people hold or to diminish the gap between the values people stand for and the reality they face:

“...Adaptive challenges require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community. Without learning new ways—changing attitudes, values, and behaviors—people can't make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment...Indeed, the single most common source of leadership failure we've been able to identify—in politics, community life, business or the nonprofit sector—is that people...treat adaptive challenges like technical problems.”¹

The prevailing technical-scientific paradigm currently in practice in the social sector has produced many outstanding impacts and obvious benefits to individuals, families, institutions, and communities. The current context in the field is heavily shaped by a growing emphasis on technical sophistication. The sector has been influenced by the world of business, embracing and emphasizing the importance of accountability, performance and impact measures, and return on investment. The underlying assumption is that the field must accelerate efficiency, productivity, and scale to produce impact. Added emphasis on short-term achievements has reinforced a growing reliance on borrowed “best practices.” Constant marketing pressures have contributed to an unhealthy focus on brand and competition for resources.

On one hand, this certainly makes sense as it reflects the common cultural norm. However, when I look at the larger social sector ecosystem I see that we've missed the mark and have hit a plateau. It seems that applying technical solutions does not work for complex and adaptive situations that are so commonly at the center of most social change challenges: natural ecosystems, communities, organizations, and individual living organisms. Simply defined, adaptive systems are a set of interacting

¹ Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky; *Leadership on the Line*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, 200, pages 12-15.

or interdependent entities that together are able to respond to changes in their environment, and that, through information feedback can adapt to changes.² Such changes are often both gradual and episodic. Such systems are shaped by the interplay between change and persistence and between predictability and unpredictability.³

Therefore, one of our blind spots obscured an important constraint: we have fine-tuned some pieces of the social change process but failed to discern the whole. We got lost in control and management and overlooked love and respect, and the old practices of listening and community. We opted for technique, precision, and compartmentalization when we should have been focused on whole systems, learning from feedback, and seeking to understand our place in the larger system. The current recession has magnified the issues.

More than ever the field needs to discover ways to integrate these and achieve a new point of view. To do this, we must face the second blind spot. In a rush to make change, change agents and organizations rarely seek to understand the source from which our intentions and actions arise. C. Otto Scharmer describes the importance of discerning “the interior condition of the intervener:”

In the process of conducting our daily business and social lives, we are usually aware of what we do and what others do; we also have some understanding of how we do things, the processes we and others use when we act. Yet if we were to ask the question, ‘From what source does our action come?’ most of us would be unable to provide an answer.”⁴

By overlooking the deeper source beneath our thoughts and actions, we tend to mis-diagnose the complex environment in which we’re operating, and then overlook our own role in contributing to the dynamics of the whole system. Thus, to reconcile the impact of these considerable blind spots, I believe leaders must make a bigger space for love, caring, compassion and a commitment to the larger, greater good in the practice of social change.

What do we Mean by Love Anyway?

Adam Kahane lifts up a definition of love that is useful for us in this context. Referring to work by theologian Paul Tillich, he defined love as “the drive toward unity of the separated. So love in this sense is the drive to reconnect and make whole that which has become or appears fragmented.”⁵ In Peter Senge’s *Fifth Discipline*, love is described as an attitude and sensibility: as commitment to serve and a willingness to be vulnerable in the context of that service. It usually requires the full and unconditional

² Retrieved from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adaptive_system_on_January_27, 2010

³ Lance Gunderson and C. S. Holling; *Panarchy-Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems*, Island Press, Washington, D. C., 2002, page 5

⁴ C. Otto Scharmer; *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges*, Society for Organizational Learning, Cambridge, MA 2007, page 7

⁵ Adam Kahane; *Power and Love: A Theory and Practice of Social Change*, 2010; Berrett-Koehler Publishers, inc., San Francisco, page 2 .

commitment to another's completion.⁶ C. Otto Scharmer included a powerful statement about love from Japanese philosopher Kitaro Nishida as he outlined a shift in the approaches of action-science, "love is the power by which we grasp ultimate reality. Love is the deepest knowledge of things."⁷

This sense of engagement and service with others is a key feature of a loving approach. It implies the "others" have a presence and a right to co-create the world. Furthermore, it suggests that if individuals and organizations are really to grasp reality and connect the pieces into a sensible whole, then leaders have a responsibility to understand their own inner place and condition—the source from which they operate—and its impact on their attention and choices.⁸

