



Ontological Foundations

Ontological Study

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Written By Chris Chittenden

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Acknowledgements

I would like to pay homage to the people who have gone before us in developing this work and whom, without their ideas, this essay could not have been written. These include Dr. Fernando Flores, Rafael Echeverria, Julio Olalla, Dr. Humberto Maturana, Francesco Varela and Alan Sieler.

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Author's Note

This essay is one of a series of essays that were originally papers in Talking About's coach training program. They have been adapted for a more general study of the ontological approach. This essay establishes the foundations of the ontological approach and therefore I suggest reading this essay before you read any of the other essays. This essay along with others essays in this series can be found at the Talking About web site, www.talkingabout.com.au.

This essay also includes some questions that are designed to encourage you to reflect on how the distinctions outlined in this essay may relate to your own experience of life.

Finally these essays are offered as a gift to you and others to help you explore your life through a different lens. Should you find any errors or wish to explore any of the ideas in more depth, I would welcome your thoughts. Please feel free to contact me through the Talking About web site.

Best wishes...

Chris Chittenden

Introduction

Ontology is the philosophical study of the nature of being. This study focuses on the question of what it means to be human; a question that has been asked down through the ages and spawned a wide range of answers. In recent times, the study of neuroscience has added some new dimensions to the answers of what it means to be human and also confirmed much of what has been part of the ontological approach for many years.

This essay establishes some key concepts that provide the foundations for an exploration of the human condition. These foundations will form the basis of alignment for the concepts found in our ontological approach as a whole and offers you a framework within which to explore life in general.

The ontological foundations also establish a basis for an approach to coaching.¹ This approach can be applied to self-coaching or coaching others and is ultimately aimed at living authentic and fulfilling lives.

Being Authentic

Let's begin a question. Do you live an authentic life?

When asked that question, most people appear to form their response on the basis of who they think is the 'real me'. Let's term this their 'self-story'. The nature of their self-story will depend on their level of self-awareness and self-understanding. It may be a simple one that focuses on what they do in life or a more intricate one that speaks to their feelings, values and so on.

By starting with the 'real me', people assume they know themselves well. They then judge their authenticity by determining whether they live life in the manner in which they believe they should live it as defined by their self-story. In taking this approach, it is quite common for individuals to idealise their self-story and find their actions falling short of the mark. They see flaws in themselves often leading to feelings of shame, guilt and anxiety and so on. They assess themselves as inauthentic. This assessment not only can create some inner distress, it can also raise questions of whether others see them in this inauthentic way and how to deal with that. In turn, this can lead to various defensive strategies to protect one's self-story and public identity. These feelings of inadequacy also have a stifling effect on learning and what is possible in life.

¹ The ontological foundations set out in this paper stem from the ontological coaching approach originally created by Dr. Fernando Flores and popularised by The Newfield Group in the 1990s and then by Newfield Network. Although there are many similarities in the distinctions made in this paper, they differ in some significant respects to Newfield Network's approach to 'ontological coaching', a term they have trademarked in the USA.

Now let's look at the idea of an authentic life from a different perspective. Rather than starting with our self-story, let's begin with our actions. What happens if we see our actions as being a manifestation of the 'real me'. If we take this perspective, we can also see that we are always being genuine as we act out of our way of being in any given moment. It is just that we do not have a story of ourselves to always match our actions.

Although the difference in emphasis between self-story and actions may seem trivial, it is not. The second approach can give our actions legitimacy. Within this context, we can more readily accept ourselves rather than seeing ourselves as flawed. We can seek to better understand who we are with a view to determining who we might want to be. Acceptance of ourselves does not mean we have to like everything we do, but does allow us to see our actions in the context of our way of being and the possibility of our becoming. Ultimately acceptance allows for self-love.






So why is authenticity so important?

Many of the more significant issues people have in life relate to challenges to their sense of self and these stem from a misalignment between actions and self-story. This in turn leads to feelings of unworthiness and the fear and suffering that goes with that. Indeed many of our stronger emotions point to a misalignment between our actions and our deep sense of self. If we are to understand our feelings and find ways to develop greater alignment in our way of being then it is vital to develop an understanding of the basis of our alignment. In essence, this involves a level of self-awareness and the ability to declare one's own values and beliefs and this is not always an easy matter.

So, how about you? Can you articulate your values and beliefs? Do you live in acceptance and love of yourself and the actions you take?

The aim of the ontological approach is to help you ask and answer those questions and develop a more deeply aligned way of being. To begin that exploration of the human way of being, let's begin with an explanation of the basic premise of our ontological approach.

Some questions you might like to ponder...

-  *How self-aware do you consider yourself to be?*
-  *When you think of being authentic, which way do you approach it? Is self-story primary or is it your way of being?*
-  *To what extent do you have a sense of self-acceptance?*
-  *How often do you find yourself being self-critical?*
-  *With respect to being authentic how well do you think your actions match your self-story? What opportunities for learning and growth do the previous questions raise for you?*

The Basic Premise

One of the strengths of Talking About's ontological approach is that it extends from a clear foundation to create alignment in relation to the human way of being. We have done this by identifying a basic premise of the human condition and then ensuring the ontological approach is aligned to this premise. This creates a way of exploring the human condition, our relationships and generally our challenges in life in a way that allows for misalignment to become more visible. It also provides the opportunity to develop greater alignment in life so we can live a more authentic life.

The basic premise states:

Life is internally experienced as an ongoing process in a sequence of indefinable moments; yet our life appears to us as a constant state of being and becoming.

So what does that mean?

Our Inner Experience

That "life is internally experienced" speaks to the idea that an individual human being cannot know anything outside of his or her experience.² When we think about it, this appears to be self-evident. How could I have any other experience but my own? Even if I believe I am having someone else's experience I still only have my own experience of sharing another's experience. So how can I ever know with certainty whether that sharing is valid or not. A simple example can demonstrate this.

If we assume you and I are not colour blind, we can both look at an object and identify its colour. Let's say, we both say it is blue. We might disagree about what shade of blue it is, but we both claim it is blue. Even though we have this agreement, the question still remains 'is the blue you see the same as the blue I see?' Based on our similar physiology, we assume what is blue for you is the same for me and act accordingly, yet we cannot know this for sure. However, we can still agree it is blue and act consistently with that agreement. As human beings, we have to assume that others have experiences similar to ours if we are to live and engage with them. The alternative is isolation.

However, this is not the end of it. One of the defining aspects of all living things is they are cognisant of their immediate environment albeit in different ways. However this does not mean human beings know the true nature of our environment, just that we are cognisant of it. For most of us, cognisance of the outer world comes through our five senses. These senses may be the avenues through which we perceive the outer world, yet each of those senses is an internal function of our physiology. Since we just spoke about seeing blue, let's further explore this idea using the example of sight.

² The rationale behind this distinction is further elaborated in the section, 'Our Way of Being'

The human act of seeing is an internal physiological function triggered by photons of light. The photons of light do not pass directly into the brain creating a direct image of what we see like they do in a camera. Rather they trigger our internal structure, mainly our neural system, and create our sense of seeing.

