

## **What is Descriptive Psychology?**

### **A Hopefully Accessible Introduction**

“At the risk of offending, I should like in this letter to offer my principle hypothesis regarding why your field has not to date arrived at any manner of broadly accepted, unifying theoretical framework, and has not for this reason realized the scientific potential, importance, and respect it would rightly possess. In brief, I believe this reason to lie in the fact that *you have attended insufficiently to the pre-empirical matters essential to good science*. You have understood aright the basic truth that science is ultimately concerned with how things are in the empirical world. However, you have neglected the further truth that often, as in my own case, much nonempirical work must be undertaken if we are to achieve our glittering empirical triumphs.”

--“An open letter from Isaac Newton to the field of psychology” (Bergner, 2006, p. 70-71)

“Descriptive Psychology is a set of systematically related concepts designed to give formal access to all facts and possible facts concerning human behavior.”

--Peter G. Ossorio (2006, p. xx)

Descriptive Psychology (“DP”) is first and foremost a conceptual framework for the science of Psychology. Created in its original form by Peter G. Ossorio in the mid-1960s at the University of Colorado, it has subsequently been the subject of hundreds of books and papers that have updated, refined, and elaborated it, and that have applied it to domains such as psychotherapy, artificial intelligence, spirituality, organizations, communities, psychological

theory creation, and research methodology. What DP primarily attempts to do is to provide the kind of precise, systematic, and comprehensive conceptual framework that is a pre-empirical requirement for the adequate conduct of psychological theorizing, research, and application.

## The Nature of Descriptive Psychology

Since DP is a bit of an odd duck within psychology -- not a theory, not a research finding, not an approach to therapy -- an analogy may be helpful in understanding its nature. The analogy I will employ is that of playing baseball. Consider a strange, hypothetical situation in which people all over the world had been playing this game for many centuries, but somehow no one had ever stepped back from the enterprise and articulated the *concept* of baseball (which would be substantially but not entirely equivalent to a statement of the rules of the game). Not born with a knowledge of baseball, these people had to learn to play by participating in the game in the course of growing up, and had evolved precisely the same game with the same universal set of rules all over the globe. They possessed, by virtue of having the overall concept of baseball, a knowledge of a whole network of systematically related concepts ("run," "hit," "error," "inning," etc.). In our hypothetical, then, all of these people knew how to play baseball and were in fact playing the game successfully, but somehow no one had ever articulated the concept of "baseball" itself. (Compare: many people speak grammatically correct English, but if asked to step back and state the grammatical rules they are following, they would be unable to do so.)

Consider some further features of this hypothetical "baseball world":

1. What would fundamentally make a baseball player a baseball player would be his or her *ability to actually play baseball* -- to *act* on the concept of baseball. The player would know when to go to bat, when to run to first base, how to strategize about how to get a run across, and so forth.
2. What would be *universal* across all players (paradigmatically) would be this ability to act on the concept of baseball.
3. The concept of baseball would articulate all of the possibilities of what has actually

happened or could possibly happen in a game of baseball. It would be *pre-empirical* in this sense. What actually happened in a specific game would be an empirical matter, and could only be discovered through (direct or indirect) observation. But whatever has happened or will happen, if it is a baseball happening, will fall within the “world” of baseball; it will be a run or a hit or an error or an out, etc.

4. Their sharing of the concept of baseball would render players able to understand the behavior of other players. They would not as a rule find the behavior of these others mysterious but quite intelligible. When an opponent bunted with no outs and a man on first base, or tried to steal second base, for example, the observing players would understand the behavior. This is not to say either that they could predict the behavior beforehand, or that they would never be mistaken in their understanding. Understanding implies neither prediction nor infallibility.

5. As masters of the game, players would speak with confidence and authority on matters pertaining to the game. With essentially no doubt or uncertainty, they could if needed declare that, “It's three strikes and you're out,” or “After three outs, the team at bat takes the field and the opposing team takes their turn at bat.” Other players hearing such statements would not judge the speaker as arrogant or grandiose or beset with a delusion that they “had a pipeline to the truth.”

6. Although historically all of the baseball players we have observed have been human beings, it is not out of the realm of possibility that we might observe aliens or robots some day playing the game. And, if they did so, we would count them baseball players. Thus, we cannot equate being a baseball player with being embodied in a certain way, or make claims such as, “Well, what is universal here is that all baseball players are organisms, and the key to understanding what they are doing lies in understanding this organism.” If robots (perhaps on the order of Star Wars' C3PO) some day play baseball, they will obviously be *nonorganismic* players. And when computers play chess today, they are obviously nonorganismic players.

