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Chapter 14

We Communicate, Therefore I Think: Making Thoughtful Action

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The title of this chapter may seem a little odd. It is somehow familiar, but a bit off. That is because it is a twist on a famous quotation from the philosopher Descartes (1596–1650). The original reads, “I think therefore I am.” Descartes’s original quotation is much better known, but I intend to show you why I prefer mine. Descartes is often called the first modern philosopher. His ideas and those of other philosophers and scientists of the Enlightenment (roughly 17th through the early 20th centuries) are still deeply woven into our everyday ways of thinking and talking. Enlightenment was a philosophical movement that believed in the power of human reason and by innovations in political, religious, and educational doctrine. The Enlightenment had the wonderful effect of justifying, promoting, and developing individual freedom and the value of creativity over obedience to tradition and authority. That is a heritage we must cherish and protect. However, Enlightenment ways of understanding human social action are a now a timeworn set of ideas that holds us captive (Wittgenstein 1953). In our everyday talk we assume that the starting place for social analysis is the individual, and that thoughts are the products of our individual minds. However, the overwhelming evidence supports the view that thinking is the product of what Blumer (1969) called “joint action” (see also Mead 1938). In Blumer’s perspective, ideas are neither entirely individual nor entirely social. Contemporary evidence shows that contrary to tradition, infants learn to think, and their brains develop inside the process of face-to-face communication. In this chapter, I will not attempt a detailed review of that literature. That is readily available elsewhere. In spite of the recent work in neuroscience, which supports the social basis of thought, Enlightenment ways of understanding thought and action have become the “default” way of understanding thoughtful action. My position is that these older ways of talking are obstructive and need to be changed. But changed for what? Before going further, two conversations will follow. After reading each, try to answer the question, “What is going wrong?”

Conversation 1. Pat and Lee are new students at Mental State College. It is their second day on campus and they have come to an orientation meeting for perspective psychology majors. They have not met before.

Pat: [Turning to Lee] “Hi. I’m Pat. Is this the meeting place for prospective psychology majors?”

Lee: "Yes, it is. I'm Lee. You must be considering a psych major. Are you a freshman?"

Pat: "Yes, just moved into the freshman dorm, 'Old Catacombs,' yesterday. Are you living there?"

Lee: "No I'm a local. I live in Cape Stress, just a few miles away. I'm living at home to save money this year. Where are you from?"

Pat: "I'm from Onarga, Illinois. It's a long way away. What is it like being from a small town like Cape Stress?"

Lee: "It's friendly. Everyone knows everyone else, which is both good and bad."

Pat: "I understand your point. Onarga is a small town too."

Lee: "Yesterday my brother found a dead bird in the back seat of his car."

Pat: [Long pause] "Yes . . . well . . . I think I see a friend over there, excuse me."
[Walks away]

Conversation 2: Lee is walking though campus and hears his phone ringing. It is Lee's high school friend Tom from Cape Stress who is going to a different university.

Lee: "Hi, Tom. I haven't heard from you in a long time. What's up?"

Tom: "I feel great and I just had to talk to you. I am in love."

Lee: "That's great. I'm happy for you."

Tom: "Wow. What a feeling!"

Lee: "Tell me more."

Tom: "Not much more to tell. I was walking toward the Sociology building and I suddenly knew that I was in love. I wonder why, or with whom or what."

What could be wrong with these conversations? Obviously something is wrong, but what? In the first conversation, what Lee says about the dead bird is in English, a language Lee and Pat both speak. It is grammatically correct. Pat knows every word Lee has said. There is no ambiguity. Pat knows the reference for every word, and we will assume Lee makes the same references. So, what is wrong? In the second conversation, Tom reports an emotional experience. We could say he is responding emotionally rather than rationally, but that is not so strange to say. Tom has no trouble identifying the emotion. How can we tell him he is wrong? It would be like telling someone they do not feel pain. Tom knows his own mind. So what is the problem?

What if meaning is not what the words represent but in the ways we "go on" together? What if meaning, thought, and action are understood to be actions in contexts that people create and maintain together (Dewey 1925; Wittgenstein 1953)? Then it would be obvious that Lee's "dead bird" comment is nonsense. Pat has no idea how to make sense of it in the context of the initial interaction they have been having together. As a result, Pat has no way to coherently "go on" in the conversation, so Pat ends it in a way that is socially acceptable for the situation.

Turn again to the second conversation, the one between Lee and Jim. Now, suppose that emotion is neither the opposite of reason nor apart from reason. Instead, of compartmentalizing reason and emotion, we could recognize that emotions are integral parts of using language in cultural, relational, personal, and organizational experience (Averill 1980). From that point of view, we would not deny that Jim is

having an experience, but we would say that Jim is experiencing a disorder of emotion. It makes no sense.

In this chapter, there will be a wide range of examples. The goal is connecting with various interests and to show the range of a new outlook. The chapter is organized in three parts. In Part 1, some features of the Enlightenment era mentality will be reviewed. They are so second nature to us that we just take them as obvious and true. There will also be some research-based reasons for rejecting the Enlightenment orientation. That will lead to the conclusion that no ideas or ways of thinking are entirely individual. They are created inside the primary process of communication. In Part 3, the systemic orientation will be introduced and a particular theory based on it. The theory is called the "coordinated management of meaning" (for ease of reference, CMM). Barnett Pearce and I (Cronen) developed it, with important contributions from our colleagues and students (Cronen, Lang, and Lang 2009; Cronen and Lang 1994, Pearce and Cronen 1980). To explain the theory, I apply it to an episode of a couple walking along a beach at sunset. Most academic book chapters introduce students to good ideas. But in Part 3, some very bad ideas will be introduced. Of course, they will be contrasted with better ones from the CMM systemic perspective. I will show how deeply and unconsciously Enlightenment ideas are woven into our everyday ways of thinking and talking. After each example of everyday talk and the Enlightenment assumption behind it, I will also offer a CMM-informed systemic alternative and ways of using it.