So it is with all our senses in varying ways. We are cognisant of the world around us because our physiological structure is constantly in a dynamic interaction with what is external to us giving us a sense of what the outer world is like for us.

It may seem we know the outer world as it is; but this is not the case. We only know how we experience it based on our physical interactions with it and our structure at the time.³

Now let us look further into the nature of our inner experience of living. In order to do so it is useful to distinguish three distinct domains - our body sensations and movement, our emotional states and our use of language. Each of us experiences and interprets the world and our response to the world through those three elements - physical sensations, our emotional states and language. They represent our experience of the human condition and form the basis of the interpretations of our way of being in the ontological approach.⁴

Our Relationship with Time

One of the major aspects of our way of being is our sense of time. Think about what is going on for you at this very moment. As you think about it, the thought comes but then goes. Even if you clear your mind of conscious thought your experience comes and goes. It continuously becomes part of your history and there is nothing you can do about it. You are relentlessly moving into the future. Your experience seems to come and go in a continuous stream of existence from the moment you are conceived until the moment you die. We all appear to exist on a constantly moving conveyor belt of experience that creates our history and moves us relentlessly into our immediate future.⁵

Furthermore, through this experience we cannot actually pinpoint the now in our experience, for if we attempt to do so that moment has passed to be replaced by another. In other words, each of us live in a constant stream of being and

³ There has been a great deal of research done into the phenomenon of consciousness in recent times demonstrating how much human beings fill in the gaps in our experience of the outer world. A good place to start is 'Consciousness... A Very Short Introduction' by Susan Blackmore

⁴ As you will see later in the section, 'Our Way of Being', we further separate our emotional states into moods and emotions, ultimately providing FOUR domains in which to explore the human condition.

⁵ We say 'appear to exist...' due to an ongoing lack of clarity of the metaphysical nature of time that in the modern day started with the Einstein's 'Theory of Special Relativity'. However, for the purposes of our practical experience of life the concept of the arrow of time is appropriate.

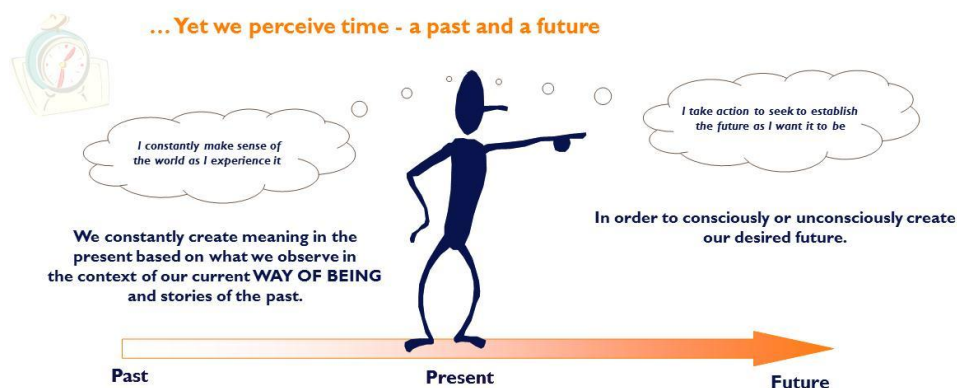
time. In many ways, the present is simply a boundary between the immediate past and the immediate future. It is undefinable yet we are always in it.⁶

Despite always being in a moment, human beings have a linguistic capacity to perceive time. This has been critical in our success as a species. It allows us to create a rich story about our history and the history of other human beings. It also allows us to anticipate and seek to create future moments. Although we cannot clearly define the exact 'now' of the present, we can anticipate a future moment and seek to design our actions in that moment. This is critical as it allows us to coordinate action in the future and to create a change in our normal pattern of being – our becoming. We are able to do all of this through our sophisticated use of language.

Here is a simple everyday example. I might be making my breakfast and suddenly remember that I want to do a load of washing. I don't want to do the washing now as I am in the middle of preparing my breakfast. However, I can anticipate that I might forget to do the washing and put something in place to trigger awareness at some point in the future. I could quickly grab the dirty clothes basket and put it in the hallway, where I cannot help but see it when I have finished eating. In doing so, I am seeking to generate awareness in a future moment to trigger the action associated with doing the washing.

Summary

Every human being exists in a continuous experience of living in the present moment



So to recap what this all means, for each one of us:

- ✚ Our experience of life is an inner experience unique to each of us;
- ✚ Our experience is continuous and although we have a sense of time we cannot point to a precise moment of 'Now'⁷ in that experience; and

⁶ When we talk about the present, we generally mean the immediate past and the immediate future rather than a precise point in time. Our distinction seeks to shift that view with a view to creating an understanding that we are always stepping into the immediate future and what that implies.

- ✚ Through language, we are able to reflect and interpret our experience as it has been and design and seek to create our experience and actions in future moments.

The basic premise of the ontological approach allows us to ask some fundamental questions about our life as they relate to our way of being in time:

- ✚ In any given moment, why do I do what I do? Given all the things I could do, why do I do that? and
- ✚ How can I design for and create a better way of being in a future and similar moment?

Finding answers to these two lines of inquiry is at the heart of the ontological approach to life and it is these questions we will be exploring from this point forward.

Some questions you might like to ponder...

- ✚ *How do you relate to the basic premise? How can you make sense of it in relation to your experience of life? Or can't you?*
- ✚ *What does it mean to you when you think of your life as being 'internally experienced'?*
- ✚ *How does life being 'internally experienced' impact on the way you think about how you relate to others and how they relate to you?*
- ✚ *What is so important about recognising that we can design future moments rather than a general future?*

The Domains of Being Human – 'The Big Three'

Before going any further it will be useful to examine how we can interpret our individual inner experience in the context of life in general.

The work of current day American philosopher, Ken Wilber, draws many parallels with the ontological approach. In his books, '*A Brief History of Everything*' and '*A Theory of Everything*', Wilber defined three domains that he claimed encompassed all aspects of human concern and action.⁸ He called these the '*Big Three*' – The '*I*', the '*We*' and the '*It*'.

1. The '*I*' domain refers to our individual internal subjective experience that is unique to each of us.

As we have seen, we each experience the world as we do and cannot truly know how others experience it, even though it is easy to fool ourselves into believing we can do so. This domain can be seen to include such things as our beliefs, private

⁷ We tend to think of the present moment in a way that reflects a period of time encompassing the immediate past and the immediate future. Here we are refining this present moment down as far as we can go – an infinitely small period of time.

⁸ Ken Wilber, '*A Theory of Everything*' and '*A Brief History of Everything*', Shambala Publications

conversations, physical sensations, emotions and so on. Even though we can share our experiences with others through conversation, we can never have someone else's experience. In other words, the 'I' domain is the 'domain of the self'.

