EPIPHANI.ES
Break out of Stimulus -> Response thinking

Unedited posts from archives of CSG-L (see INTROCSG.NET):

Date: Thu May 05, 1994 1:45 pm PST
Subject: Epiphanies

[From Bill Powers (940505.1150 MDT)]

In a private post, Clark McPhail said this (cited with permission):

> Most people find it very difficult to break out of Stimulus-> Response thinking. Of those who do, most either reject any form of systematic scientific thinking and research on human experience and action and resort to philosophical nonsense or post-modern interpretations and the like; the remainder who reject Stimulus->Response thinking sometimes view cognitive models as a useful alternative to Stimulus->Response models. That was my entre' to PCT and it took a while to understand that PCT was not about the control of action outputs. My perception is that this always comes as a shock when newcomers on the net realize this counter-intuitive "truth". It is a disturbing epiphany. They have to reorganize, to start over again and re-think their way back through the entire PCT argument.

And, in giving permission, Clark also added this, cited in anticipation of permission:

> Maybe someone should forewarn those who "rush to judgment" that they don't have it until they can wake up in the morning, walk around throughout the day, and try to fall asleep in wonderstruck realization that "all I know about the world and all I can accomplish regarding what I and others do in the world reduces to my perceptions".

It's somewhat frustrating knowing that there are 120+ long-time subscribers to this list, and not knowing how many of them have experienced these "epiphanies." Most people come to some sort of understanding of PCT quite early in the game. I hope that Clark and others will write about what it was like to "understand" PCT _before_ these crucial insights penetrated, while control still seemed to be controlling actions, and while perception was something that one still considered as a theoretical aspect of _other_ people's functioning (or however it was conceived). I suspect that many people here have not crossed the threshold yet, and perhaps hearing how others see their pre-threshold understanding they will realize that there is yet another step to take in reaching complete understanding.

Clark described the critical experience: "They have to reorganize, to start over again and re-think their way back through the entire PCT argument." This is the big AHA. When you really understand that control systems do NOT control their own actions, and when you understand that ALL they can control is their own -- your own -- perceptions, the first thing that happens is that all your previous understandings of PCT flash back through your mind and _change_. It is absolutely amazing how one can make sense of something and still not have it right, and then how one little change of interpretation can cascade all the way back through everything you thought you understood and totally revise it. That's what "getting it" with respect to PCT means. That's why some people make such a big deal of this experience, and even doubt the claims of others to understand PCT when they show no signs of having gone through this upheaval.

Of course it's possible that for some people nothing ever stood in the way of getting the picture correctly on the first exposure to PCT. But that doesn't seem very likely to me; I haven't yet encountered any examples. It's hard to reach adulthood without having formed some explanatory concept of human behavior, particularly one's own behavior. Everybody comes into PCT with some preformed system concept about human nature. What makes PCT difficult to grasp is the very effort one naturally makes to "make sense" of the theory, meaning to make it fit in with what one already understands. We are, in fact, very

good at doing this. All we have to do is bend the meaning of one sentence one way, another sentence a different way, and the new idea slips neatly into place among the old ideas. When we succeed in doing this, as we usually do, we say we "understand." We say the new idea "makes sense." We even say it improves our understanding.

But this form of understanding is specifically designed to leave intact what we understood before. This is a control process, by which system concepts are protected against disturbance. The purpose of this way of treating a new idea is exactly to counteract any disturbance it might create among the system concepts one is already maintaining. This is not an epiphany; the pleasure of making sense of the new idea is not the dangerous thrill of discovery, but the pleasure of finding reassurance that all is well with the world the way it is -- or even better than before.