Part 1: What Is the Enlightenment Perspective and What Is Wrong with It?

The Enlightenment period was deeply indebted to the success of science in the 18th and 19th centuries. Newton's theory of physics provided the basis for marvelous inventions like the steam engine and the telegraph. With the inventions came hope for the perfection of human understanding. The universe was assumed to be like a perfect old-time clock with gears and springs. It could be disassembled and each part studied. The outlook was well captured in a poem by Alexander Pope:

Nature and Natures Laws lay hid in night:
God said: "Let Newton be!" and all was light.

Newtonian science was carried over by many into domains outside physics, including psychology and communication. This was not a period in which all ideas converged; however, there was a good deal of commonality in the Enlightenment perspective.

Enlightenment Perspective

The following is a short overview of the enlightenment perspective:

1. There are underlying universal laws of behavior that explain what people do. These laws are elaborated into testable predictions.

2. Truth is a clear, objective description of the world. The goal of a theory is prediction and certainty.
3. The study of social life must be based on the study of individuals. A group can be explained if we can understand each individual in it. To understand what individuals do, we must understand their individual minds. The mind directs and operates the body.
4. The meaning of words (and any other symbols) is their representation of an idea in someone's head. They also represent things outside the individual. The word *chair* represents our idea of a chair and points to chairs in the world. Language is a set of symbols for the internal ideas and external objects. That is "denotive" meaning. "Conative" meaning is the way a symbol represents aspects of our affective internal responses, for example, an emotion we feel when we see the object.
5. We have meanings and we then try to communicate them. Communication is the way we send ideas from one place to another with as little distortion as possible. Internal ideas are encoded into symbols (messages). These messages go through a channel (face-to-face conversation, e-mail, texts, Facebook, and so on) and are decoded into ideas by a receiver. Good communication is sending and receiving enough ideas without distortion.
6. As in the physical world we can isolate causes and effects. Causes can be identified, and that will give us control over the effects. We can do the same thing to understand social action.
7. People have separate, identifiable mental abilities. Examples are reason, emotion, will, memory, and perception. Each can be studied on its own.
8. The parts of the human psyche are related to each other like parts of an old-time clock that works by gears and springs. We can study each part and then find out how it affects other parts. One bit of the human machine can affect another, but it cannot become part of another. Each is what it is. For example, reason affects will (or if you prefer, intentions and motives). But reason is not part of our emotions.

Don't you believe any of that! Our knowledge of how children learn to think has dealt a serious blow to these eight ideas and has given strong support to the very different systemic view that had been developing since the work of Darwin in the late Enlightenment and is being further developed today.

Language Learning and How It Contradicts the Enlightenment View

At the time of writing this chapter, the data supporting the systemic view are overwhelming. These data also provide strong support for the new systemic outlook. Perhaps the earliest data supporting the transactional view came from the sad cases of feral children—children isolated from human contact. These children had something in common. They could not learn to use language if not exposed to it before the age of 12. They could learn to name things much like chimps and gorillas do, but they cannot learn grammar. With modern research technologies we now know what some people suspected years ago: Communication among people is the process in which the brain develops the neurological connections needed for language and thought. Simply put, Descartes was very wrong. Thinking does not come first; communication does. Thinking in language is a neurological—social—achievement.

We must not make the mistake of thinking that language makes communication possible, although language surely facilitates communication and allows many possibilities. Communication is the precondition for language development. The psychologist Jerome Bruner (1974–1975) wrote a groundbreaking essay entitled "From Communication to Language," in which Bruner describes how coordinated responsiveness between parent and child creates the conditions for learning language. Meredith Wilson (1999) gave a very good example of the process with reference to a mother teaching a child how to read a book. I will extend her example with observations of my daughter teaching her three-month-old child how to deal with a book. She sits on the floor and holds him in a sitting position with the book in front of him. She directs his attention to the book, by pointing and saying, "Look at this." She turns the thick page. My grandson takes a bite of it. She gently says, "No, let's look at the page" and points again. There is so much to learn. He has to learn to focus his attention on one page at a time, learn to follow her finger and her voice, and come to anticipate the turning of a page. He must learn when the activity is over as the last page is turned and her voice sounds differently. These are the abilities to focus on sound, movements, anticipations, and response. They are the background conditions for learning language.

Another example is that of a baby in a crib with bumper pads. The baby hears noise, gets up on her arms, and looks over the bumper pads. Her little arms are not strong so she soon sinks back down. The adult notices this and says, "Is baby trying to play peek?" The adult assists the baby's learning to have intentions and to grasp the pattern of the game. This happens again and the adult says "peek" when the baby lifts her head. When her head goes down, the adult says, "All gone. Where is baby?" The baby learns to anticipate the adult's voice when she picks her head up. Now when the adult enters, the baby makes little sounds. She may giggle, then lift her head up and the adult says, "Are we playing 'peek'?" Does the baby know the meaning of "peek"? In a simple way, yes, she does. She has learned a pattern of responsive action. She has learned to wait for the sound of an adult's presence, and knows what to do and what to expect next. In other words, she knows the meaning because she can identify a pattern and knows how to "go on" in it. Another thing to notice about this game is that the baby is not just learning behaviors and words. She is learning to listen for an adult entering. She has physiological experiences including excitement, anticipation, and the making of little sounds. The adult may call attention to the sounds she makes and say, "You are all excited," or "You are so happy." The adult is teaching the baby an emotional and intentional vocabulary.

The most powerful learning that develops the brain is face-to-face engagement. In reciprocal actions a child learns coordination in detailed responsive action. Inside that process the child's brain develops. Dana Suskind (2015) has done an admirable job of reviewing the literature on learning in childhood. The data leave little doubt that children's intellectual development is related not only to the number of words they hear, but more crucially, to the number of turns in extended interaction between child and adult. These talking turns are not isolated comments like pearls on a string. Each act informs and shapes conditions for coherent response. If thought

emerges inside the primary process of communication, then the notion that ideas are from individual minds cannot be right. It cannot be right that the basic unit of social understanding is individual. It must be the case that all thinking is social. That does not mean that each person is just like another. We all participate in multiple conversations by many means, with different technologies, with different people.