2. The 'We' domain refers to the domain of community (collective) subjective experience that we might share with others.

This domain relates to our shared subjective experiences with others. This can be seen as a community's culture and involves the 'meta-narratives' that speak to how we do things within this community – its shared conversations, moods, standards, values, beliefs and ways of relating and so on. The 'We' domain is the 'domain of relationships'.

3. The 'It' domain relates to our perception of objectivity⁹.

As Wilber says, 'It-language is objective, neutral, value-free surfaces. This is the standard language of the empirical, analytic, and systems sciences, from physics to biology to ecology to cybernetics to positivistic sociology to behaviourism to systems theory.

In other words, it is monological. It is a monologue with surfaces, with 'its'. It-language describes objective exteriors and their interrelations, observable patterns that can be seen with the senses or their instrumental extensions – whether those empirical surfaces are 'inside' you, like your brains or lungs, or 'outside' you, like ecosystems.'

As Wilber indicates, the 'It' domain is one where we observe the surface of objects with our senses. We do not need others to observe the 'It' domain; we can do it by ourselves. The 'It' domain is the basis of the rational approach to living and is the domain of science, measurement, observation and the tangible.

We can easily align the 'Big Three' to the basic premise. It still follows that we can only experience our inner life; however we can use our immense capacity for interpretation to relate to the 'We' and 'It' domains. In the 'We' domain, we can seek to understand and relate to others' experience by developing our own self-awareness and distinctions about how other people may have their life experience. In the 'It' domain, we can draw on techniques, such as the scientific method, to develop a deeply-rooted and well-grounded shared subjectivity that is defined as 'objectivity'.

When we look at these domains in terms of the human condition, we can see that the 'It' domain relates to what we observe (the phenomena), whereas the 'I' and 'We' domains are focused on how we interpret what we have observed (our individual and shared explanations or stories about the phenomena).

⁹ The idea of 'objectivity' is discussed in more detail in the section, 'Our Way of Being' and is central to work of one of the founding fathers of the ontological approach, Dr. Humberto Maturana. For a good overview on the work of Humberto Maturana see 'Living Systems: An Introductory Guide to the Theories of Humberto Maturana & Francisco Varela' by Jane Cull

More often than not, the 'It' domain is where members of western society focus their attention. Our society is one where we tend to look at the world as though everything can be measured and those measurements tell us everything we need to know about life, the universe and everything. We seek the 'Truth' without realising we can only ever have a human version of the universe. Yet we seem to have an obsession with measurement in today's world. This seems particularly so in the business world, where organisations seek to measure everything with a view to having more control over their activity¹⁰. Ironically, by focusing so one dimensionally on the 'It' domain and ignoring the 'I' and 'We' domains, they may feel more in control but that sense is more myth than actuality.




The 'Big Three' are based on a premise that there is more to the human condition than just what we observe at the surface. It is about moving beyond the surface and into the experience and a world of interpretation; transcending the 'It' by including the 'I' and the 'We'.

To speak about the 'Big Three' is not to put any one domain over the others. Rather to fully understand the human condition and human action, it is vital to explore each of these domains and the coherence between them. If we do not, we limit our interpretations and, as a result, our ability to take effective action.

If you wish to live a more fulfilling life then you may find great value in exploring the domains of the 'Big Three' and how they show up in your life. You can start to do this by examining where you spend your time in each domain in comparison to where you believe you would like to spend it. Such an exercise can open new doors of self-understanding and often uncover breakdowns to be addressed.

This is often a valuable exercise for people who are transitioning from being a technical expert to being a people manager. As a technical expert, they may well decide they should spend the majority of their time in the 'It' domain, but this generally shifts to the 'I' and 'We' domains in their new role.

Some questions you might like to ponder...

-  Which of the three domains – 'I', 'We' or 'It' get more of your focus and energy?
-  What do you feel happens because of that focus? What does that mean for you?
-  How could an awareness of the Big Three change the way you observe your world and interact with others?

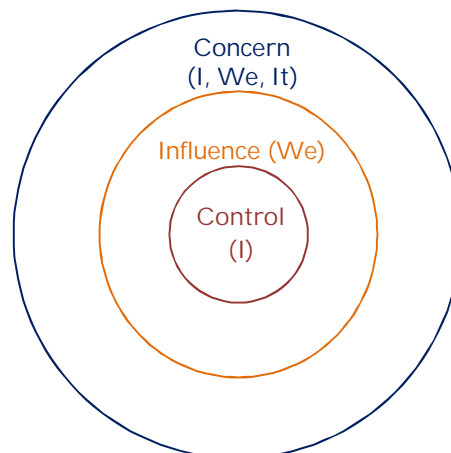
The Circles of Control, Influence and Concern

Human beings' relationship with the future throws up two major apprehensions about life. The first relates to the certainty of death; a certainty we will have to address at

¹⁰ See the section, 'The Circles of Control, Influence and Concern' for more on the ontological distinction of 'Control'

some stage in our life. The second relates to the uncertainty of everything else in the future. How we face up to the certainty of our death and our uncertain future plays a large part in our self-story and way of being.

We can utilise the 'Big Three' ('I', 'We' and 'It') to create a useful perspective on how to address the challenge of the future and where you can put your energy to achieve a more fulfilling life. We can create this perspective by defining three areas of life – what we can control, what we can influence and what concerns us.



Let us start with what matters to an individual. This is delineated as the 'Circle of Concern' as shown in the diagram below and covers all 'Big Three' domains. The 'Circle of Concern' represents everything that matters to a particular individual. This includes aspects that someone can control and influence. However, by its nature the 'Circle of Concern' will always contain many things outside of a person's influence or control. For example, most people have an interest in the weather and its impact on their daily life; yet can do nothing to influence it.

Within the 'Circle of Concern' lies the 'Circle of Control'. This resides exclusively in 'I' domain and represents the aspects of a person's world they can directly control. From an ontological perspective, 'Control' relates to what we can directly make happen as a result of our choices regardless of the agreement of others. In this regard, our 'Circle of Control' can only relate to one's self and, for that matter, only to our conscious self. Why is this?

In the ontological approach, 'Control' is seen as being directly linked to conscious choice. Indeed, the claim is 'Control = Awareness + Choice'. As such, it can then be said a person can only exert control over aspects of their own way of being of which they are aware. As most of what we do is habitual, what we term 'transparent'¹¹ in the ontological approach, we generally act without conscious decision about how we will act and play out well-worn patterns of action. To act that way means to be outside of our direct control. It is useful to appreciate those habits are not just physical actions but include how we observe and interpret our observations. It follows that the greater our capacity for self-awareness then the greater our capacity to have control over our way of being.

Another aspect of this relates to addiction. Sometimes we are well aware of our habits and seek to change them. However, we may be aware of ourselves falling into an

¹¹ See section, 'Transparent Action', for more on this topic

habitual act, such as eating high sugar content food when we say we wish to eat healthier foods, but find our habit still has us snack on a chocolate bar. Clearly this speaks to a lack of control even when we find ourselves in a choice point, so it is important to recognise that to fall into our 'Circle of Control' our moment by moment choices have to be aligned with our bigger declarations for the future.