Again, is it possible that for some people the principles of PCT fit right into their previous system concepts without any need to distort or reinterpret them to make them fit. But again, I haven't encountered any examples of this. It's really not to be expected. There are no existing disciplines or lines of thought that were based from the start on the idea of control of perception and non- control of action. Yet each discipline or line of thought has attempted to produce explanations of human behavior, the same human behavior with which PCT is concerned. It must be realized that control of perception and noncontrol of action are _fundamental premises_ in any explanation of behavior. So other explanations that have done without these concepts, and this is true of all conventional approaches, must have substituted some _other_ fundamental premises.

There are only two basic kinds of fundamental premises that were adopted (singly or in combination) prior to PCT. One was that events in the environment cause the behaviors we see, and the other was that internal processes, traits, properties, or cognitions cause the behaviors we see. Whatever superstructure is built on these premises, the fundamental premises are absolutely crucial at every step.

As a result, the main misinterpretations of PCT that occur are those that leave one or the other of the conventional premises intact. The simplest misinterpretation is quite straightforward; as an example, I have seen the title of my first book cited (in an approving way) as "Perception: the control of behavior." That leaves the environment as the causative agent. Another straightforward confusion is the identification with _Plans and the structure of behavior,_ citations in which my work is described as being inspired by the TOTE unit: the TOTE unit is described as a way of producing planned actions until the desired result is achieved.

So, getting back to the main thread, the most likely outcome of an encounter between PCT and ANY conventional theory is that there will be a clash that traces back to fundamental premises. But the clash is not necessarily obvious. The basic statements of PCT, which we try to make as clear and unequivocal as possible, can too easily be taken as rather clumsy ways of saying that the environment causes behavior, or that plans or traits and so forth cause behavior. To add to the difficulties, people who work under either of the conventional sets of premises are not often conscious of the crucial ways in which their observations and arguments rest on those fundamental premises. There is a tendency to pit the _conclusions_ of another theory against the _conclusions_ of PCT (or else to emphasize the similarities), without any realization that the roots of the problem (or the apparent agreement) rest in incompatible sets of fundamental premises. So arguments tend to occur at the wrong level of abstraction -- at the level of talking about goals or purposes, properties of perception in psychophysical terms, specific explanations of bizarre behavior or behavior seen under unusual circumstances, specific designs for control processes. All the while, the real problem is a basic difference in conceptions of what behavior is and how it works.

The epiphanies of which Clark speaks are not just statements that one accepts as one accepts the premises of a logical argument. For some reason, one catches oneself in the act of controlling some perception, and realizes that the _actions_ by which this control is brought about are _not_ under control, but vary with every disturbance. One suddenly understands "control of

perception" as applying to one's _own- perceptions, and realizes that -- of course -- _there is nothing else to control_. One suddenly realizes that the basic premises are in fact true. That, and not the acceptance of the arguments as logical premises, is what leads to the sense of revelation, the epiphany. The critical moment occurs when one makes the connection between the abstract statements and direct experience, discovering that the abstract statements are not abstract at all: as Clark said, they are counterintuitive truths. The intuitions to which they run counter are the fundamental premises of most other theories of behavior.

Best to all, Bill P.

Date: Sun May 15, 1994 1:04 pm PST
Subject: Epiphanies

[From Dag Forssell (940515 1400)] Bill Powers (940505.1150 MDT)

Bill, your post on epiphanies (I looked it up in Webster's) is one of those timeless classics. Thanks!

I cannot remember clearly any conversion of mine similar to Clark McPhail's. In some ways mine is still ongoing, fresh and exciting every small step of the way. Particularly as I find ways to understand PCT myself and ways to explain to others. As examples:

Recently, I posted in "PCT in a nutshell" that: *Behavior is not an end result*. I have since simply asked an acquaintance: What is the focus of contemporary psychological theories? The answer is: Action/Behavior! I agree. How is behavior described? By the outcome! Confusing? Now I ask if they are aware of and can remember the actions they took when they sneezed, took a glass of water, -- whatever I saw them do -- in the last minute. Do they pay attention to the hand movements when they drive, or to the position on the road? My friend became interested and wants to read Ed's book.