Based on the previously mentioned data, the idea that communication is encoding ideas into symbols and sending them to a decoder must also be wrong. Communication is the coordinated way that people together create change and manage meaning. There is a great difference between communication and interaction. Bees interact. A bee returns to the hive, and does a genetically programmed dance that shows other bees the direction to go for pollen. The response to the dance is also genetically programmed. Humans communicate. We use experience to form what we are going to say so we can coordinate (not necessarily agree) with others. Our responses make it possible for other people to respond coherently. In doing so, people create experience to be used in future communication events. Experience then is not an intrapsychic thing. It is produced in joint action. Meaning is never finished because all responses have some unique qualities and there will be more conversations.

The Enlightenment perspective mind is primary, and it is something different from our material bodies. Minds just run the body. That idea is surely defunct. Our current knowledge of neuroscience tells us that thinking is a change in the brain. We think/feel/move/talk as we learn integrated responses to what is going on.

Part 2: The Systemic Perspective and Coordinated Management of Meaning Theory (CMM)

The previous section provided an overview of the Enlightenment orientation. By contrast, here are the main features of the "systemic" orientation. They are the bases for CMM theory.

What Is a System?

The following is a list of features that characterize the systemic point of view.

1. Human action is not fully predictable by a few underlying laws that determine behavior. Systems are complex and sometimes quite disorderly. The goal of systemic inquiry is to promote intelligent action in a changing social world. The goal is not perfection or ultimate predictability. A good systemic theory provides ways for inquirers to join with others to promote creative and productive ways of life.
2. The goal of a systemic theory is not "truth," but usefulness in situated social action.
3. Communication is the primary social process. Remove communication and there are no episodes, relationships, identities, organizations, cultures, or human communities. Communication is also the process in which we make ideas, emotions, ways of focusing, ways of recalling, and the other aspects of communication itself.
4. The starting places for social inquiry are episodes of communication, not individuals. We cannot understand individuals or individuality outside episodes of communication. When we engage in solitary activity such as reflection, reading, or using media, we

use the skills and patterns first learned in face-to-face communication. Children begin self-regulation by using the voice of caregivers out loud, "Hot, don't touch! Bad boy."

5. Systems are their own best explanations. We do not go outside systems to understand them, although we may need to look at multiple levels of systems. We do not appeal to nonsystemic ideas like "personality" or "temperament."
6. Individuality is a social achievement. It is encouraged by having attention called to actions that are unique and attributing them to a person's choice. Multiple engagements with different people require unique ways of coordinating with them. In addition, it is impossible for two people to have the same position in a conversation at the same time. One person must speak and the other answer.
7. Systems work by rules and habits that people create together in joint action. These habits and rules are used and changed in the stream of mutually responsive action.
8. In a living system, the parts of the system do not just affect each other in a set of cause-and-effect little jerks. They mutually form and change each other. That is called "autopoiesis."
9. Meaning is use. In a broader analysis, the meaning of an act is in the full range of the consequences of using it (C. S. Perice cited in Bernstein 2010). Meaning is made and remade inside the process of mutual responsiveness. We have to act in a way that is a coherent response to what has just been said and facilitate a coherent response from the other person. That was the problem with Lee's dead bird response to Pat.
10. "No context, no meaning" (Bateson 1973). We create contexts in social action in which our actions make sense. The "dead bird" response was also nonsense because it had no place in the context Pat and Lee were creating together.
11. Systems have levels of organization. In a broader social analysis, we can see that a university class operates in the context of a department that, in turn, works in the context of a college, and so on. At a smaller level, the discussion between a student and a professor in a class involves multiple levels of context, such as their particular relationship, the obligations of their roles, and the episode they are creating such as a discussion of a grade.
12. In a system, levels of organization are reflexively connected. The rules of the college influence what goes on in a class. However, an event in a class can evoke a change at the levels of college and university.
13. Everything said about systems so far assumed that time is highly important. To understand a system, it is not sufficient to know the frequency of an act. It is more important to know the stream of action, how one thing happens after another.
14. The system's operation is not just a way to get to ends. Ends are always "ends in view" (Dewey 1925). Ends are created inside the communication system, and ends only make sense in context.
15. The idea of a system with multiple levels brings into view the position of the inquirer. When we inquire about a new system, or reflect on our own, we can observe from the position of a fully embedded participant or from the position of reflecting on the system. In either case you are a part of the system. There is no outsider, completely objective position, only different perspectives from which different things can be learned.

Coordinated Management of Meaning: Extending and Elaborating the Systemic View

The theory of coordinated management of meaning (CMM) encompasses these systemic ideas. It is a practical theory (Cronen 2001). That means it is designed to

guide inquirers' efforts to join with others to understand communication patterns and identify ways of participating that promote creative and productive social action. "Inquirers" can be consultants, counselors, therapists, human relations professionals, or others who are invited to work with communication systems. However, CMM can also be used by members of communication systems, enabling them to be constructive participants. CMM is and can be used for larger organizations (Pearce, Sostrin, and Pearce 2011). However, this chapter is limited to interpersonal settings such as families, committees, managers and supervisees, students sharing a dorm or apartment, friendships, and task-oriented small groups.

CMM does not assume a neat, orderly, social world. It is meant to help in the messy, changing, pluralistic social world we live in. Here is an explanatory fictional episode: Edith and Wilber are walking on the beach. They have been dating exclusively for a year. There is no one near them and they have not spoken for some time. Wilber turns to Edith and takes her hand in his. He looks into her eyes and says, "I love you." Wilber feels warm and highly attracted to Edith. Edith stops walking. She takes her hand away, looks at her phone, and says, in a stumbling way, "It's, ah, getting late. I don't want to miss my favorite TV show."

