

A Maturana-Informed Grammar of Viability

Conserving Life, Love, Reflection, and Coexistence

What kind of world are we conserving through the way we live?

This question may sound simple, but it reaches into almost everything: our families, our schools, our clinics, our workplaces, our institutions, our economies, our politics, and our relationship with the living Earth.

We often ask whether a system works.

Does the school produce results?

Does the hospital treat patients?

Does the economy grow?

Does the institution survive?

Does the civilization remain powerful?

But these questions may not go deep enough. A system can function while conserving harm. A school can achieve high scores while conserving fear. A clinic can treat disease while conserving objectification. An economy can grow while consuming the living medium that makes its future possible. A civilization can become powerful while becoming less able to conserve humanness.

So we need another question.

Not only: Does it work?

But: What manner of living is being conserved here?

And then: Does this manner of living keep life livable?

This is the heart of a Maturana-informed grammar of viability.

It begins not with abstract systems, but with living itself.

Living is not permanence. Living is conservation through change.

A living being does not continue by remaining fixed. The cells change. The body changes. The medium changes. The relations change. Yet the living being continues while its organization and its congruence with the medium are conserved.

A river remains a river because the water keeps flowing. A body remains alive because its processes keep changing in a way that conserves its living organization. A culture remains a culture because certain conversations, emotions, and habits keep returning.

So conservation is not the opposite of change.

Conservation is the pattern that continues through change.

This is the first insight.

Whenever we look at a person, family, institution, culture, or civilization, we should ask: what is being conserved through all this movement?

Is trust being conserved?

Is fear being conserved?

Is play being conserved?

Is humiliation being conserved?

Is care being conserved?

Is extraction being conserved?

Is love being conserved?

Or is the negation of love being conserved?

To ask this is to begin seeing life differently.

A living being never exists alone. It lives in a medium.

The medium is not simply a background or container. It is the domain of circumstances in which living becomes possible. Air, water, food, shelter, temperature, and light are part of the medium.

But for human beings, the medium also includes touch, language, memory, family, culture, institutions, economy, law, technology, stories, and emotioning.

A child does not grow in space alone. A child grows in a relational world.

A patient does not enter a clinic only with a disease. The patient enters with fear, trust, previous experiences, family burdens, cultural meanings, financial constraints, and hope.

A citizen does not live only under laws. A citizen lives within public narratives, bureaucracies, police encounters, media atmospheres, economic pressures, and experiences of recognition or humiliation.

So the unit of concern is not the isolated individual.

It is the living being in a medium.

But even the word “medium” is not enough.

Two beings can share the same physical surroundings but live completely different worlds.

A wealthy executive and an undocumented worker may live in the same city, but they do not live the same niche. A child, an elder, a disabled person, a migrant, and a prisoner may inhabit the same society, but their lived worlds differ profoundly.

The niche is the particular organism-medium relation actually lived.

So we must ask: what niche is being conserved here?

Not only: what resources are present?

But: what relational world is being lived?

What does this world make possible?

What does it make impossible?

And what kind of human being does it bring forth?

This becomes especially important when we look at children.

A child does not become human by genes alone. A child becomes human in a human relational medium. The child learns body, self, other, trust, play, language, and belonging through recurrent relations with caregivers and the surrounding culture.

A child’s human niche includes being held without fear, touched without violation, seen without humiliation, corrected without negation, allowed to play without constant performance anxiety, and accompanied into language without losing bodily trust.

This gives us one of the most important civilizational tests:

Does this culture conserve the niche in which children become loving, self-respecting, other-respecting, playful, reflective human beings?

If the answer is no, the civilization may still conserve intelligence, productivity, wealth, and technological power. But it may fail to conserve humanness.

Now we come to structural coupling.

Structural coupling is the history of recurrent interaction through which a living being and its medium change together.

The medium does not simply determine the organism. The organism does not simply control the medium. Instead, they trigger changes in one another over time.

This is why human suffering cannot be understood by blaming the individual alone.

A child can become structurally coupled to fear.

A worker can become structurally coupled to exploitation.

A patient can become structurally coupled to dismissal.

A community can become structurally coupled to humiliation.

A civilization can become structurally coupled to ecological destruction.

These couplings may allow survival. But survival is not the same as life-coherence.

A person can adapt to harmful conditions. A culture can adapt to domination. A society can adapt to crisis by becoming more controlling. But adaptation alone does not mean that life is being conserved well.

So the question becomes:

What kind of structural coupling is being conserved?