It is central to the ontological approach to also appreciate that, when we become aware of our transparencies, we can seek to create new and more useful ones. In doing so, we can create greater alignment for ourselves leading to a greater sense of authenticity.

Finally, given human beings are social beings, an individual is able to impact on their 'Circle of Concern' through others. This is their 'Circle of Influence' and is related to the quality of their relationships and the quality of the conversations that happen within those relationships. It speaks to our capacity to build our authority with others and gain substantive promises from them. The bigger the promises we can gain from others, the bigger the impact on our 'Circle of Concern'.

Some questions you might like to ponder...

- ✚ *What are your general reflections on the Circles of Control, Influence and Concern? How could an awareness of these circles change the way you interact in the world?*

Our Way of Being

Self-awareness and self-understanding lie at the heart of living a more fulfilled life. As Socrates once said, '*The unexamined life is not worth living*', so in order to build our understanding of self, let's begin by looking at the human way of being.

The foundations of the ontological approach were established in part through the work of a Chilean biologist, Humberto Maturana.¹² He wanted to explore the nature of living systems and through his inquiry he came to some remarkable conclusions.

Maturana identified that each human being is a closed system. It is the state of our nervous system as perturbed by our environment that creates our own personal view of the world. He coined the term 'structural determinism' to help us understand this. 'Structural determinism' infers that we can only act out of the structure we have at a point in time.

We can only ever know our own experience of being in the world.

¹² For a good overview on the work of Humberto Maturana see 'Living Systems: An Introductory Guide to the Theories of Humberto Maturana & Francisco Varela' by Jane Cull

Each individual has his or her own structure and so responds to the world in a different way. This includes how we are cognisant of the world, how we interpret our observations and use language to explain those interpretations. For example, if I find myself breathing polluted air, I may notice little difference in my way of being whereas if someone around me has asthma then they may have great difficulty breathing. The situation is the same but our structure responds differently.

However, it is clear our structure is not fixed but changes over time. To account for this, Maturana identified that there is plasticity in our structure.¹³ This plasticity is common to all human beings and allows each one of us to change our structure and, as a result, observe and act differently. We do this in part through what he termed 'structural coupling' - the interactions that we have with our environment. As our environment also includes other human beings, our coupling with others can impact on their structure and vice-versa. As a result, structural coupling provides a key ingredient for learning.

Another one of his key conclusions related to the way in which living systems and hence human beings are cognisant of the world in which they live. Through his work, he put forward the notion that we are all unique observers of the world because we can only ever truly know our own experience of being in the world. We have already touched on this concept and also defined three distinct but mutually dependent domains - our physical being, our emotional states and our use of language.

In the ontological approach it is valuable to further distinguish our emotional states as our moods and our emotions. Therefore we can then use these FOUR aspects - body, moods, emotions and language - to expand our exploration of the human experience.

Examining these domains further, the distinctions can be deepened by thinking of them in terms of a hierarchy. As Ken Wilber has pointed out in his book, '*A Theory of Everything*'¹⁴, hierarchies have received some bad press in the past few decades mainly due to hierarchies associated with domination. Those who are critical of hierarchy tend to overlook the importance of hierarchies in nature, most particularly in relation to how entities contain other entities. Wilber uses the term 'holarchies' to better describe these forms of hierarchy, where one whole fits into another whole. A simple example of this can be seen in the nature of matter. Atoms are part of molecules; molecules are part of cells; cells are part of organs; organs are part of the human body and so on. Destroy all molecules and you destroy all cells. In other words they form a growth hierarchy, which are found everywhere.

A hierarchy that applies to our way of being relates to our predispositions. A predisposition is what we are likely to do in a certain situation. If looked at as a hierarchy of predispositions, we can see that our physical being predisposes our emotional being which in turn predisposes our linguistic being. This does not mean we

¹³ This has more recently become better known as neuroplasticity as a result of our growing knowledge of neuroscience.

¹⁴ '*A Theory of Everything: An Integral Vision for Business, Politics, Science and Spirituality*' by Ken Wilber

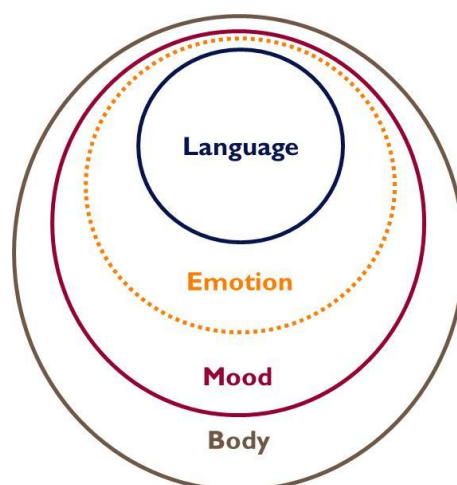
will always act out of our predispositions just that without intervention we will tend to do so.

The Hierarchy of Predispositions

Our **BODY** or **PHYSICAL BEING** is the physical living organism that we are. It is our physical structure that encompasses everything physical about us from our skin to our neurons to our energy levels and wellness. Our physical being is the structure holding our basic predispositions at any given time.

Our physical being establishes an underlying emotional state we define as our **MOOD**. This can be seen as a background emotional state. Moods manifest from our current stance in the world and can be affected by physical aspects such as our energy levels, emotional states that hang around or through our linguistic being via our stories about our self or the world in general. Moods will predispose us to manifest certain emotions in given circumstances. For example, for someone who is in a mood of resentment it is much easier to access the emotion of anger than the emotion of compassion. If we have some distinctions about moods and we reflect on our emotional states, we can often identify our current mood and thereby create the opening for a shift.

In response to our environment, our physical being can generate certain chemical responses to what we observe that we define as **EMOTIONS**. Emotions predispose us to certain actions and patterns of thinking. For example, someone experiencing fear may be predisposed to think that they will be hurt in a given situation. As was said before, emotions can also hang around and become a mood. For example, a prolonged sense of fear can manifest into the mood of anxiety.



Our **LANGUAGE** involves our beliefs, stories, prejudices and patterns of conversation (including thinking) that predispose the other actions we take.

Given they exist in a hierarchy there is a connection between these domains such that when a shift occurs in any of the domains, it has the potential to create shifts in the others which over time can lead to a new 'pattern of being'. If the shift is not sustained, then change will be fleeting as we are drawn back into our old coherence and our old predispositions will remain in place. With this hierarchy in mind, we can see authenticity in the human condition as being coherence and alignment between all four domains.

Patterns of Being

Do we always have the same way of being?

To answer that it is useful to examine our way of being in a temporal context. Think over how you feel on any given day. No doubt there will be periods when your energy levels vary; sometimes higher, sometimes lower. Those shifts in your energy level denote a shift in your physical being at that time. Using the ontological distinctions, we can see there is a different way of being as a direct result of your energy level leading to different predispositions. For example, many people find themselves in a mood of irritability when their energy is low, whereas they are not so predisposed to irritability when they have a higher energy level.