Understanding Contexts and Their Organization

CMM can be applied to this episode between Edith and Wilber. People develop habits for using aspects of their experience in a situation. We treat the aspects of experience that are used as a "hierarchy of stories." In CMM we treat broader contexts such as relationship, identity, and episode as stories. That is because stories have detail and progression in time. These provide part of the context for each moment of action. By interviewing Edith and Wilber about this episode, I want to learn what (stories) are relevant for them. I also want to learn how one story provides information needed for the coherence of another. I learn that Wilber has had many failed relationships and felt that he would be an unhappy single man all his life—until he met Edith. Now, with Edith, he thinks his life can be a full and happy one. I will call this Wilber's identity story. Notice that this story has a time dimension. Wilber also has a story about the development of his relationship with Edith. He says he has been falling in love with her and that on the beach he felt their attraction very strongly. He thought she felt the same way. This story was a higher context for Wilber than his identity story. Without that relationship story the future of his identity story is threatened. A third level of context for Wilber is the episode on the beach. It is the lowest level. It began as just a pleasant evening, but as they walked, his feelings for her grew stronger. He decided to take an opportunity to express the strength of his feeling for Edith and hoped she would reassure him of her feelings for him. None of these stories is made of only language. Stories are learned as an integration of many abilities. His relationship story includes integrated ways of observing any signs of losing her. It includes ways of feeling during various episodes together, vigilance about signs she is losing interest, and emotional experiences related to being with her. The language that describes these stories is an evolving skeletal structure that organizes attentional practices,

emotions, and memory. The same can be said of Wilber's identity story. It includes feeling, memories, and ways of attending, organized around the language of the story. An episode is an understanding of how the reciprocal actions on the beach have been going and how they may proceed. The episode also provides a guide for what is sensible to do, say, and feel walking with Edith on the beach. As the lowest level story, it is strongly informed by higher ones. Episodes are also punctuations. We know how to get into an episode and when the episode is over.

Here are some of the stories salient for Edith. Edith has a "life plan" as she calls it. In the plan she finishes school with a business degree, graduating this coming May. Then she plans to get a job to pay debts. After that, back to school for an MBA. This story is also more than words. It includes anticipations of how she will feel when she has these successes. After finding a good job and having some career success, marriage would be great. As for their relationship, she enjoys being with Wilber, but part of her identity story is that she does not want to make a lifelong commitment now. As a result, she monitors the development of the relationship in light of what does and does not fit her "life plan." She likes the relationship as it is now: exclusive, warm, and supportive, without further commitments. If they are still together after her MBA and good job, that could be good, though unlikely. The beach episode for her is a great break from studying. She enjoys Wilber's company and his dependability. This episode requires of her a sophisticated management of consciousness to enjoy the feelings of the moment, while monitoring indications that she may be led into too much commitment. Unlike Wilber, her life story is the context for understanding her relationship story, and these two influence her story about the beach episode.

The Three Dimensional Speech Act

In CMM theory we think of a speech act as having three dimensions. The first dimension of an act is the way people make sense of the immediate situation into which they will act. For example, when Edith takes Wilber's hand and reciprocates his gaze, Wilber understands this as an expression of deep and lasting commitment. The second dimension of the act is what people think they are doing by their responsive act. Wilber describes taking her hand, looking at her, and saying, "I love you" as confirming his commitment, showing his love, and assuring Edith of it. Obviously, this act is more than words. He also says he was trying to move their relationship to a deeper level. The third dimension of a speech act is the expected and desired response from the other. Wilber said he expected Edith to respond that she loved him too, and that is just the response he desired. In some cases, the desired response is not the expected one. Here, for Wilber they are the same. Edith understood Wilber's act just as he did, but she did not expect it. She understood it as an attempt at getting more commitment than she wanted to make. When she looked at her phone and said she did not want to miss her TV show, she said she was not trying to hurt or insult Wilber, but was surprised and did not act well. She says she could have said other things to avoid making such a strong commitment without being unkind. She also says that she had to avoid the commitment, but could

have done that in a better way. She said that what she desired to get from Wilber was an indication that he understood she was not ready for commitment now and end the episode. Given the way she acted, she expected him to respond with sadness, shock, and maybe anger. In CMM theory we do not think of these three dimensions of an act as occurring in a lockstep, one after the other progression. Typically, they are all created in a flash as we act in a situation. In CMM we take an act apart into three dimensions to find good questions to ask about the system. We also recognize that every act is complex. It has sound, feeling, facial expression, language, and so on. Every interpretation is one among many possible ones.

It is important to keep in mind that what Wilber and Edith do is not only influenced by the stories they use, but also very importantly by what the other person does. The other person's action is part of the context too. What another person says can be understood more than one way, but the other person's behavior must be taken into account in a way that produces coordination; otherwise, we are back to dead bird talk. Anticipation of response is part of the context too.

These are just a few examples of a speech act. In the beach example, both speak for themselves as far as we know. But suppose that Edith has a still higher-level story than the three we have cited. It could be a family story about how her family is made up of high achievers who put success above everything. In responding to Wilber, she might also be speaking for her family and its expectations.

Constraints and Possibilities

In CMM theory we assess the constraints and possibilities for each person at each talking turn. These are created by connections in the system. Collectively, these connections are called "logical forces" in CMM.

"Prefiguring force" refers to how preexisting stories and interpretation of the other person's act constrain our own choice of what to do.

"Practical force" refers to the degree a desired response constrains our choice of action.

"Reflexive needs" direct us to the degree someone needs a kind of response from the other to sustain and develop stories.

"Reflexive effects" describe how the response we actually get from another person changes the stories we brought to the situation.

"Substantializing force" describes how acting out of stories in a specific situation alters those stories themselves.