Largely institutions have been operating from the control mode for years, despite the continued complexity and unpredictability of the times. This tension is articulated in a simple booklet, *Ten Things to Do in a Conceptual Emergency*:

"The world is once again exposing our ignorance and lack of understanding—but now we reach instinctively not for mystery but for control. This a natural psychological response to being overwhelmed by complexity and uncertainty...The love and fear responses are always present. The challenge is to get them in the right balance....For it is in the love loop that we find our creativity, energy, and the hidden human resources we need to cope with the unprecedented."⁹

In the face of accelerating growth and development practices, the field turned to specialization and competition, despite the emphasis for most grant recipients to produce new levels of consensus and collaboration. We overlooked the fact that certainty is just another point of view and we underinvested in learning and adaptation. In many instances, the consequences of these choices elevated the role and influence of experts and specialists. This trend has not slowed the problems that are structural or systemic. Generally this rush has obscured the value of subjective and lived experience. Emphasizing the internal knowledge and operating timelines of institutions obscures access to the wisdom and insight from community that is needed to address the complexities of our era and make sense of it.

"Our society reveres measurable results, financial success and intellectual competency," observed Fetzer Institute president Tom Beech. "...

I suggest that our over-emphasis of them and our preoccupation with results have contributed to our current situation...Our focus on short-term results has blinded us to the systemic nature and interconnectedness of all of our institutions and has yielded long-term results of disastrous proportions."¹⁰

⁶ Peter Senge; *The Fifth Discipline*, Currency-Doubleday, New York, 1990, page 285

⁷ C. Otto Scharmer; *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges*, Society for Organizational Learning, Cambridge, MA, 2007, page 109

⁸ Scharmer, page 7

⁹ International Futures Forum; *Ten Things to Do in a Conceptual Emergency*, 2003; IFF; Andrews, Scotland; page 8.

¹⁰ Tom Beech; "Leadership for Our Times," Fall 2009, *Fetzer Institute News*; Kalamazoo, MI, page 2.

This limited perspective affects the larger social sector. The Fetzer Institute commissioned a quantitative survey in 2009 of over statistically representative 1,400 adults in the U.S. The survey results revealed that there “is in the U. S. a strong and growing longing for communities that work, that are nourishing and life-affirming for everyone, that are characterized by deep relationships, inner strength, hospitality, and spiritual power.” Despite the optimism, 80% of survey respondents believe the world is too divided and that we don’t love one another because we can’t get past divisions.

Public surveys reflect the spirit of the current times, which clearly are marked by the kind of creative tension listed in previous sections of this paper. Finding balance between short-term action and deep, systemic and community integration is a leadership challenge for the sector.

The contemporary social challenges that frame much of the work of philanthropy are intensely complex and growing ever more so. Adam Kahane and C. Otto Scharmer describe this frame of complexity as having three interconnected features: **dynamic complexity**, when cause and effect are interdependent and far apart in time and space; **social complexity**, when the stakeholders involved have different or competing interests and perspectives, and **generative or emergent complexity**, when the patterns of change are disruptive and unfamiliar and the best practice solutions of the past aren’t effective.¹¹

The underlying drivers for this increasing complexity are four interrelated forces (ecological, social, economic, and spiritual) that generate difficult systemic challenges for philanthropy and the social sector. Any economic solution has social and ecological impacts and numerous unforeseen consequences; and likewise, protecting ecosystems and reducing the impact of development on the atmosphere and the earth has obvious economic and social repercussions. Continued income inequality, structural disadvantages or racism, disease, and fear are challenging the spirit and resilience of communities and prompting serious re-thinking about the human aspect of social and economic change.

These forces are part of a pattern of larger shifts where old ways of perceiving our surroundings are disintegrating while some persist, and others—totally new—are in formation. The new structure and the new story are not fully clear, but to be lasting a new structure must address these guiding questions:

1. How can we create a more equitable global economy?
2. How can we deepen democracy and evolve institutions so all people can participate and shape the solutions?
3. How can we renew our culture and build communities where love, tolerance, equal opportunity, high expectations, health, and quality of place are common?
4. How can we protect our environment and natural resources and be wise stewards of the planet?¹²

Scharmer notes that “we may recognize all these types of complexity in today’s institutions, but we continue to deal with them inappropriately.”¹³ Facing continuous complexity can push leaders to choose

¹¹ Kahane; *Power and Love*, page 5 and C. Otto Scharmer; *Theory U*, pages 59-61.