And what manner of living does it sustain?

This helps us understand behavior differently.

Behavior is not simply something an isolated organism does. Behavior appears in the relation between living being and medium.

A step is not in the leg alone. It is in the body-ground relation.

Speech is not in the mouth alone. It is in the speaker-listener relation.

Care is not in intention alone. It is in the relational field where one living being is met as legitimate, present, and worthy of attention.

So when a child acts out, we should not ask only: what is wrong with the child?

We should ask: what relational world is this behavior arising from?

When a patient does not follow medical advice, we should not ask only: why is this patient noncompliant?

We should ask: what history of trust, fear, cost, explanation, dismissal, or shame is this behavior living from?

When an institution resists change, we should not ask only: why are people difficult?

We should ask: what recurrent pattern is the institution restoring?

Behavior is relational.

And this brings us to emotioning.

Emotioning does not mean private feeling alone. It is the relational domain that makes some actions possible and others difficult or impossible.

A child in play can explore, invent, laugh, fail, return, and begin again.

A child in fear may freeze, hide, cling, strike, or scan for danger.

A patient in trust can ask questions and participate in care.

A patient in humiliation may withdraw, resist, or remain silent.

A society in mutual recognition can deliberate.

A society in fear may polarize, accuse, punish, and silence.

Emotioning gives action its relational identity.

The same words can live in different worlds.

“Try again” can be encouragement, pressure, humiliation, or invitation.

“No” can be protection, rejection, control, or loving boundary.

“We need security” can mean shared protection, fear, surveillance, exclusion, or domination.

The words alone do not decide the world.

The emotioning in which they are lived decides what they become.

This is why institutions cannot be diagnosed only by their official language.

A school may speak of curiosity while conserving fear of error.

A hospital may speak of compassion while conserving distance and hierarchy.

A government may speak of peace while conserving enemy-making.

An economy may speak of development while conserving extraction.

A family may speak of love while conserving control.

So the question becomes:

What emotioning is actually being conserved here?

This matters because emotioning shapes reasoning itself.

In fear, reasoning becomes defensive.

In resentment, reasoning becomes accusatory.

In domination, reasoning becomes strategic.

In love, reasoning can become responsible.

In play, reasoning can become exploratory.

In trust, reasoning can become reflective.

We do not reason from nowhere. We reason from the emotioning in which we live.

Now we turn to languaging.

Languaging is not merely the use of words. It is the recursive coordination of doings.

Human beings do not simply use language to describe a world already given. We live in languaging, and through languaging we bring forth shared worlds.

A diagnosis brings forth a medical world.

A law brings forth a civic world.

A price brings forth an economic world.

A border brings forth a political world.

A promise brings forth a moral world.

A story brings forth a world of memory, identity, and possibility.

These worlds are not imaginary simply because they arise in languaging. They become real in the way they coordinate bodies, institutions, expectations, exclusions, responsibilities, and futures.

Money, debt, property, citizenship, credentials, markets, growth, development, and risk are symbolic realities. They exist because we coordinate our living around them. And because we coordinate around them, they shape who eats, who works, who belongs, who is excluded, who is protected, and who is abandoned.

So we must ask:

What world is being brought forth in this languaging?

And what manner of living does it conserve?

But languaging never occurs alone. It is always braided with emotioning.

That braid is conversation.

Conversation is not simply talk. Conversation is the living flow of languaging and emotioning through which human beings bring forth and conserve worlds.

A family is conserved in conversation.

A school is conserved in conversation.

A clinic is conserved in conversation.

A legal order is conserved in conversation.

An economy is conserved in conversation.

A nation is conserved in conversation.

A civilization is conserved in conversation.

This does not mean these things are merely verbal. It means that their human form depends on recurrent coordinations of doing and emotioning.

Buildings, laws, classrooms, hospitals, money, borders, technologies, and institutions become what they are for human beings within conserved networks of conversation.

A culture, then, is a conserved network of conversations.

Culture is not merely heritage, art, ritual, food, or declared values.

Culture is what people recurrently live.

A culture continues when children learn its conversations.

It continues when institutions repeat its distinctions.

It continues when bodies become accustomed to its rhythms.

It continues when its emotioning feels normal.

It continues when its assumptions disappear into common sense.

This is why culture is powerful. It is not merely taught. It is inhabited.

A child learns what can be asked, what must be hidden, what counts as success, what deserves shame, who may speak, who must obey, what is dangerous, what is beautiful, what is worthless, what is possible, and what is impossible.