These connections come together to create possibilities and constraints in action. The degree of constraint people experience on what they can do is given a short description when using CMM. These constraints can make just one kind of response "obligatory." Looser constraints, "legitimate," can include a range of response possibilities. These constraints of context can make some responses "prohibited." If the situation is so confusing that a person does not have any idea of what can or cannot be done, we mark the logical force as "unknown." In CMM we also make a distinction between the experience of making a conscious response and the feeling that what we do is beyond our conscious control. For example, a person reports that

what someone did "made" them angry. In such situations we use the labels "caused," "probable," "blocked," or "random." We do not think that people's actions are really "caused" by external events, but that may be how it is experienced.

Wilber's act of expressing love was strongly influenced by several aspects of the system. He says that his expression of love was an emotional response "caused" (beyond his control) by the situation and his feelings for Edith. His identity and relationship stories played important roles in forming his understanding and response. Together, the influence of the stories salient for Wilber, including his understanding of Edith's reciprocal gaze and holding his hand ("prefiguring force"), created an important part of the "logical force" and explains in large part what he did. Wilber says, however, that his wish to get the desired response from Edith did not much influence what he did (weak practical force). A desired end was not a powerful factor explaining Wilber's act. However, what we call "reflexive needs" are very important here. Wilber needed reciprocation of love to keep the episode going as he wanted and to confirm his stories of self and relationship. That is particularly important because his identity story depends so much on his relationship story. In this situation, the response Edith gave was not what Wilber expected. Here "reflexive effects" enter the picture. The response Edith gives turns back on Wilber's stories. He cannot go on in the episode as he expected and wanted. His story of the relationship is changed and thereby his life story, which depended on it.

The "reflexive effect" of Edith's response clearly alters Wilber's stories about the episode and his relationship to Edith. However, the reflexive effect is not a simple one-way mechanical change from one story to another. The unexpected event on the beach has to be integrated into a new view of the relationship. His understanding of her act is itself further formed by being integrated in the newly changed contextual stories. There is mutual modification and accommodation between act and the contextual stories. Realizing what the TV comment does to the relationship probably contributes to Wilber's further negative understanding of Edith's act. It was not just a way to break off the beach episode. He may now understand it not only as "I don't love you," but also as "insensitivity," "social ineptness," and other possibilities.

Every act is complex. We learn to focus on particular features of an act: certain words, things we observe, the sound of the voice, and so on. We can understand an act in various ways. When trying to promote new possibilities, this selectivity allows us to offer different ways to understand an act by focusing on different features of it. Wilber could focus more on the clumsiness and surprise shown in the act, or he could focus on how abrupt and hurtful it was.

Part 3: Applying the CMM Alternative

To understand the difference that CMM's systemic perspective makes, we can look at samples of everyday conversation. These samples were selected because they are commonplace ways of talking that have Enlightenment roots. After each I will offer a CMM perspective and examples of how the CMM theory can direct us to ways of dealing with the situations.

Everyday Talk Sample 1

"This family [or organization] is dysfunctional. We need to find out who is bad or who is mad or who is wrong. If we 'fix' or fire the defective person, the problems will be gone." In organizations we also hear this related kind of claim: "If our workforce is losing days of work because of sickness due to stress, we can offer individuals stress reduction therapy."

Enlightenment assumption: To understand human behavior, we must start with the individual. To fix a problem, we must fix the individual.

Fix the individuals and all will be well. A family, group, or organization is a collection of individuals.

CMM Systemic Alternative

Psychologist Don Jackson (1977) noticed that after working with an individual for some time and ending therapy, that same person was back later with similar problems, or another member of the family came to him with problems. This led him to the idea that the problem was not the individual, it was the communication system. Many family therapists now say that the problem is the system—the problematic patterns of communication. In organizations, the idea of fixing an individual to make the same system work can amount to cruelty. At a university where I used to work, students and faculty were offered individual therapy for stress when final exams started. No one wanted to recognize that the problem was at a higher level of context, namely the system organization and rules. There was insufficient time for studying between the end of classes and exams. There was also insufficient time between the last exams and when grades must be submitted.

Everyday Talk Sample 2

"Why does my sister get into so many arguments with me? What my sister needs is to change her way of thinking. Why can't she be reasonable like I am?"

Enlightenment mentalist assumption: Individual mind is primary.

There is one way to be reasonable (my way, of course). Reason is reason, so there! This idea goes back to ancient times. It was carried over into the Renaissance and then into the Enlightenment.

CMM Systemic Alternative

Reasoning is a matter of making a coherent narrative for yourself and others in a particular situation. There are different social and cultural narratives that are equally coherent but incommensurable. Telling your sister to stop being unreasonable will not help, and we know it. People (even including family members) learn a way of making coherent sense for themselves and others in a particular situation. Today this is called "narrative rationality" (Fisher 1985). That is what cultural anthropologists seek to learn when they study how a different culture makes sense of the world. In the conflict with your sister, you and your sister are working from different understandings of what is going on—different narratives as contexts. Try

to find out what ideas your sister has that need to be protected in the situation. As the systemic practitioner Peter Lang put it, when we hear negative feelings, we should take that as an invitation to explore an endangered hope. The problem is not how to make her rational; it is how to encourage the development of new kinds of rationality in your relationship, in which both of you can work out your cherished hopes.

Everyday Talk Sample 3

Han Solo: "Princess Leia, you say you wish I would be more emotionally responsive. Well, I'll try, but what does 'emotionally responsive' really mean? How do you define that?" Leia: "It's hard to explain it to you when you are in the middle of a light saber fight."

Enlightenment Assumption: Meaning is representation. The meaning of a word is the way it represents either something inside one's head and points to some thing or action.

What is needed is honesty and clarity. Someone should work with Leia to help her find the definition that distinguishes "emotional responsiveness" from similar ideas so that she can tell Han what she wants.

CMM Systemic Alternative

The problems with that Enlightenment assumption are many. How can people know if the language they use is a good representation of their internal idea? There would have to be internal criteria for matching language to ideas. Next, how do we know if the criteria for matching ideas and language are the right ones? There have to be criteria for choosing the criteria. This becomes an infinite regress.

