

About discussions of PCT —a high-wire act?

A post to CSGnet by Mary A. Powers, November 1993

I seem to be somewhat grumpy this morning ☹

<snip>

What I see going on here, and it's been going on for months, is people who think PCT is interesting and has its points, but who see Bill [Powers] and Tom [Bourbon] and Rick [Marken] as dancing on a high wire without a safety net. How can they possibly have such reliance on control theory that they don't need the security and comfort—and wisdom and right-thinking—of (for instance) feedforward or information theory or dynamic systems theory or whatever.

Most of this endless quibbling is between people who have lots of training and professional experience with control systems of the artificial variety, or who have approached the same issues PCT addresses, but in a different way—between those people and the three dancers on the wire. Those people have their feet on the wire, but they've got to have that net, and a safety harness, and they aren't letting go of the platform, either.

Meanwhile Bill and Tom and Rick are saying “what's with the harness and the net?” Because for years they've been out there on that “wire,” and it isn't a wire at all, but solid ground. A lot of what PCT “leaves out” or “doesn't explain”—a lot of the really valuable, important stuff that PCT dismisses so arrogantly and unwisely—is harnesses and nets. Stuff that's really superfluous (and even a barrier) to understanding.

I think I'm becoming disillusioned with [CSG]net. I can look over at the bookcase and see 6 computer-paper boxes full of printouts, a sickeningly large proportion of which is quibbling of the sort that came through this morning, and Bill endlessly and patiently explaining, and explaining again, and explaining yet again—and nobody seems to be able to stop and think MY GOD, how is he able to keep these discussions going with psychologists and information theorists and control engineers and roboticists and AI types and linguists and sociologists and educators and therapists and organizational development people and bicycle designers and human factors mavens—and the answer staring all you klutzes in the face is not that he's some kind of frigging genius—pretty smart, sure—but that his ace in the hole, the ground on which he takes his stand, the source of his insights and analyses and ability to talk to people in all these “separate” fields, is PERCEPTUAL CONTROL THEORY. Simply that, no frills, none of this baggage you keep dragging in. Just a simple little unified theory of living systems which enables him to handle the complexities of all these fields. Doesn't anyone else want to try it too? The only catch is: you'll never get anywhere with PCT if you keep looking at it from where you are. You need to look at where you are from the point of view of PCT. Then maybe Bill could quit teaching kindergarten over and over again, and have some time to get some development done, and have some company doing it.

I guess I'm still grumpy ☹

Mary P.