¹² C. Otto Scharmer; *Theory U*, pages 81-96

technical responses since those are most familiar and predictable when the situation calls for adaptive responses built upon discernment, learning, experimentation, and innovation and approached in a more human and loving manner.

Too often our known approaches seem to be linear in design, provide insufficient leverage and are overtly short-term in intent and implementation. These are self limiting from inception because they ignore the systemic complexity and the pivotal role that all actors play in contributing to the current dysfunction. “We pretend that our world is empty, but it is not,” explains Adam Kahane, “often we assume that all it takes to create something new—whether in business or politics or technology or art—is purposefulness or power. This is because we often assume that the context in which we create is an empty world: an open frontier, a white space, a blank canvas. In general, this assumption is incorrect.”¹⁴

Behind the prevailing ideas of social change is a tacit assumption: that social and natural systems are predictable and can be directed to change if enough force or resources are targeted at an issue or problem. This is the fundamental flaw in most of the change efforts. Economies, financial markets, communities, networks, and organizations are complex, highly adaptive and interdependent ecosystems that don’t stand still—they have inherent knowledge and relationships and the will, life force, and ability to sustain them. The essential characteristics of complex systems are uncertainty, surprise, and constant change. They typically feature dense connections and interdependence and a tight coupling where a change in any component has a ripple effect on others, and can amplify repercussions across the system. Systems exhibit non-linear behavior where changes are not proportional to their size and can alter their behavior, making forecasting based on the past highly uncertain.¹⁵ According to social change scholar Margaret Wheatley, they respond intelligently to the need for change. She emphasizes an insight from scientists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela: “You can never direct a living system. You can only disturb it.”¹⁶

If we can develop new ways to relate to and respond to complex systems in our social change efforts, then we’ll have to employ a new set of design principles. These principles must include a respect for diversity and co-creation, humility, and love and an expansion of boundaries.

Scientists believe we can only understand living and adaptive systems in the most general ways and that we can’t foresee accurately how they will respond in the future. “The idea of making a complex system do just what you want it to can be achieved only temporarily, at best” observed pioneering environmental scientist Donella Meadows.

“The future can’t be predicted, but it can be envisioned and brought lovingly into being. Systems can’t be controlled, but they can be designed and redesigned...We can’t impose our will on a system. We can listen to what the system tell us, and discover how it’s properties and our values

¹³ C. Otto Scharmer; *Theory U*, page 79.

¹⁴ Kahane; *Power and Love*, page 4.

¹⁵ Thomas Homer-Dixon; *The Ingenuity Gap*, Vintage Books, New York, 2002, pages 110-115

¹⁶ Margaret Wheatley; *Finding Our Way*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, 2005, page 33-37

can work together to bring forth something much better than could ever be produced by our will alone...We can't control systems or figure them out. But we can dance with them."¹⁷

Living in a New Space of Ambiguity

A snapshot of the current era suggests the social sector is facing a dilemma. It is undergoing a slow transition to a different world and set of social-cultural-spiritual norms. We are in the overlap of two eras—one known but approaching exhaustion and a new one, not yet clear and assimilated. The result is a confusing mix of the old and new. The mix suggests an archetypal pattern though the specific content and context is contemporary.

There is a concept called *mandorla* that describes the transition that is underway. It is an ancient symbol (often used in both Christian and Buddhist iconography) of two circles coming together forming a transformation of opposing forces. Scholars and psychologists describe the transition space as “the place where you arrive after you leave one room and have not yet entered another. In this place you are living on the threshold and this requires faith.” Navigating transitions requires new thinking. To reconcile the existing duality and close the gap between reality and vision, you have to practice a shift in thinking from “either-or” to “both-and.” Holding such dynamic tension allows leaders to live in a space of continual ambiguity by facing uncertainty with a reservoir of confidence.

Jungian analyst Robert Johnson describes the power of a mandorla as “a true integration ...The two elements make something greater than either.”¹⁸ So, there is tremendous promise in the mandorla if we can integrate opposing energies—or at least dance with them. In Tibetan Buddhism, they describe the co-emergent nature of such transitions and note that during such an experience “wisdom and confusion arise simultaneously....This constant uncertainty may make everything seem bleak and almost hopeless; but if you look more deeply at it, you will see that its very nature creates gaps, spaces in which profound chances and transformation are continuously flowering—if, that is, they can be seen and seized.”¹⁹

So, I suggest we are in the midst of a mandorla experience, and what is necessary to navigate to a new era is an integration of love and action science—a dynamic new blend of the technical and adaptive. The way through this transition is a more intentional joining of the inner and the outer realities that leaders face. Such integration will require facing our blind spots and uncovering the shadows from our light. We'll need to reframe our notions of community and social change with a much longer view.