There is another problem with the representation assumption: What would the ideas inside the head look like? We would have to know what these unrepresented ideas are before we could tell if they are represented correctly. Then we would not need the representation. Many of our ideas are primarily words. Some words are *part* of experience. In the case of eating an apple, when we learn to describe the experience in words we change the way we experience apples the next time we bite into one. Perhaps instead of just focusing on whether it is "good" or "bad," we learn to use words like *tart*, *mealy*, *perfume-like*, *crisp*, etc. The language focuses our sensations in more sophisticated ways and changes the experience.

The best response to Han's question, "What does 'emotional sensitivity' really mean?" is: "Bad question, Han." Meaning is always in process as we use language. We should ask instead: What is happening when Leia has the idea that Han is not being emotionally sensitive? What did Han say or do in the pattern of conversation when Leia thought Han was "emotionally insensitive"? What had Leia said to Han before the response she calls "insensitive"? A systemic inquirer would also want to know Leia's stories about their relationship and how she hopes it is going to develop? How does showing emotional sensitivity enter into it? What are Han's stories about their relationship, and about their identities? Does his story about being a hero have a place for showing "emotional sensitivity"? Perhaps we could reframe Han's action as "showing strength" rather than insensitivity.

A systemic perspective would include asking Leia about the emotion she experienced when Han responded insensitively. We should ask Han if he noticed her response and how he understood it.

Everyday Talk Sample 4

Concerned son or daughter: "I hear my parents get into this same kind of argument over and over: Father says that mother 'nags.' Mother says that when she tries to get him to do something, he 'withdraws' by getting absorbed in the newspaper or by going into his study. Then mother tries to get him to pay attention and he calls that 'nagging.' Neither of them likes this pattern, but it happens again and again. After several days of this, father often does what mother is trying to get him to do. I would like to know who is the cause of the problem, who started it?" In CMM theory we call these "URPs" or unwanted repeated patterns. They are not uncommon. In a particular situation or when a certain topic comes up, we know how the conversation is going to go. No one wants it, but no one knows how to stop it.

Enlightenment cause and effect assumption: Action is made up of causes and effects.

Nothing moves or changes unless something happens to start things going. If we can locate the cause, we can account for the effects and then fix the problem. We must locate the cause first. Then we will know who is to blame or who must change.

CMM Systemic Alternative

In the biological world, every living thing must be in constant interaction with its environment or it is dead—as dead as the bird in Lee's brother's car. Even going to sleep or being quiet is doing something in a place, at a time, with social consequences. In a sequence of actions, all events are both causes and effects. Every "effect" is the "cause" of the next event. We have all heard of the experiment in which Pavlov "conditioned" a dog to salivate at the sound of a bell by pairing the sound of the bell with an "unconditioned stimulus" that was meat powder. Is meat powder the original stimulus for the dog salivating? One can just as reasonably say that the dog (its physiology) is the cause of meat powder being a stimulus. The dog's physiology causes meat powder to be a stimulus. In a move that ran against the current of her time, English writer Maria Edgeworth (1767–1849) gave this advice to newly married young women whose husbands complained about some of their habits. She advised them to say, "I wonder how you learned to be so sensitive to those habits?"

A systemic orientation says there is no answer to a bad question like "Who started it?" If we could answer it, that would only make things worse by identifying someone as the bad person. Instead, do something to break the pattern. An influential family therapist, Salvador Minuchin, and his colleagues (1967) demonstrated some ways to block a pattern by saying something that makes the usual next response incoherent. A systemic inquirer might find an opening to say something like this to the father: "I notice that you have a way to make sure things get done around the house even when you are tired from work. You show your wife how much you need

a push to get things done by reading the newspaper or going into your office. Then, she helps you to get something done by saying something like _____. How did you learn to get her to help you like that?" Notice that the systemic response makes it hard to rationally go on with blaming if the act is labeled "helpful." Then the systemic inquirer might say to the wife, "How did you learn when your husband needs you to help him get to an important task?" To both: "Can you think of some other ways to help your spouse that would be even more effective and contribute to a better relationship?" A future-oriented question that could complement the earlier one might be, "If this old pattern continues for the next two years, how will your relationship be then?"

In the conversations between Lee and Pat at the beginning of this chapter, the problem was that Lee's last comment was nonsense in light of the context they were creating. Pat had no idea how to go on. By contrast, in this example, each person knows exactly how to go on. Father knows his wife is trying to get him to do something when he feels tired and wants to put it off. The wife knows her husband is trying to avoid doing something. They understand each other very well. The problem is coordination, not mutual understanding.

Everyday Talk Sample 5

She: "We are having problems about money in our relationship. He wants to spend more and enjoy the moment. That is not responsible." He: "She has lost her sense of fun and adventure. We are only young once—let's enjoy life." He and she: "What we need is more communication! That will lead to better mutual understanding and the resolution of our problems."

Enlightenment assumption: Communications is sending and receiving information.

If we have more information, we can have mutual understanding. If we understand each other, we can reach agreement. With mutual understanding we can have compromise and mutual respect.

CMM Systemic Alternative

That is not necessarily so. Two people can have very clear ideas about what another person thinks and a great deal of information. However, not all disagreements are matters of information and clarity as we saw in the case of the nagging/withdrawing episode. At times two people can be operating from very different contexts. One is trying to maximize enjoyment for the moment and thinks that is essential to their relationship. The other is acting from a context in which security is most crucial for the relationship in the long term. Compromise with the other seems to involve blocking an important hope for their future together. Some compromise would be useful, but that is probably not enough. What could help is to create a new context in which they can coordinate their actions. They could, for example, create a higher context in which they value the way each perspective provides balance to the other. There could be a story about what a good team they make. A systemic inquirer would first want to stop the pattern of mutual recrimination as in previous examples. Criticism could be reframed as showing concern for their future

together. Then, it would be a good idea to “normalize” the situation with a comment like this: “Well, this is just the sort of thing all new couples have to work out.” Next, identify the positive dimension of the conversation. Disagreements are also engagements. There is commitment here to work through things for the good of both. A future-orientated question could be, “Suppose you have gotten past this discussion. It is a month from now. You are both really happy with your decisions and the way you go about making them. How were you able to get to that point?”