Another aspect of our physical being that is constantly shifting is our posture. We sit, stand or lie down. We sit with one leg over the other or feet apart or cross-legged. There are so many different postures we can take and they have an impact on our way of being at that moment in time.

Based on this, it can be said that our way of being is dynamic through time and so are our predispositions.

However, human beings have a propensity for seeing patterns and so we see patterns in our ways of being. Based on our observations, we generate stories about ourselves which in turn establishes what we see as possible and what we are likely to do. We generate stories about others that we use to predict how a person might behave and how we might relate to them.

It is our observations of our patterns of being that underpin our sense of who we are and our identity to others and theirs to us.

Creating New Patterns of Being

One way of looking at personal growth is as ego development and a greater capacity to see the world from more perspectives. Developmental psychologists such as Jane Loevinger, Jean Piaget and Robert Kegan¹⁵ have identified this as a general shift from an egocentric to an ethnocentric to a worldcentric worldview. Such shifts see a broadening of our Circle of Concern and the development of our self-awareness thereby allowing us to more readily identify a more grounded understanding of our Circle of Control and Circle of Influence. This allows us to see more options and to take more effective action in life.

Many of our more traumatic breakdowns in life are associated with transparencies that have been with us for many years. To resolve these underlying breakdowns involves the creation of a broader worldview leading to new and more effective transparencies and patterns of being.

Human beings' sophisticated use of language is the key to achieving this. We can use language to explore other points of view and anticipate the future. As such, our

¹⁵ See Jane Loevinger 'Ego Development' (1976), Jean Piaget and his 'Theory of Cognitive Development' and Robert Kegan on 'The Evolving Self - Six Equilibrium Stages'

linguistic capacity allows us to understand our patterns of being and that of others, and look to the future to design and create new and deeply rooted, or embodied, coherent ways of being. In other words, we have to distinguish things in language if we are to create change in any of the four domains – body, mood, emotion and language. This idea can be seen as creating new transparencies and habits and is fundamental to the ontological approach.

Some questions you might like to ponder...

- ✚ How does having an understanding of the distinction of way of being allow you to observe how you interact with the world differently?*
- ✚ How are your current energy levels in life? What do you do to ensure you maintain appropriate energy levels?*
- ✚ How aware are you of your emotional life? To what extent are you able to distinguish between the different moods of your life? What do these moods predispose you towards?*
- ✚ What are some of the central habits or patterns of your life? When you consider this question, don't just think about physical action but also reflect on your emotional responses, your patterns of relating and so on.*
- ✚ How do those habits and patterns serve you? How do they hinder you?*
- ✚ How well do you go about creating new patterns and habits in life?*

We are Different Observers

It is easy and perhaps intuitive to believe that when we observe the outer world we actually observe it as it is. However, as we have seen, the work of Humberto Maturana speaks to a different interpretation of the human experience.

Maturana's work, which is aligned with our basic premise, favours the idea that we cannot know the world as it is, only as we observe it based on our structure. And, given we each have a different structure, we each experience it in our own unique way. We are indeed different observers.

As such, how we each see the outer world and experience it is not how it is but our individual interpretation of how it is. Accordingly, human beings live in individual worlds of interpretations. This is vitally important to the ontological approach. By accepting this view, we are no longer dealing with whether or not we are right or wrong in the way we observe the world. Rather we are exploring the power of our interpretations both as individuals and communities. This approach allows us to question the effectiveness of our interpretations and whether they allow for the generation of effective action rather than continually debating who is right and who is wrong.

We live in a world of interpretation.

Again this idea is at the heart of the ontological approach. We are not focusing on the way things are; rather our focus is on our interpretations of our observations. This is critical. If I seek to engage others about the rightness of my views, then I am claiming to have access to the 'TRUTH'. I am also claiming that others

do not have the same access.¹⁶ What would make someone so special they could claim this? This is not to deny the possibility of there being a reality. However, since we only have our own individual experience on which to build our interpretations of how things are, we can only claim to know what is true for us as an individual. We can also build shared interpretations of what is true for us as a community, regardless of effectiveness of these interpretations. This ability allows us to build relationships and coordinate action with others.

For example, many people believe in a monotheistic God whilst many others do not. These two groups both believe in their views, even though only one of them can be true. Yet both groups act on their version of what is true leading to very different sets of possibility and often varying degrees of conflict.

By recognising the human view of the world is one of interpretation, we can put ourselves in the space of being able to judge whether other interpretations might serve us better than the ones we hold. Coming to agreement about our interpretations is the substance of more effective conversations.

Some questions you might like to ponder...

- + Many people understand the idea that we cannot experience the world like anyone else, yet our way of being does not reflect that understanding. How about you?*
- + How much do you hold the 'Truth'?*
- + How does your approach in practice to everyone being or not being different observers affect your relationships?*
- + How does the distinction of different observers change the way you think about seeing the world from differing points of view?*

The Legitimate Other

Accepting each individual lives in their own world of interpretation allows for a further understanding that for each of us our own world of interpretation is legitimate for us. The idea of legitimacy here relates to authenticity or genuineness. How I observe and interpret the world is how I observe and interpret the world. It is valid for me as, at this point in time, I cannot observe it in any other way given my current way of being.

We can most effectively engage with others if we hold that the way they observe and act in the world is legitimate for them. We term this holding them as a 'legitimate other'. As we have discussed, everyone is a different observer of the world and each one of us is always interacting with people who have different interpretations of the world to what we hold. Sometimes these interpretations are markedly different from ours and this can create a significant challenge for us in dealing with others at times.

¹⁶ With this in mind, it is important to recognise that the ontological approach is not claiming to be the one true way of observing the human condition; rather the claim is the ontological approach is a powerful interpretation allowing for very effective ways of being and relating.

This can be particularly valid if we find ourselves in a work or personal relationship that is ongoing.

It is also useful to recognise our own way of observing is valid for us based on our way of being at the moment of observing. Rather than invalidating our interpretations, we can recognise those interpretations may not be as useful as they could be and seek to shift our way of being to develop better interpretations in the future. This is the stuff of 'second order learning' where we explore the observer we are.¹⁷

This form of learning is an act of unfolding and living in the question of our ways of being.

If we are to hold others as 'legitimate others', it is imperative we seek to take care of their dignity and not fall into the trap of believing we 'hold the truth' about their world. Holding another person as a 'legitimate other' provides a foundation for better and mutually beneficial relationship and also provides us with an opportunity to learn from others' ways of being.

Some questions you might like to ponder...

✚ *Given your current state of being, how well do you consider you treat other people as 'legitimate others'?*

Human Beings in Action

Together with every other living thing, human beings are constantly in action. Our hearts pump blood, we breathe, and we move our arms and our legs. Even when we sleep we are in action. We are always in motion. We cannot help it. If we were no longer in action, we would be dead.