This suggests that change agents will have to connect open minds and open hearts, with their faith and personal resolve to approach social change in new ways. Organizations will have to discover new and effective organizational learning processes and reformulate theories of success—and ways it is usefully measured. Philanthropy will have to shift its typical practices from philanthropy as relief, improvement

¹⁷ Donella Meadows; “Dancing With Systems,” *The Systems Thinker*, Vol. 13, No. 2, March, 2202, page 1.

¹⁸ Robert Johnson; “The Relationship of the Inner and the Outer,” *Inward Light*, Vol. XLVI, Spring, 1984, pages 1-4, as retrieved January 5, 2010 from <http://fcrp.quaker.org/InwardLight100/100Johnson1.html>

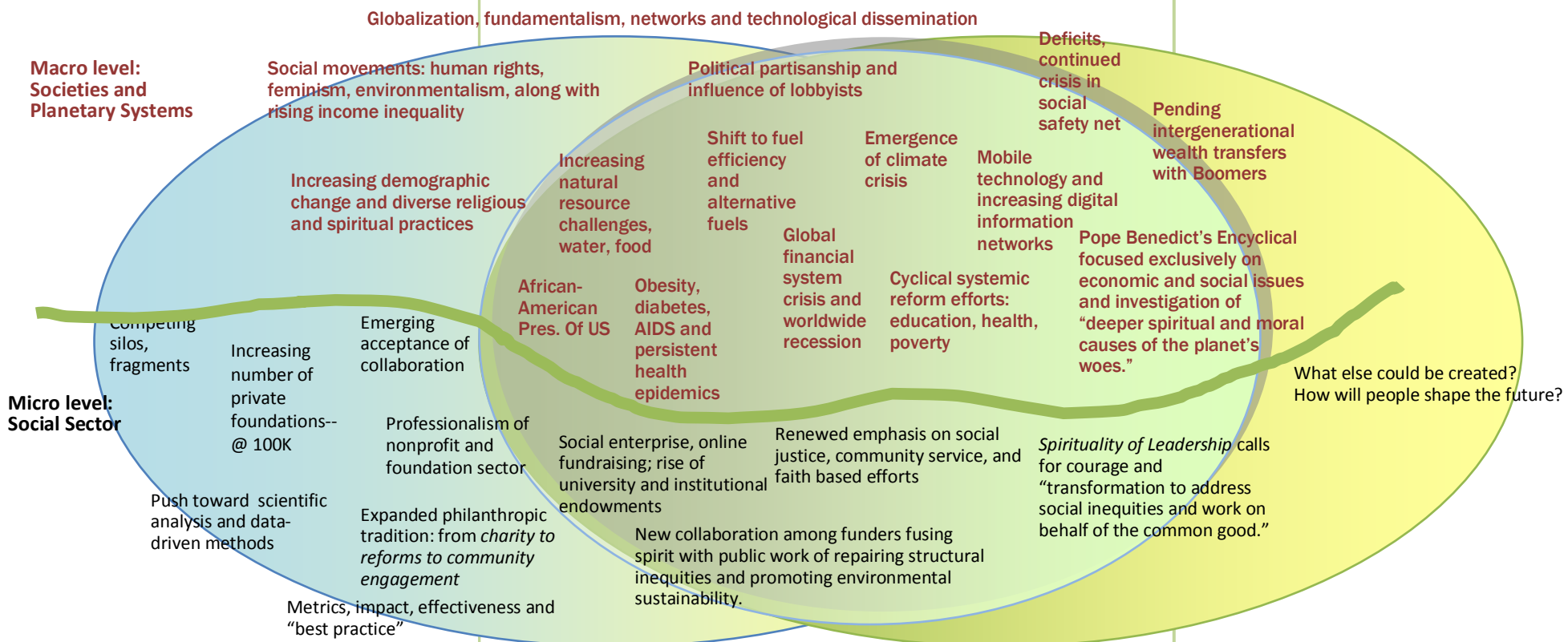
¹⁹ Sogyal Rinpoche; *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, Harper San Francisco, 1993, page 109.

and social reform even further toward the more recent traditions of community engagement and collaboration that accomplished philanthropic leaders Elizabeth Lynn and Susan Wisely described in a 2006 paper. “We can create the conditions for conversation,” they suggested, “in the hope that new vision and fresh action will eventually emerge....we will be furthering public deliberation and promoting discovery of new ways of seeing.”²⁰

On the diagram that follows, I have illustrated a snapshot of the mandorla pattern. It contains a selection of signals that are representative of the dynamics. Obviously, any group could add and adjust an alternative selection of signals that can further illuminate the concept.