Everyday Talk Sample 6

[Between two friends by text message] “I am sorry I said that in my last text. When you texted me _____, it made me so mad that I texted back _____ and then posted it to all our friends.”

Enlightenment dualist assumption: Located in our individual minds are distinct capacities (powers).

These different powers include emotion, thought, consciousness, attention, recall, and more. They are different from one another and can be studied one at a time. A study of emotion is focused on a different mental power than a study of thinking or a study of memory. A person may act from reason or from emotion. This division of abilities into separate mental powers is called “dualism.” It dates back again to that Enlightenment philosopher Descartes. Emotions come over us. They are not rational responses, and we cannot blame anyone for a response beyond their control. We could say that a person should learn to control his or her emotions, but how is that possible if emotions are not rational acts?

CMM Systemic Alternative

Remember the second dialogue at the beginning of this chapter. Jim said he is in love but had no idea with whom, what, or why. A systemic view says that we learn a cultural vocabulary within which we learn to identify and experience emotions. That is why emotions are different across cultures (Averill 1980). Emotions are part of a full, rational life.

A physiological change is identified as an emotion within a linguistic, that is, cultural system. A famous early study by Schachter and Singer (1962) showed that the introduction of a chemical stimulus was variously interpreted depending on the social situation and the emotional vocabulary used within that situation. From a systemic outlook, emotions are social constructions. This does not make them less real.

An emotion has a place in social/cultural life. We learn how to identify and experience emotion in sociocultural contexts. It is complex learning. For example, we learn how to be *nonconscious* of certain elements of experience. If we were reflectively conscious all the time we spend with someone, it would be very hard to fall in love with them and even more difficult to enjoy intimacy.

Emotions have multiple functions. When someone you know says he was acting emotionally and that some event made him angry, that is a way of disclaiming responsibility although it may be an honest report. From a systemic point of view, we would want to know what was going on when the feeling of anger began (in

our case with the text message). An emotion is supposed to be something that “comes over us” but not at random—if Jim has no idea how he came to be “in love,” he has a disorder of emotion. The usual way to talk about emotion is to separate it from conscious choice, so a systemic move might be to change the reactive vocabulary to a conscious one (Gefranco Ceechin, personal message). It could be asked, “What was going on between you when at the moment you decided to *show* the other person your anger.” That would be a way to make conscious control or its absence ambiguous. The angry person could also be asked, “What did you think would happen next after you showed your anger?” or “What would be the best response your friend could have given? How might the two of you act to make that good response possible?” Emotion is a learned experience, and there are times when we have greater control over emotional actions. A systemic approach would ask, “Are there other situations when you might have shown a great deal of anger but decided not to? What are some of these? How did you learn the ability to control anger? Are there other situations in which you could use that ability?” If you doubt that consciousness can be taught and learned, watch how a coach teaches a new skill. First it is divided into segments and the learner must become conscious of much detail. But to perform the skill, the learner must later learn not to be conscious through most of the process.

Emotions can create great logical force. Suppose you have a good friend and that friend has a large dog that you found obnoxious and feared. One day your friend says to you with sniffling tears, “My beloved killer guard dog Bruno died last night.” You may be very glad the dog is gone, but your friend’s tears obligate you to offer sympathy.

There is a systemic way to talk about consciousness. We are self-conscious when we can report for ourselves or for others a connection—say, between an event and our response, or between something said to us and an emotion we feel. We can work to create that ability to report by calling attention to a regularity of events that a person does not articulate.

Everyday Talk Sample 7

Student employee number 1: “I really hate this job. This manager is constantly checking up on me. I learned in a business class that what he does is called ‘micro-managing.’ It makes me less efficient, not more.” Student employee number 2: “Have you tried talking to him about this?” Student employee number 1: “No, there is no point. That is just his personality.”

Enlightenment Naturalism Assumption

The Enlightenment view, focused as it is on individuals, tends to attribute too much to the “nature” of people. If it is in a person’s nature to act a particular way—there is nothing to do but to endure or leave.

CMM Systemic Alternative

If by personality we simply mean habits of behavior that a person has learned, no problem. But when we say that such habits are part of someone’s nature that

cannot be changed, we get trapped. From a systemic point of view, we wonder how, when, and in what circumstance someone learned these habits. We are even more interested in how patterns of communication perpetuate these habits. From a systemic point of view, we want to understand these habits in joint action. It is not uncommon that micromanaging leads to less efficiency, which then leads to more micromanaging, then less efficiency, and so on. This is an unwanted repetitive pattern much like the nag/withdrawal pattern but with the added bit that one person's behavior is assumed to be fixed by nature.

From a systemic point of view, this would not be approached by conceding that the manager cannot change. We want to know how the manager learned this style. Did a mentor advise her or him that employees try to get away with little work and that a manager must be vigilant? With a diminishing degree of efficiency, it would be good to ask the manager future questions such as, "If this continues, how efficient will your part of the business be in six months? Who in upper management will be the first to notice the problem?" The employees can be asked, "How will your relationship to your manager be in six months if this unwanted pattern continues? Will you still have this job?"

The goal of questions like the ones here is to try to create a space for both manager and subordinates to change. A systemic view of management tells us that leadership is not possible without good followership and vice versa. From a systemic point of view, we would like to know that the employees think they can help the manager to be a better manager, and how the manager can help the employees be better employees. That way, everyone keeps their jobs and the company does well.

Everyday Talk Sample 8

Jill and Michael are brother and sister. They have a younger brother Bill who has lost his job again. Michael says, "Bill is such a weak person. He won't stand up for himself. He has no self-confidence so he keeps losing jobs because he is not assertive about his ideas. Now he needs us to find a place for him to live. We all want to help him. We are having a family meeting with him tomorrow. We rarely do get together as a family to find out what we are all doing. But we do get organized to help poor Bill. He needs us."

