

## Chapter 24

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# Up at the top

This chapter will focus on Powers's top three orders of control: programs, principles, and system concepts. They are the "farthest" from the "real world." An experience at the top of the control hierarchy is an interpretation of layers upon layers of interpretations at lower levels. I diagrammed the layering in Figure 18–3.

### VIEWPOINTS

We can be conscious at any level of what we are perceiving below that level. When we are thinking about how to do something, we are using perceptions at the level of programs: "If I do *this*, I will also be bringing about *that*, and *that* will make it possible for. . . ." But in the midst of planning something we want to achieve, we rarely stop to think about thinking. We just *do* the thinking, and our attention stays on the imagined sequences of acts. Acting with perceptions coming to the level of programs, we can be conscious of perceptions at all *lower* levels. To be conscious of the *thinking* we are doing, we must go up (so to speak) to the level of principles. And to be critical of the principles of logic we are using, we must go up to the level of system concepts—concepts *about* logic. Any level can be a viewpoint, so to speak, from which we can be conscious of lower levels.

To illustrate changing levels of perceiving, I will tell you about a famous puzzle that experimenters have used in studying problem solving. The experimenter brings the subject into a room and directs his attention to two strings hanging, some distance apart, from the ceiling. Except for the strings, a chair, and a few tools, perhaps left behind by the person who put up the strings, the room is bare. The experimenter tells the subject that the problem here is to tie together

the two ends of the strings. Every subject begins by taking hold of the end of one string and walking toward the other string. But the subject is disappointed; the string is too short. He or she cannot hold to one string and reach the other. The chair is no help, either. Many subjects give up, but a few succeed in tying the strings together.

In posing the problem, the experimenter draws the attention of the subject to the *relationship* between the strings. As long as the subject focuses only on relationships, there is no hope of solution. Some subjects, however, turn their attention "upward" to categories. They look around for help. They look at the tools, and a few subjects realize that the tools can also be categorized as *weights*. They pick up a tool such as a pair of pliers and tie it to the end of one string. They set the pliers swinging back and forth toward the other string. They take hold of the other string and walk toward the swinging pliers. They catch the pliers on the inward swing and tie the two strings together. (I am not saying that every successful subject found the solution in just this way. Perhaps a few imagined themselves swinging on the strings like acrobats with ropes.)

When we go from perceiving at one level to perceiving at another, we change the aspects of the world to which we give attention, and different opportunities become apparent. When two people move from a "relationship" to a marriage—that is, from having overlapping schedules (levels 6 through 9) and certain obligations to each other (level 10) to the level of "one unique entity" (level 11)—both purposes and modes of pursuing them acquire greatly expanded degrees of freedom. Many people undertake marriage as a way of solving particular existing problems—problems they have come upon in their single state. But looked at from the level of marriage

as a joint enterprise with new degrees of freedom, a problem may look very different. It may vanish, or it may change its shape and become susceptible to a different sort of solution.

In a missive to the CSGnet on 6 December 1994, Powers wrote:

Behavior never takes place at just one level, and any model that tries to handle all of behavior at one level is just wrong. It's like watching an orchestra conductor and saying that all he's doing is waving his arms in repetitive patterns. He is certainly doing that, but it's not ALL he's doing—it's not even the most interesting aspect of what he's doing. . . . In some quarters, the mistake is in trying to represent functions at all levels as if they were logical processes. . . . To a logic-level system, the whole world consists of variables which are either true or false. . .

Because problems often look different from different levels of perception, changing the level of perception can uncover solutions impossible to perceive at the previous level. Helping a perplexed person to change his or her viewpoint to a higher level, therefore, can be an effective therapy. It enables the person to find his or her own solution and understand it from his or her own viewpoint. Such a solution is far more likely to be carried out successfully than advice from someone else's viewpoint. Powers calls this the "Method of Levels." I will describe it at greater length in Chapter 30.

By the way, people sometimes want to classify actions or events according to Powers's eleven levels of perception. "What level is baseball?" "What about brushing your teeth?" "What's philanthropy?" Levels are not about actions, but about internal standards—reference signals. The levels are not out there like shelves in a warehouse, labeled so that everyone can walk in and find actions such as baseball, teeth brushing, or philanthropy. Levels exist only in your own purposes. Whatever you do, you are doing for one or more (usually more) purposes. Those *purposes* reside at one level or another—in *your* head. When you are acting to maintain a purpose at any level, you are also acting purposely at all lower levels. When you play baseball, you are playing at many levels. Your assortment of purposes will be different tomorrow, and they will differ, too, from the purposes of the other players.

## REALITY

Regardless of the level in the control hierarchy, all perceptions seem "real" to us. (Well, we do have moments of disorientation, but let's set those aside for now.) When I feel an apple in my hand, my conviction that I am feeling an apple rests entirely on the neural signals running up my arm to my brain and supplying somehow part of what I experience consciously at some level—perhaps the level of "event." But the feeling of reality does not diminish in the levels of control lying farthest from the sense organs. Here, from the book *Powers of the Crown* by the Editors of Time-Life Books, 1989, is an example of how real a system concept can feel:

In August 1593, [Abbas Khan, shah of Persia] was advised by his astrologers that the stars boded ill for the ruler of Persia, since Mars and Saturn were in quadrature in the ascendant. Resourcefully, Abbas stepped down from the throne and had a condemned heretic . . . proclaimed shah in his place. The heretic ruled under close surveillance for three days. On the fourth day, when the zodiacal aspects were more favorable, the substitute shah was executed and Abbas resumed his reign.

Sometimes we want to check up on the reliability of a perception: "Wait a minute—let me have another look at that." Or we say to someone else, "Would you take a look at this and tell me what you see?" To make it easy to compare one person's perception with another's, scientists try to keep their perceptions low in the control hierarchy: "Did the pointer on your dial point closer to 3.75 than 3.76? Yes or no?"

At the highest levels, however, it is often difficult to validate one's perceptions. How could Abbas Khan have checked his understanding of the compulsions from the stars? His astrologers told him that harm was about to befall the shah of Persia. They were right; the shah (the heretic) met death. Furthermore, Abbas Khan and his astrologers demonstrated dramatically how well they understood the stars; they figured out a way to fool the stars, and they got away with it.

We can ascertain the reality of some systems (corresponding to our system concepts) in much the same way we ascertain the reality of an apple. The reality of the solar system is an example. You and I can both look through a telescope night after night, make notes, and compare the movements we trace with the movements predicted by the model of the solar system. That, at any rate, is what I am told we can do. I have looked