²⁰ Elizabeth Lynn and Susan Wisely, “Four Traditions of Philanthropy,” retrieved January 20, 2010 from www.civicleflection.org/resource/d/28310/FourTraditionsofPhilanthropu.pdf

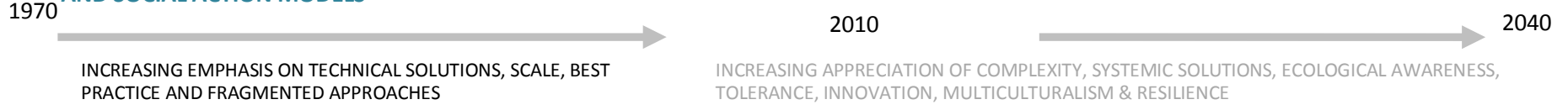
Leading through the Social Change Mandorla



TRANSITION-MANDORLA

**PRIMARY THEME OF ERA
PURSUING
SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH
TECHNICAL AND SCIENTIFIC
APPROACHES
AND SOCIAL ACTION MODELS**

**BUILDING CONNECTED
COMMUNITIES OF OPPORTUNITY
AND HEALTHY ECOSYSTEMS
AND SUSTAINING A
COMPASSIONATE CULTURE**



Holding a Space for Love

There aren't any quick and easy steps to integrate the kinds of complexity we're facing. Surely, we can hope for new technological innovations that provide more feedback and connectivity among people and across systems and subsystems. The body of knowledge about useful ways to guide or create social change is likely to provide additional good ideas that can be adapted by institutions, organizations, and communities. There are many efforts in philanthropy and the wider social sector that suggest positive ways to contribute to a new era.

The rest of the work is on us. In her closing comment from an article titled, "There are Limits to Growth, but No Limits to Love," Donella Meadows reminds us that love is both practical and rational. "The world can never safely pass through the adventure of bringing itself to sustainability if people do not view themselves and others with compassion. That compassion is there, within all of us, just waiting to be used, the greatest resource of all, but one with no limits."²¹

So, we'll have to hold open a space for love, humility, and learning. We'll have to discover the individual practices or disciplines that connect us to spirit and unleash loving mindfulness and creativity. And we'll have to reshape organizational culture to optimize collective ways of nurturing integrities. "An integrity is not closed: it is constantly in relationship with its environment and with other entities in the four critical domains of sovereignty, recognition, reciprocity, and agency."²²

While such shifts will be difficult, we have another asset that will help push past the helplessness: our own ability to learn and adapt. As we understand how living systems operate, we develop the skills we need: we become resilient, adaptive, aware, and creative.²³

In conclusion, I believe that the time for a reformation is here, and that important shifts are already emerging. What is needed most is our resolve to embed reflection and deep conversation into the cycle of strategic action and to seriously reframe our worldview. This will require what Zen practitioners call "right action: action that is harmonious with our own reality and with the reality around us."²⁴

Noted writer E. F. Schumacher, framed a solution to such dynamic tensions in an optimistic note:

"Through all of our lives we are faced with the task of reconciling opposites which, in logical thought, cannot be reconciled...by bringing into the situation a force that belongs to a higher level where opposites are transcended—the power of love...Divergent problems, as it were, force us to strain ourselves to a level above ourselves; they demand, and thus provoke the supply of, forces from a higher level, thus bringing love, beauty, goodness, and truth into our lives."²⁵

²¹ Donella Meadows; "There are Limits to Growth, but No Limits to Love," retrieved November 30, 2009 from http://www.sustainer.org/?paage_id=90&display_article=vn433btloveed

²² International Futures Forum; *Ten Things to Do in a Conceptual Emergency*, page 12

²³ Margaret Wheatley; *Finding Our Way*, page 1

²⁴ Parker Palmer; *The Active Life*, Harper Collins, New York, 1990, page 58

²⁵ E. F. Schumacher as quoted in Parker Palmer; *A Hidden Wholeness*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2004, page 179.