The child learns a world.

So again we ask:

What conversations are children being brought into?

Are they being brought into trust, play, tenderness, curiosity, reflection, and mutual respect?

Or are they being brought into fear, ranking, shame, performance, obedience, and control?

This question is not sentimental. It is civilizational.

Because civilization reproduces itself in the child before the child can reflect on what is being conserved.

Now we come to love.

In this grammar, love is not romance. It is not sentimentality. It is not blind acceptance. Love is the relational domain in which another living being arises as legitimate in coexistence.

This means the other does not have to justify their right to exist before they are treated as legitimate.

Love can still set boundaries.

Love can oppose harmful behavior.

Love can refuse abuse.

Love can hold accountability.

But love does not require the denial of the other's being.

Aggression is the opposite. Aggression is the relational domain in which the other is denied as legitimate.

This can happen loudly or quietly. It can happen through violence. It can also happen through polite bureaucracy, cold procedure, diagnostic labels, market categories, and institutional indifference.

A person can be reduced to a case.

A patient can be reduced to a bed number.

A child can be reduced to a score.

A worker can be reduced to productivity.

A river can be reduced to a resource.

A people can be reduced to a problem.

A future generation can be reduced to an externality.

In each case, something living is made less than legitimate.

And where love is negated and that negation becomes conserved, suffering appears.

Suffering is not the same as pain. Pain may be part of living. Grief may be part of love. Illness, loss, and difficulty may be unavoidable.

Suffering, in this grammar, is the conserved negation of love.

It is what happens when a living being is repeatedly denied legitimacy, and then must organize its living around that denial.

A child may begin to live as if worth must be earned.

A patient may begin to live as if asking questions is dangerous.

A worker may begin to live as if exhaustion is normal.

A people may begin to live as if humiliation is destiny.

A civilization may begin to live as if extraction is reality.

Healing, then, is not merely removing symptoms.

Healing is the restoration of a relational domain in which trust, self-respect, respect for the other, and possible living can reappear.

Healing cannot be forced. A living system changes according to its own structure. A person cannot be commanded to trust. A culture cannot be ordered into love. An institution cannot be transformed by slogans alone.

A healer, leader, teacher, parent, physician, or community can create conditions. They can protect margin. They can interrupt further negation. They can invite reflection. They can conserve presence. They can begin another conversation.

But healing occurs when another manner of living becomes possible from within.

That brings us to reflection.

Reflection is living becoming able to see how it is living.

It is the pause in which the world that seemed obvious becomes visible as a world being conserved.

Before reflection, we say: this is just how things are.

After reflection, we can ask: what manner of living are we conserving by calling this reality?

A parent may see: I have been living as if control is care.

A physician may see: I have been living as if diagnosis is the person.

A school may see: we have been living as if ranking is learning.

A political community may see: we have been living as if peace requires the defeat of the other.

A civilization may see: we have been living as if Earth is resource rather than living medium.

Reflection opens freedom.

But reflection requires enough love or trust for seeing not to become annihilation.

A person in fear may defend rather than reflect.

A person in shame may collapse rather than reflect.

A culture under accusation may deny rather than reflect.

So reflection requires a relational ground where truth can appear without destroying belonging.

This gives rise to ethics.

Ethics is not first a rulebook. It is care for consequences in coexistence.

Ethics begins when the consequence for the other matters.

What does my action do to the child?

What does this policy do to the patient?

What does this economy do to the worker, the caregiver, the soil, the water, and the future generation?

What does this development do to the living Earth?

Ethics asks not only: did we follow the rule?

It asks: who or what disappeared from concern in this manner of living?

And what conversation made that disappearance normal?

Responsibility follows.

Responsibility is not blame. It is not guilt. It is not punishment. It is not omnipotence.

Responsibility is answerability for participation.

It is the capacity to say: I participate in what is being conserved.

I may not control the whole institution, but I participate in its conversations.

I may not control the culture, but I participate in its repetitions.

I may not control civilization, but I participate in how Earth, the child, the stranger, the poor, the defeated, and the future are brought forth in language and action.

Responsibility asks:

What continues through my participation?

And do I want to continue conserving it?

This question opens freedom.

Freedom is not the absence of all constraint. Living is always constrained. We live in bodies, histories, cultures, relations, and consequences.

Freedom is the reflective possibility of no longer conserving what one does not want to conserve.

It is the possibility of seeing an inherited pattern and saying: I do not have to continue living this as the only world.