Another oh-so-simple idea I had the day before yesterday is to emphasize (in class) what a control system looks like from the outside: The only thing you can see is action/behavior -- thus the science of psychology. When you look from the inside; your own perspective on your own existence, the only thing you can see (and control) is your perceptions -- thus the science of PCT.

Third, listening to a parent describe how s/he and a child routinely conflict, it struck me that given the fundamental focus on behavior -- judgement, of it, snyde comments on it etc., it is IMPOSSIBLE to convey respect for another human being. Ed Ford shows the way to conveying respect, by asking (not telling) about wants. The fundamental concept and focus each person internalizes makes a MAJOR difference in our ability to lead satisfying lives.

Best, Dag

Date: Sat May 14, 1994 9:10 pm PST
Subject: Time to come back to basics

[From Bill Powers (940514.2025 MDT)]

. . . What was the disturbance that Rick Marken kept insistently applying? What was most disturbing was not his manner of speaking, but his message, which is my message, Tom Bourbon's message, and the message of anyone who has understood PCT. The message is very simple: the behavioral sciences have missed the boat, and so have even most of those who have tried to apply control theory to behavior. All the elaborate theorizing that has gone on for Descartes only knows how many decades has been almost totally a wasted effort, because the main simple facts about how behavior works have been grossly misunderstood or completely overlooked.

There is a simple and direct way of understanding behavioral organization, one that gives us a realistic hope of actually understanding behavior in great

detail -- first simple aspects of it, then more complex aspects as we establish our base and build upon it.

But this simple and direct approach has essentially no relationship to any mainstream line of reasoning that now exists or has existed in the past. And that is the problem. It is very hard to grasp the message of PCT when the price of doing so is to realize that one has been on a false track; the longer one has been on that track, the harder it is to accept its falsity. It is perhaps the hardest to accept by people who actually grasped a part of the picture, but followed the hints in the wrong direction. As we have seen illustrated clearly in the recent past, the automatic human response is to cry "But if what you say is true, then my life's work, my career, my sense of understanding, my beliefs are worth nothing!" And it is equally human and automatic to conclude, in the greatest _non sequitur_ of all, "Therefore you must be wrong and I must still be right!" This is the simple human refusal to gaze directly on a personal disaster, to avoid the despair that would follow on accepting its reality.

To those who defend other approaches, these pronouncements can only sound like arrogance and religious fervor. That way of seeing them is one effective way of defending against a threat. In fact, the principles of PCT are extremely simple; they are in conformity with normal scientific thinking and they are based on easily demonstrable facts. In this area of simple tests and demonstrations, no advanced rhetoric is needed, no extraordinary interpretations, no flights of mathematical abstraction, no leaps of faith. The observed relationships are simple, clear, and reproducible, as are the predictions of the simple model that suffices to explain them.

The arrogance and religious fervor are not on the side of PCT, but ranged against it. The principles and demonstrations offered under PCT are simple, embarrassingly simple. It is beyond its critics to accept that they could have overlooked such straightforward and obvious facts. The arrogance of these critics lies in assuming that nothing as new as PCT claims to be could possible have escaped their notice; the religious fervor lies in the assertion that everything observed under the label of PCT could, somehow, some day, be explained by some other existing theory -- even if it happened that nobody who believed in that theory saw the relationships that PCT exposes and explains.

The greatest sign of religious fervor is the belief that if we just continue developing the existing lines of research, we will eventually solve the problem of understanding behavior. This is the illusion that keeps people following conceptual schemes that are fraught with difficulties and contradictions and that do not even consider the simple facts that PCT has demonstrated. The difficulties and contradictions, it is fervently believed, are merely technical problems, to be overcome by persistence and effort -- more effort of the same kind, not by starting over from scratch. To those who are engaged every day in the effort to overcome these problems, the presence of another entirely different direction, based on entirely different assumptions and observations, is simply a distraction and an irrelevancy. I know what I'm doing, so please let me get on with it!