There is a saying that goes 'All talk, no action!' Traditionally, action has been defined as physically acting upon the world and not just talking about it. For example, I chop wood, make my lunch or drive a car and so on. That is action. The implication is a person is not taking action if they are just talking about chopping wood and so on. But what if our view of language was different?

Language as Action

The ontological approach stems in part from a reasonably recent revolution in the philosophy of language that started in the last century with the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and was followed by philosophers such as J.J. Austin and John Searle. The

¹⁷ Second order learning is a key concept in shifting our ways of being and expanding our capacity for effective action.

upshot of their work, which is central to the ontological approach, is 'Speech Act Theory'¹⁸.

Speech act theory moved language out of the domain of merely describing the world and into the domain of action. Through language we took actions such as making requests, declaring promises and so on.

The ontological approach is founded on the claim that the use of language is one of the fundamental human actions.

It is our use of language that has allowed humans to shape our world in a way no other creature on this planet has been able to do. It allows us to plan, coordinate with each other and generate vast stores of knowledge. Yet, we generally do not give our use of language much thought in our everyday life. As author Christina Baldwin has said, "*We live in story like a fish lives in water. We swim through words and images siphoning story through our minds the way a fish siphons water through its gills. We cannot think without language, we cannot process experience without story.*"

Given most of us rarely, if ever, consider how we use language, it presents a huge opportunity to explore how its use impacts our experience of life. Take this simple example. Answer these two questions. What was the worst thing that happened to you today? What was the best thing that happened to you today? Now think about how those two responses made you feel. Think about what other thoughts came with those answers. Now consider where you tend to focus – good or bad – and what that means for how you experience life. Now consider what would happen if you did the opposite. How would life be like for you then?

These may be simple questions however they are all born of the way we use language. A shift in our usage can have a profound effect and life could be very different than it is.

The breakthroughs leading to the ontological approach have come from understanding the role of language in shaping our personal world in every minute of every day. It is the idea that language plays a far different role than passively describing our experience. Rather language is seen as playing a role in actively creating our experience.

Two Ontological Claims

One of the major early works relating to the ontological approach was by Rafael Echeverria in a series of papers with the overarching title 'The Ontology of Language'.¹⁹ In those papers, he set out a couple of claims which highlight the role of language in the ontological approach.

¹⁸ The contemporary use of the term goes back to J. L. Austin's development of performative utterances and his theory of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. Speech acts are commonly taken to include such acts as promising, ordering, greeting, warning, inviting and congratulating.

¹⁹ 'The Ontology of Language' was a series of unpublished papers written by Rafael Echeverria for an Ontological Coach training program known as 'Mastering the Art of Professional Coaching' run in the 1990s by The Newfield Group.

1. Human beings are interpreted as 'linguistic beings'.

This claim identifies that human beings owe their 'beingness' to the use of language. This is not to say that this is all human beings are, but rather language is the key to understanding the human phenomenon.

2. Language brings forth our reality.

Human beings live in a world where we constantly interact with other human beings through language. Through language we shape the future. How we say things and what we say will all have an impact on what will happen to us in the future. We also create our identity - how we are described by others and ourselves - through language.

Ultimately, human beings use language to build stories to explain how the world is for us and then paradoxically forget that we have done so and transparently see the world through those stories.

These two claims can bring forth a very different way of looking at the role of language in human life and lead to insights into interpreting the human condition and relationships not found without an understanding of the role of language as action.

Some questions you might like to ponder...

- ✚ *What is your understanding of the idea that 'language is action'?*
- ✚ *What impact do you think this has on how human beings observe and act in the world?*
- ✚ *How have the two ontological claims changed the way you think about language?*
- ✚ *What shows up for you when you think about how a different approach to language provides for different interpretations of the human condition?*
- ✚ *How might this relate to your own self-story?*

Transparent Action

It seems that human beings are predisposed to believe in a purposeful universe. No doubt this was a useful tendency in years long gone. This predisposition goes way beyond simply believing that human action is intentional. We even see purpose in non-living things. For example, you may have thought at times that your computer is setting out to make your life a misery. Clearly it is not, yet many people anthropomorphise non-living things. Indeed if we were not predisposed to do so then how could we engage with cartoon characters?

However, this predisposition to readily assume human beings always act with intent quickly breaks down when it is examined.

Take an example that you are likely to have personally encountered. You will most likely have been driving a car for some time. You also no doubt have had the experience of driving somewhere and engaging in conversation with someone or being lost in thought as you drove, but still arriving safely at your destination. You did not drive with conscious purpose at all. You were able to engage in the action of driving

without giving it a second thought. You were not aware of your actions in driving and, as a result, they were 'transparent' to you. You did not notice what you were doing, but somehow you successfully drove the car nonetheless. Yet how often do we think badly of other drivers for not doing what we expect them to do and even believe they are intentionally doing so!

There has been a great deal of investigation into the habitual nature of human beings with many studies suggesting the overwhelming role of our subconscious in our daily life. Some research puts the ratio of conscious to subconscious thought at anywhere between 1:10,000 and 1:500,000! So it is not hard to see that we take far more action in life as a result of subconscious rather than conscious thought. This puts habits and the idea of transparency at the forefront of the human behaviour and also begs the question, how useful are our habits?

Habits are double-edged. Some can be very useful but others may be very damaging. They are useful as they allow us to do things we have learnt to do without having to think about doing them. This frees our conscious mind to focus on what we feel is important in this moment. They are damaging because all of our habits are a result of our earlier life when they were developed to address certain concerns. As some of these concerns may no longer be relevant, some of these habits may no longer be appropriate. For instance, some habits come from childhood when they may have served a purpose for us as a child but no longer serve us as an adult. Yet in playing out such habits we take on the way of being of our younger self.

By claiming our use of language is also action, it follows that the way we use language is also often transparent to us. As part of the human use of language, we create explanations about how the world is or should be and then forget that we have created them. This is transparency. For example, if you go to work every day, it is almost certain that you would not consider whether the physical place where you work will be there each day. You just get up and go on the assumption that it will be. It is a transparency only likely to be broken if you turn up one day to find the building demolished! Hence in many ways, we can look at our assumptions about the world as some of the transparencies in which we live.

We can also look at transparent action in terms of our ways of being and its hierarchy of predispositions. In other words, our transparency extends across our whole being – our language, our moods, emotions and physical way of being. Transparent action can be seen as a result of our predispositions in that moment. In other words, it is action engaged from our current way of being without conscious intervention; a habit that plays out unless we are mindful enough to intervene.

It might be a physical response to a food that once made us sick, a mood we always find ourselves in when we are in a certain city, an emotional response to a song or a language pattern that we frequently use – one of mine is that I have been known to say 'basically' a lot when I am looking to explain an idea! Some of these can be difficult to shift, others are more easily changed. However we cannot do so if we are not able to bring them into our awareness and distinguish them in language.

The idea of transparent action is an important aspect of the ontological approach. It provides us with the key to unlock the way we see the world and how we can intervene to observe, interpret and act differently.

Some questions you might like to ponder...