Freedom is not unlimited choice. A person may have many options and still be trapped if every option conserves the same self-negation.

True freedom asks:

What automatic conservation can now be seen, released, and transformed?

Can control be released as the automatic form of care?

Can ranking be released as the automatic form of learning?

Can objectification be released as the automatic form of expertise?

Can enemy-making be released as the automatic form of politics?

Can extraction be released as the automatic relation to Earth?

If freedom is the possibility of living otherwise, transformation begins when living otherwise becomes recurrent.

Transformation is not mere change.

A new policy is not transformation.

A new slogan is not transformation.

A new metric is not transformation.

A new technology is not transformation.

Transformation occurs when a new manner of living begins to conserve itself.

A school transforms when curiosity, dignity, and disciplined inquiry are lived again and again.

A clinic transforms when patients are recurrently met as legitimate whole persons.

An economy transforms when value begins to serve provisioning, care, sufficiency, and regeneration.

A civilization transforms when Earth begins to appear as living medium, not merely resource base.

Transformation is a new conservation beginning to live.

Now we can ask about life-coherence.

Life-coherence is conservation that does not betray living.

A stable system may be life-incoherent.

A prison can be stable.

A bureaucracy can be stable.

A violent family can be stable.

An extractive economy can be stable.

A culture of silence can be stable.

So the question is not: is this stable?

The question is: what is being stabilized?

A resilient system may also be life-incoherent. A person can be resilient in a destructive workplace. A community can be resilient under abandonment. A civilization can be resilient in avoiding transformation.

So we must ask:

Resilience for what manner of living?

Growth is not enough.

Efficiency is not enough.

Innovation is not enough.

Power is not enough.

The question is:

Does this manner of living conserve living?

In the family, does it conserve trust, play, boundary, and dignity?

In the school, does it conserve curiosity, disciplined inquiry, and self-respect?

In the clinic, does it conserve healing, presence, science, and personhood?

In politics, does it conserve disagreement without dehumanization?

In justice, does it conserve accountability without disposal?

In economics, does it conserve care, sufficiency, provisioning, and regeneration?

In civilization, does it conserve Earth as living medium?

Only after this derivation can the diagnostic primitives appear.

They are not things life is made of. They are questions that help living see what it is conserving.

Conservation asks: what is being conserved?

Constraint asks: what must be respected for that conservation to continue?

Margin asks: how much room remains for viable change?

Disturbance asks: what triggers change without determining it?

Present structure asks: from what embodied history does the response arise?

Regulation asks: what recurrent dynamics restore the pattern?

Relevance asks: what becomes visible, meaningful, invisible, or legitimate?

Possible doings asks: what can actually be lived next?

Together, these questions become a practical grammar of life-coherent inquiry.

But this grammar must not be used mechanically.

It is not a checklist for controlling others. It is not a weapon for declaring who is life-coherent and who is not. It is not a superior standpoint outside living.

The observer is always inside living.

So the grammar must apply to itself.

When I ask, what is being conserved here, I must also ask: what am I conserving by asking in this way?

When I ask, what emotioning is being conserved, I must ask: what emotioning am I bringing to the diagnosis?

When I ask, where has love been negated, I must ask: am I negating the other in how I name this?

This recursive safeguard is essential.

Without it, the grammar becomes ideology.

With it, the grammar remains conversation.

The purpose of a Maturana-informed grammar of viability is not to master life.

It is to help living see what it is conserving.

It asks persons, institutions, cultures, and civilizations to pause before the worlds they reproduce and ask:

What manner of living is being conserved here?

What happens to love?

What happens to the child?

What happens to reflection?

What happens to responsibility?

What happens to the living Earth?

What becomes possible if we conserve otherwise?

The final invitation is not to impose transformation from outside.

It is to begin another conservation.

To conserve play where fear has been conserved.

To conserve dignity where shame has been conserved.

To conserve presence where procedure has been conserved.

To conserve care where objectification has been conserved.

To conserve responsibility where consequences have been hidden.

To conserve Earth as living medium where Earth has been reduced to resource.

To conserve disagreement without dehumanization where enemy-making has been conserved.

A life-coherent world will not appear because we name it.

It will appear only as another manner of living is conserved, again and again, in bodies, homes, classrooms, clinics, institutions, economies, laws, technologies, and relations with Earth.

So the question returns to us.

In this moment, in this conversation, in this relationship, in this institution, in this world:

What manner of living are we conserving?

And does it keep life livable?

The grammar ends where living begins again.