To conclude our hypothetical, at some historical point, an individual comes along and says, “I see how all of this hangs together. I comprehend the concept of baseball. I see the network of concepts and how they relate one to another--the rules that dictate and constrain how the game is played. I understand that what is fundamental here is *acting on the concept of baseball*; after all, you have been doing it for centuries. But permit me if you will to set forth the

*cognitive content of the concept.”*

Peter Ossorio is an individual who has come upon the historical scene and done something analogous to our baseball explicator. He has discerned that there is a vastly complex, all-encompassing concept, the concept of a “Person.” What happens (paradigmatically) is that, like our hypothetical baseball players, we human beings learn this concept growing up, which means primarily that we learn, not a cognitive content, but *how to be a person in a world of persons*. Ossorio's fundamental task in the creation of Descriptive Psychology has been to articulate this *pre-empirical concept* of “Person”, as well as the extraordinarily complex network of systematically related concepts that comprise it. In the end, keeping our baseball explicator in mind, one can say that what Ossorio has done is articulate the rules for operating as a person in a world of persons.

### ***A Conceptual Framework***

When Isaac Newton created his famous theory, we are all familiar with fact that it did an exceptional job of describing and predicting how large objects -- things like apples and planets -- would behave in light of the forces operating upon them. The theory, with its universal law of gravitation, its laws of motion, and other elements resulted in the the achievement of countless empirical triumphs such as predicting the presence of Neptune before anyone ever observed this planet, and is used to this day by space programs worldwide to plot the courses of their spacecraft.

What has always received much less attention was the fact that, before Newton could state any empirical propositions, he required *a new conceptual system*. The one that existed when he began his work was not sufficient to accomplish his task. So, prior to the creation of his laws, he created, from parts old and new, just such a system of concepts. For example, he essentially *invented* the concept of “*force*” as any influence that can cause a body to be accelerated. Further, the concepts in his conceptual net were *systematically related to each other* -- they formed a system. He could not define the concept of *force* without also bringing in the concepts of *body* and *acceleration*. All of this was *pre-empirical*. He didn't *discover* what *force* meant; he stipulated its meaning. In essence, he created the pre-empirical scaffolding he needed

to create his “system of the framework of the world.”

Descriptive Psychology, in a manner parallel to this, is *a set of systematically related concepts designed to allow one to distinguish, to describe, and to categorize all facts and possible facts concerning human behavior*. In the same way that Newton’s system enabled physicists *to distinguish, to describe, and to categorize any known or possible phenomenon involving bodies and their motion -- their accelerations, inertias, masses, instantaneous velocities, etc.* -- so the aim of DP is to provide a system that serves the same function for *persons and their behavior*. Like Newton’s conceptual system, it is *itself* not a scientific theory and not a set of empirical research findings, but rather something that is a pre-empirical requirement for the creation of successful theories and research endeavors. How could one observe or claim, for example, that a “force” was inversely proportional to the distance between two objects if one did not first have the concept of “force” (a concept which Newton himself formulated)? How could one say anything rigorously (e.g., formulate a theory, state a research hypothesis) about *persons* or *behavior* or *language* (etc.) if one lacked an adequate conceptualization of these from the outset? How could one proceed in other sciences such as biology, physics, or chemistry if one scientist had one definition for a key concept (e.g., “synapse,” “force,” or “ion”) and another scientist quite another; yet psychology continues to disagree on the meaning of such core concepts as “behavior,” “personality,” and “psychopathology?” Paraphrasing Kant, we might say that the establishment of a well and rigorously formulated conceptual system represents a “prolegomena to any future successful psychological science.” Descriptive Psychology is such a system.

### ***A Person-centered View of Science***

A standard view of science, one that might be termed the “cosmic perspective,” goes loosely as follows. Some 15 billion or so years ago, there was a “Big Bang.” An unimaginably hot, dense and energetic singularity exploded, expanded outward, and became the universe. In time, matter clustered into many billions of galaxies, each with many billions of suns, and many of these in turn with their own planetary systems. In one otherwise ordinary galaxy, one ordinary sun formed and on one of its planets, earth, conditions came about in time such that life forms

emerged. Over the course of several billion years, these life forms evolved and exhibited ever increasing complexity, until in the very recent cosmological past an especially complex organism emerged, homo sapiens. This species, then, is a very recent, accidentally evolved, cosmologically insignificant organism that has existed for one second of cosmic time on one ordinary planet in the vastness of the cosmos.

A second, far more rare (but not unprecedented) view of science may be termed the “person centered” perspective, and may be characterized in the following way. As human beings, we engage in many different activities, practices, and ways of life -- different “games” if you will -- in domains such as romance, child-rearing finance, music, athletics, drama, religion...and science. From this perspective, to borrow an old phrase, science is but one among many of the “games people play.”

As persons, we give accounts of many different kinds: historical, journalistic, biographical, political, fictional, personal-experiential, and more. Among these different kinds, some are scientific accounts -- accounts of how things are and have been in the empirical world - - about how the cosmos evolved, how we evolved, how characteristics are transmitted to offspring, and much more. Historically, we observe that some of these accounts such those of the ether and of Ptolemaic cosmology have failed to survive, while others such as Einsteinian relativity and Darwinian natural selection continue to survive, for how long we can never be sure. We have seen fit to give such accounts a place of honor in our worlds. Still, they remain but one among many of the kinds of important accounts in the broad worlds of persons.