✚ *What are some of the assumptions you hold in life? About yourself? About others?*

Breakdown

Traditionally we think of the word 'breakdown' in a negative light. For example, we might think of a car breaking down or a 'nervous breakdown'. In the ontological approach, it is important to put aside your current definitions of the word 'breakdown' and allow for a new distinction of this term.

The ontological approach defines a 'breakdown'²⁰ as an interruption to the flow of our life or our transparency. In this interpretation, human beings are constantly dealing with breakdowns, from a small distraction such as the phone ringing to a major life event such as getting married or suffering a heart attack. We deal with most breakdowns as a matter of course and often transparently. For example, if the phone rings I will most likely just respond automatically and answer it. However some breakdowns are more significant than others and the level of significance can be assessed by the type and extent of our emotional response accompanying the breakdown. The importance we place on a breakdown is related to the importance of the impact we feel it will have on our future. The most significant breakdowns are born of a major impact on what is most important to us in life.

Furthermore, rather than just being negative, we can assess a breakdown as either positive or negative depending on the impact we feel it will have on our future. We will tend to assess as positive those breakdowns that will enrich our lives. Those leaving us feeling worse off will likely have us making assessments in the negative.

It is important to appreciate that breakdowns do not occur independently of us. A breakdown for an individual is a breakdown for them because they interpret it as so and that interpretation stems from his or her

way of being at the time. It is true things happen in the world around us, but those happenings only constitute a breakdown when we become aware of them and place some meaning upon them. Given that we have our own unique way of being and way of observing the world, I may not even observe the occurrence that creates a breakdown for you even though we may both be looking at the same scene.

Furthermore, it is an individual's response to what happens that defines the

An intrinsic aspect of being human is that we constantly live in a world of transparency and breakdown.

²⁰ See the work of German philosopher Martin Heidegger, 'Being and Time'

breakdown for that individual. Therefore what might be a breakdown for me may well not be the same breakdown for you. For example, if my car stops running on the freeway, this could be seen as a negative breakdown for me as I cannot get to where I want to go, but it is a different breakdown for the tow truck driver. For them, this is a positive breakdown and they have designed their business to take care of it.

Breakdowns not only happen to us, they can occur as a result of our declarations. We can say, *"I will marry you"* or *"I will learn about ontological coaching"* and in doing so we anticipate we are creating breakdowns for ourselves. We can also seek to create a future breakdown such as described in the earlier example about doing the washing. In that case, the dirty clothes basket was put in place specifically to create a breakdown in the future. The key is to appreciate that through language we can create breakdowns which may serve us well and, as a result, design a better life for ourselves.

Our assessment of the effectiveness with which we deal with our breakdowns is how we assess how effective and resilient we are in life. Profoundly, our assessments of how we deal with breakdowns lie at the heart of our self-story and as the founder of the Newfield Network and masterful ontological coach, Julio Olalla has said, "Mastery of life is mastery of breakdowns".

Our breakdowns emanate from our way of being at that moment. Hence breakdowns provide an avenue to understanding how an individual observes and interprets the world and, as a result, the capacity to develop better interpretations of their 'beingness'. This vital distinction links beingness and breakdowns and provides an opening to develop an interpretation of ours or another's way of being in that moment or patterns of being over time.

Breakdowns also provide us with an opportunity to learn. If there were no breakdowns, we would always act in transparency and nothing would ever change. Given that learning is such an important aspect of life, it pays to be open to observe our breakdowns as learning opportunities.

Creating Breakdowns for Others

Human beings are in a constant state of coupling with the world, including with other human beings. Often others will do things that create a negative breakdown for us and which we would prefer not to find ourselves in that breakdown again.

We can deal with this by giving the other person some explicit and implicit feedback with the intent of creating a breakdown for them. Unfortunately all too often individuals react to feedback from an emotionally defensive predisposition and simply respond transparently. If we have given the feedback with the purpose of eliciting a change of behaviour or the person's way of being then such a response is largely ineffective. The challenge here is to create a breakdown for the other person in a way that opens up a conversation in a constructive rather than a defensive mood. The key to doing this lies in respectfully seeing the others' interpretations of the situation as legitimate and entering these sort of conversations with their permission.

As individuals, it is useful to recognise the value of creating choice from our breakdowns and from those we create for others. This connection between increasing levels of self-awareness and choice is critical in expanding our 'Circle of Control'.




Awareness and Choice

In order to expand one's 'Circle of Control' and also to shift to a new coherence of being, an individual seeks to establish new habits or transparencies. This does not come about simply through a declaration – if it did all of our New Year resolutions would come to pass! By their nature, habits are well ingrained and easily repeated and to create new ones to replace them requires persistence.

A key way of achieving this is to generate awareness at future moments where the transparency usually plays out thereby allowing us to make choices to take a different action rather than our habitual one. Establishing a strategy to create these points of awareness and choice plays a fundamental role in developing new habits and a new transparency.

Without some strategies to build habits, any attempt to do so is unlikely to succeed. The implications of these failures go beyond continuing the old habit and into the possibility of doing damage in the realms of our self-story and our relationships. Fortunately in the ontological approach there are a number of useful and simple strategies we can use to heighten self-awareness and establish future choice points in order to develop new ways of being.

Some questions you might like to ponder...

-  *What meaning shows up for you in the concept of breakdown?*
-  *How well do you deal with the bigger breakdowns in life?*
-  *How well do you make an effort to learn from them?*

Two Tendencies of Human Beings

Humberto Maturana teamed with a fellow Chilean biologist Francisco Varela to further his work and together they identified two aspects of all living systems, including human beings.²¹ Living systems have conservative and expansive tendencies.

Our conservative tendency is to continue what is so for us. Through our daily living we strive to maintain the life we have developed for ourselves. We put a great deal of energy into doing this.

However, human beings are future-focused and so we sometimes think about what could be different. We seek to expand our life and go beyond what we currently have. In doing so, we are being expansive.

The degree to which each of us seeks to conserve or expand is unique to us as an individual. The stories we have about ourselves and the world will speak to what we wish to conserve or what new possibilities we may wish to develop in our life.

²¹ For a good overview on the work of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela see 'Living Systems: An Introductory Guide to the Theories of Humberto Maturana & Francisco Varela' by Jane Cull

Our conservative and expansive tendencies are also dynamic in nature. One aspect of this is age. As we get older, we have more strongly engrained patterns of being. We are also likely to have established a way of life and relationships that are very important to us. As a result, we are more likely to wish to conserve those aspects of our lives and potentially less inclined to be expansive.

Another aspect of the dynamism of our conservative and expansive tendencies lies in our way of being. For example, when our energy levels are low or if we are under too much stress, we are more likely to focus on conserving rather than being expansive. With low energy, we are more likely to find ourselves just coping rather than growing. As our energy levels are directly linked to our physical way of being, this example is a good reminder of the importance of maintaining good health if we are to continue to grow.