I can see only one way to avoid spending the rest of my life pushing against prejudice and self-defense, and that is to stop pushing. In other words, Rick Marken is right. The only people who are going to join the work on PCT and carry it further are those who have been able to grasp its basic principles and who have seen that they replace a host of confused and aimless attempts to explain behavior by those who have failed to notice the basic facts of behavior.

PCTers have, from the very start, been self-selected. They read the books, they read the articles, they asked the questions, and they decided that this was the way to go, all without argument or arm-twisting. They saw for themselves what was wrong with whatever theory they had believed before; for many of them it was seeing the flaws in their own disciplines that initially led them to look for something new.

I think that our basic presentations of the principles of PCT are quite sufficient to convince an unprejudiced person that there is something fundamentally new and different here. As I look back on my arguments with yes-butters and nay-sayers, I realize that all my effort has gone into trying to elaborate on and make even clearer what is basically simple and already clear.

By trying to deal with slippery and ever-changing arguments at higher and higher levels of abstraction, I have been overlooking the obvious: that for these debaters, understanding the simple demonstrations and relationships is not the point. The point is to try to negate apparent contradictions of their own theories and interpretations, and to avoid talking about behavior at a simple and direct level where everything is clear and understandable. I have let myself be suckered into debating on shifting grounds about vague concepts and imaginary situations. It is time to return to basics, and take my stand on the solid foundations of PCT where definitions do not change, the reasoning is public, clear, and understandable, and the threat of experimental test with real human beings looms over every confident pronouncement. ---------- So, Rick, I think it's about time to come back. We have experiments to design and carry out, programming to do, and progress to make. That's what CSGnet was originally supposed to be about. Let those who want to learn more, ask. Let those who want to join in the effort, join in. And let those who just want to show how much they already know go fly a kite.

Best, Bill P.

The article below deals in a very intuitive way with the importance of the subjective principles and systems concepts perceptions we develop, and echoes Bill Powers' observation in the post on epiphanies that we protect what we already know (no matter how well or poorly it serves us) and resist any disturbances to it. As the author observes, objective facts have very little to do with it. That condemns us to many arguments and conflicts, unless we understand more about how perceptions are formed and controlled and resolve to question the fact versus fantasy discrepancies that often cause real conflict.

Date: Mon Jun 13, 1994 12:39 pm PST
Subject: Systems Concepts

[From Dag Forssell (940613 1110)]

Article in today's Los Angeles Times. Submitted without comment, but inspired by Rick's thread on control of systems concepts, and the importance of recognizing systems concepts for what they are.

THE FIGHT TO BE RIGHT

In our hearts, we know our opinions to be the truth -- and not even a few lousy facts can change that.

Story by MICHAEL HAEDERLE Special to the times

Given the choice of being right or being happy, we cling to our opinions. It's an inescapable fact of human nature. We spend our lives wrangling and fussing going toe to toe over who's right and who's wrong.

We pay a big price for our stubborn insistence on correctness. Friendships fracture, marriages burst and, on a global scale, nations go to war.

Oh, we might compromise here and there, but there always lurks in each person's heart the secret conviction that he or she alone knows the truth.

Why is it we must always be right?

One reason may be that it makes evolutionary sense to have all the answers.

"In terms of survival, it's better to be right than not right," said Frederick Koenig, a professor of social psychology at Tulane University in New Orleans.

"When we're brought up, 'wrong' is counterproductive and negative," Koenig said. "People who are right more often than others are considered superior, because that's a sign of intelligence."

And as everyone knows, he added, "There's a certain amount of gratification in being smarter than somebody."

There are really two ways to be right, Koenig contended.

One has to do with factual correctness. Right in this sense means that a fact or statement can be checked.

This kind of rightness doesn't usually cause much human suffering (with the possible exception of those who live with "Jeopardy" contestants and baseball trivia nuts).