Enlightenment assumption: There are some acts that are powerful, like being assertive, and others that are powerless like not promoting your own ideas.

The power of the act is in the kind of act performed and the resources you have. Bill is just a victim of his own lack of ability and lack of resources.

CMM Systemic Alternative

The power of an act lies in how it constrains or promotes the actions of others. Bill's losing his job is in many ways very powerful. Losing his job brings the family together, and that is something they have not been able to do on their own. They learn what the others are doing and cooperate to find the best way to help Bill. Only Bill's problems have the power to bring the family together. A systemic consultant

might ask Bill how he has come to be that powerful. The family could be challenged with the idea that Bill is working too hard at helping the family stay connected. To do it, he has to lose jobs and be treated as ineffectual. "How can we take the burden off Bill?" This reframing is done in front of Bill. It is meant to alter his consciousness of his own less-than-assertive action on the job and consider other choices he has. A systemic consultant might have Bill suggest other ways for the family to keep connected without relying on him so much.

Everyday Talk Sample 9

Vic is a university student who shares an apartment with a friend. He says, "My roommate Luke does not get up in time for class because he is unmotivated. He needs a lot of prompting. A typical Monday morning goes like this 'Hey Luke, wake up.' [knock, knock] 'You can't be late for class again.'" Luke says in a muffled voice, "Go away, Vic, I'm tired." Luke says, "You have to get up now. You said the instructor takes attendance and it's part of your grade." "Yeh—stop trying to be my mother and go away." Luke knocks again, "I am not going away. It is 7:15 . . ." Here is a similar situation, in which Jeff says, "Fred, are you still watching television? Haven't you started your paper for turbo incubation?" Fred replies, "Ok, I'll get it done." Jeff: "When? It's 10 p.m." Fred: "I'll get to it. Shut up."

Enlightenment intentionality assumption: There is a special power of the mind called "willpower" or "intentionality."

You may know about a line of psychological research called "locus of control" (Lefcourt 1976). According to it we sometimes attribute the cause of our own motivation and initiative to forces outside ourselves. Other times we attribute motivation to our internal intentions or willpower. Either way, it is assumed that the acting person must have in her or his head the power of intentionality. If it is not strong enough, an outside force is needed to stimulate it. For an "unmotivated" workforce, an organization might invite a motivational speaker and hang motivational plaques on the walls. These are usually of no lasting value, but there is little else to do.

CMM Systemic Alternative

From a systemic point of view, it is just confusing to say that people have intentionality. If so, we could speak of people having intentionality about nothing at the moment. We do not have intentionality. Intention is something we *do*. All language is intentional because our words point beyond themselves into the future. They create new conditions for our future actions by giving a description of a situation and creating possibilities and restrictions for others. Anyone who has tried to get a roommate or friend up on time, or to start a project knows how ineffective it is to "make someone" act responsibly. A systemic approach would be to consider how effective Vic's approach is. Vic has learned how to wait just until the last minute when they actually take action and how many classes he can miss and not flunk out. That is a skill we could call to their attention. This is similar to the systemic approach to emotion: "How have you gotten so good at knowing just how long to wait before starting a paper or getting up?" This sort of question moves from a

passive to an active vocabulary. Making an ability (for that is what it is) conscious can make it difficult to do it again. It breaks the confluence of abilities needed to resist the urging, feel that the situation is out of their control, and still get the paper done. Another way to promote a change in consciousness is to ask how many times the helper tries to get the desired response before compliance occurs. Often this is quite consistent. If, in fact, a person occasionally does not start the paper in time, or does not get to class in time, questions should be asked about how the person in question will refine those skills.

Another aspect of learning has to do with teaching the helper how to stay persistent even when rebuffed, and how much insistence to show. Saying "Oh go away" can be a highly international though not conscious way of continuing the pattern. The two learn just how much resistance and how much persistence will work. Offering thanks when the help is successful can be a good way to keep the helper involved. From a systemic perspective it would be good to inquire where the helper developed the idea that he or she is obligated to keep trying for some period of time, working against resistance and sometimes insults.

The contexts involved are multiple. There is the context of the episodic pattern—the well-rehearsed game of the roommate's wake-up effort and Vic's resistance. Another context could be the helper's story about being a good friend and what a good friend must do. The resisting person may have the story that he or she needs help to get things done and a relationship story that includes the kind of a dependency that the helper facilitates. The resistance of the oversleeper might even confirm the helper's story about what a good friend he is. Vic must also be skilled at finding roommates who will act into this pattern. That takes initiative. These are only examples of stories that could provide context and could be reconfirmed and developed in these episodes. Which stories actually provide context must be found by asking questions and by observing the communication process.

Conclusion

I hope that I have done a little "therapy," as Ludwig Wittgenstein liked to say. By that I mean, I hope you will begin to question the traditional Enlightenment-based ways of thinking that are so interwoven in our everyday talk. I hope that when you hear dead-end explanations such as "That is just his personality," "She is unmotivated," or "They are irrational, acting out of their emotions," you will stop and think that there is another way to look at what is going on and maybe have a glance back at parts of this chapter. I hope you will see the moral implications of the CMM theory. If our thoughts are not just in our heads, but are the result of participation in communication, then we need to consider very carefully how to create and support institutions in which good conversations take place. These include families that engage children in an extended conversation instead of simple giving orders, workplaces that are what Senge (1990) called "learning organizations," and educational institutions that offer multiple perspectives and encourage student engagement with different ideas and people unlike themselves. If you value individuality, then the perspective offered here may suggest ways to join in activities that promote

joint action rather than repeating slogans. Perhaps something in this chapter will give you ideas about how to *do* that. What we need is not just thought, or uninformed action. We need more thoughtful action. We communicate, therefore we think.

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