Our moods are also an important contributor to the dynamic of our conservative or expansive tendencies. Moods such as resignation and anxiety are more likely to be related with a conservative tendency whereas ambition and curiosity have us being more expansive.

When dealing with breakdowns, we can find ourselves in a space where we will seek to retain what we have (conservative tendency) or seek and develop new opportunities (expansive tendency). As individuals we can develop an interpretation of the extent of ours and others' conservative and expansive tendencies. In doing so, we can seek to understand the unspoken breakdowns associated with those tendencies and which we may desire to address.

Some questions you might like to ponder...

- ✚ *Think of the people you come into contact with on a frequent basis or that are important in your life. How do you assess them to be in regard to their conservative or expansive tendencies?*
- ✚ *What leads you to make those assessments?*
- ✚ *What about your own tendencies?*
- ✚ *Again, what leads you to make those assessments?*

Our Core Concerns

Our interpretations of the world include interpretations of ourselves as human beings. One of the ontological claims is human beings, rather than always acting intentionally, mainly act transparently to take care of our core concerns.

Based on the work of David Rock in the field of social neuroscience, human beings can be seen to exhibit overarching organising principles in relation to minimising threat and maximising reward. This is aligned with the notion of conservative and expansive tendencies as put forward by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela and also the Neuro Linguistic Programming idea of 'moving away' and 'moving towards'.

David Rock identified five key domains of concern where human beings seek to minimise threat and maximise reward. He calls this the 'SCARF' model²² representing an acronym of the five domains - Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness. In the context of our ontological approach, these domains can be seen as our core concerns:

Status

Status speaks to our importance to others and can be seen in terms of the value we believe others see in us and how we believe we should be seen.

Certainty

As we have seen earlier in this essay, time is a key linguistic aspect of the human condition. We have the capacity to anticipate the future, yet the future is inherently uncertain. As such, we seek to create greater certainty about our future through various means explored in more detail in the ontological approach.

Autonomy

Autonomy speaks to our capacity to author and influence our future. Authority given to us by others, and by ourselves, is central to this capacity.

Relatedness

Relatedness speaks to our capacity to create meaningful relationships and to maintain our safety in relation to others. Human beings are social beings and as such we live in communities where we seek acceptance and have a desire to fit in with others. We also need to create intimate relationships in order to fulfil one of our instinctual needs and procreate.

Fairness

Fairness speaks to our perception of how people, including ourselves, should be treated by others.

Our sense of our own dignity, or self-esteem, is the story we create and hold about ourselves in relation to our core concerns. Are we of value to others? Are we capable of dealing with an uncertain future? Do others treat me as a valid human being and give me the authority to play a role in their life? Can I develop meaningful and intimate relationships with others? Do others treat me fairly? To varying degrees, we are always in these questions. Our answers speak to our sense of self and our dignity.

Our breakdowns often stem from a need to take care of our dignity when we act in ways to protect or enhance our core concerns. For example, if others treat us in a way that we interpret means they see little value in what we have to offer, we may become withdrawn or aggressive in response to their actions. These responses are generally born of an underlying emotional response. In other words, our emotional responses to a given situation may point to a breakdown associated with our dignity.

²² See David Rock's 'The Brain at Work' for more on the SCARF model

As an interpretation of our core concerns the SCARF model presents a useful framework within which to consider our breakdowns.

Some questions you might like to ponder...

- ✚ *How important are each of the core concerns – Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness – to you?*
- ✚ *Are one or two of them more important than the others? If so, which ones?*

Our Core Concerns and Relationships

Our core concerns exist in the context of our relationships with others. As human beings are social beings, we cannot escape seeing who we are in the context of the communities in which we live.

Whenever we engage with another human being, we are engaging with their dignity and their core concerns. In part the quality of any of our relationships lies in the way we take care of not only our own dignity but also the dignity of the other person. We claim the best relationships are those where there is a balance between taking care of our own dignity and the dignity of the other person in a manner that allows both people to conserve and enhance their own self-esteem. What we term 'The Dignity Equilibrium'.

If we look deeply enough, we will often find a connection between our breakdowns and our core concerns. Our sense of dignity manifests from our core concerns as they are at the heart of how we make meaning of our place in the world. Whenever we are involved in dealing with our breakdowns, we can be certain our dignity is playing a part in how we see ourselves and how we see the breakdown.

Therefore, if we are dealing with the breakdowns of others, it is important we engage with them in a framework of respect, always seeking to take care of their dignity, whilst being aware of our own stories about our role in the relationship. We are best served when we observe and seek to appropriately maintain the Dignity Equilibrium or the balance between our dignity and theirs.

Some questions you might like to ponder...

- ✚ *To what extent do you consider the dignity of others when engaging with them?*

A Summary

The interpretations in this essay provide some basic ideas developed more fully in other essays relating to the ontological approach. They include:

1. Human beings live life in the moment yet can seek to design and create future moments.
2. We can observe the human condition in the context of three domains: the 'I', the 'We' and the 'It'. Doing so provides a more balanced approach to being and also more options for effective action.
3. Our beingness is but a point in our becoming. Human beings are always changing, but we can do a great deal to design who we want to become.
4. Language is action and through it we generate our social and personal reality.
5. Human beings can be interpreted as linguistic beings and it is through our use of language that we can unfold our beingness.
6. Most human action is transparent to those taking the action. When pointed out, a breakdown in that transparency may open up vast possibilities for learning.
7. Human beings constantly live with breakdowns, but what is a particular breakdown for me may not be the same or even be a breakdown for you. Mastery of breakdowns means mastery in life.
8. Human beings can be observed in four distinct but connected domains - body, moods, emotions and language. We can enhance our way of being in all four of these domains. When those four domains are coherent, then the individual can be said to be acting authentically.
9. Human beings observe patterns of being and generate stories about how they and other people are.
10. Human beings act out of their structure but have plasticity in their structure that allows us to be different. We take actions because of who we are, but we are also who we are because of our actions. Changing our actions can change our story about who we are.
11. We are all different observers of the world. We do not see the world as it is; rather we see it as we are.
12. Human beings live in an individual world of interpretation. We do not have access to the 'Truth'. Our interpretations can be seen as being more or less powerful than other interpretations thereby allowing us to take more or less effective actions than what other interpretations may allow.
13. Human beings have conservative and expansive tendencies, which are triggered in response to breakdowns.
14. All human beings have some core concerns, which can be seen in the framework of the SCARF model – Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness.

15. All human beings' interpretations are legitimate. Even if we do not like those interpretations, we are able to see them as legitimate for the person who holds them based on their current way of being.

About the Author

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He has over 4000 hours of coaching experience with both individuals and groups, including providing executive coaching to clients overseas in countries such as the US, UK, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Chris specialises in executive and leadership coaching, and in developing new coaches. He created and wrote the Talking About Coach Training (TACT) program from which this essay was derived. He has written and theorised on the subjects of leadership, coaching and the human condition since 1994 and continues to develop new ideas in these fields. He has authored over 140 newsletters on coaching and related topics.

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