But _right_ also refers to moral or emotional rightness, arising from personal values--and this is where things get really sticky.

"When you get to value questions, being right is very important to your whole world view," Koenig said. Opinions about abortion, gay rights or capital punishment spring from broad beliefs about how things are or ought to be. Likewise, we nay have a deep psychological need to see ourselves as good or righteous (even when we're at fault).

When the emotional and moral stakes are high, Koenig said, "there's not any room for equivocation."

Koenig cited the example of those who are convinced there was a conspiracy to kill President Kennedy.

"From the beginning it seemed to me very clear it was done by Oswald, and that's all there was to it," Koenig said. "I couldn't see what the fuss was about, but there are people who devoted 30 years to this on the assumption the CIA and the government can't be trusted.

"It's somehow important to people. not only because of their distrust of the government, but a 30-year investment in this belief."

Ultimately, when defending your world view, "you have to be consistent," Koenig said. Seeking to eliminate the dissonance between inconvenient facts and their beliefs, people often simply dismiss the offending evidence.

Rigidity, experts say, can be related to self-confidence.

"People who have a strong ego-who are self-satisfied and confident about themselves--don't have to win every argument," Koenig said.

Gender differences also arise.

Generally, "women are more willing to try to compromise," he said. "It's not so important for women to triumph."

Writer Alfie Kohn thinks much of our need to be right comes from our cultural upbringing, which emphasizes the gulf between winners and losers.

Kohn, author of the influential book ' No Contest: The Case Against Competition" (Houghton Mifflin, 1986), argues that many disputes are really power contests.

"There's a difference between trying to be accurate and having a prideful investment in not giving in," he said. "If you and I get in an argument and I start defending my position because I want to score points, it's more problematic."

A former nationally ranked high school debater, Kohn knows whereof he speaks.

In debating, "the goal is not to reach the truth. The goal is to marshal arguments selectively to win," he said. "It took years after my debate training to say, 'Huh. That's a good point--I never thought of that.' " It's a short step from debate club to law school, where students learn that no idea is intrinsically better than another because an argument can be made for either side. Kohn calls this aspect of legal reasoning "a very cynical world view."

Kohn blames it all on America's "state religion" -- competition. "People in this culture are raised to look upon others as obstacles to our success. That pernicious world view is stamped on us with musical chairs, spelling bees and Little League, and even parents who say, 'All right, kids, who can get in their pajamas fastest?'"

All this, he said, leads to "either-or" thinking.

"From either-or, we start to think in terms that are black-and-white," he said. "That becomes 'we-they'--us against them."

People from other cultures, especially non-Western societies, see our preoccupation with winning and losing as baffling, Kohn said.

Like Koenig, Kohn sees gender differences in how badly people need to be right, in particular "the famous macho need not to back down, on which altar millions have lost their lives."

One example, he said, was Lyndon Johnson's refusal to pull American troops out of Vietnam: LBJ is said to have declared that he wasn't going to be the first President to lose a war.

"The ultimate false dichotomy is thinking, 'Am I going to be a winner or a loser?'--in conversation, in business or world affairs," Kohn said.

"There is no hope for us unless we realize those are two versions of the same competitive world view. The real alternative to being No. 1 is not being No. 2, but to dispense with these categories altogether."

The obsessive need to be right (and for everyone else to be wrong) has poisoned our public discourse, contends Virginia author Andrew Bard Schmooker, who explored human conflict in his book "Out of Weakness: Healing the Wounds That Drive Us to Make War" (Bantam, 1988).

Political pundits spouting pithy televised sound bites exemplify the trend, Schmooker said.

"There's a great temptation to take simplistic black-or-white positions, because the market will reward them more," he said. These same forces shape our expectation of how leaders should lead.

"People would rather have someone who speaks without a wavering of uncertainty," Schmooker said. "One has to posture as if one is already there. Otherwise, people are uncomfortable."

Best, Dag