Pursuing a further aspect of the person-centered view, Kant pointed out long ago that we have no access to noumenal reality. That is, we have no access to reality conceived as how things are independent of us, our perceptions, and our conceptual distinctions. Scientific accounts, ineluctably couched in our concepts and based on our (aided or unaided) observations, must therefore of necessity always be accounts of *how things are for us*.

In the cosmic model of science characterized above, it is often said that, in the grand scheme of things, we are unimportant and insignificant. On the person-centered model, however, it is noted that, *without persons, there is quite literally no such thing as importance or significance*. Both are “our gig.” Nothing is important to planets and suns and dark matter. Without us (and other persons who may one day be discovered in the universe), it’s just mindless

rocks in empty space.

On the person-centered model, if we may be permitted a dramaturgical metaphor wherein “all the world’s a stage,” persons are the *dramatis personae*. We are center stage. We are Hamlet and Lear and Juliet, and all the rest our props and stories. Science is one human activity. Its theories, while extremely important, are but one of many human stories, and are important because we persons have given them importance, something we did not always do. They are conceived by human minds, based on human perceptions, and conceived in humanly constructed conceptual frameworks. Without persons, there would be no science. On the person-centered view, in a certain sense, psychology may be considered the queen of sciences: as the study of persons and their behavior (which necessarily involves their “props and stories”), it encompasses all else. As Santayana once observed, “Human life is a peculiar reality in that every other reality, effective or presumptive, must in one way or another find a place within it” (quoted in Ossorio, 2006).

Which of these points of view is the the “true” one? Obviously, unlike the case of claims like “dropped cats will land on their feet,” there can be no either-or test of the truth here. Both are faithful to facts, and both possible orientations to science. The one puts persons center stage. The other regards persons as an insignificant and derivative phenomenon. An understanding of Descriptive Psychology, however, will be aided by the recognition that it lies squarely in the person-centered camp.

### **Some Core Concepts of Descriptive Psychology**

Descriptive Psychology’s conceptual network is vast and complex (see Ossorio, 2006). It extends well beyond what can be covered in this brief chapter. At the heart of DP, however, lie four key concepts: *Behavior*, *Person*, *Reality*, and *Language*, and I shall here try to give the reader a basic sense of these four. Since psychology is by common consensus regarded as the scientific discipline that studies the behavior of persons, a good place to begin might be with the concepts of “Behavior” and “Person”.

***The Concept of “Behavior”***

Consider the following hypothetical movie scene. Larry is raising his right hand to the side of his head with palms forward and five fingers extended. An observer of this, Moe, asks another observer, Curly, “What is he doing?” Curly responds: “He’s holding his hand up.” Moe gives him a dope slap, saying, “I know that, you idiot, I can see that. What I’m asking you is what is he doing.” Curly (befuddled, checking his observations again): “He’s holding his hand up .” Moe gives him another dope slap and stalks off.

Moe is clearly dissatisfied with Curly’s answer. But Curly, confused and wishing to vindicate himself, consults several psychological dictionaries regarding their definition of “behavior.” He is surprised to find that most do not define the term at all. Typical of the answers he does find is the following one: behavior is “any observable overt movement of the organism generally taken to include verbal behavior as well as physical movements” ([webref.org/psychology/b/behavior.htm](http://webref.org/psychology/b/behavior.htm)). Behavior is essentially observable movement in space: a pigeon pecks a disk, a pianist strikes a key, a woman says “hello”, ...and Larry raises his hand to the side of his head. “There,” Curly concludes, “I was right...that was what he was doing...that was his behavior.”

So, what was his behavior? Was it nothing more than raising his hand as described? Or is Moe justified in finding this a woefully inadequate description? Psychology to date has been unable to settle upon any consensus answer to the utterly basic question of what behavior is. In general, the approach seems to be “Oh, you know...behavior!”, and no attempt is made to define or otherwise articulate the concept. Among those few who do consider the question, the most generally favored answer is that discovered by Curly in the psychological dictionary: behavior is essentially observable movement in space. We notice, however, that this is precisely *not* a satisfactory answer for Moe. He already knew that Larry was holding his hand up but this did not tell him what behavior he was engaging in. Was Larry... signalling someone to stop...giving a Native American gesture of greeting...swearing an oath... indicating 5 minutes were left until the burgers were done...informing the market maker that he wanted 5 million bushels of September corn...or what?

On the mainstream psychology definition, Curly was correct when he said, “He’s holding his hand up.” And, indeed, we would all agree that he did give *a* correct description. However, we note that this same definition provides no access to any of the other possible correct answers - *- including all of the truly informative ones that go beyond the observationally obvious*, to Moe’s question, “What is he doing?” In restricting us to the observable physical movements (or sounds), psychology cannot strictly speaking provide a meaningful answer to the what’s-he-doing question such as, “He’s signalling that there are 5 minutes remaining.” Beyond this, there are many further problems with this conception. If the doctor taps my knee with a rubber mallet, and my foot jerks forward, this is clearly physical movement. Should I regard and treat this as behavior -- *as the same kind of phenomenon* as giving a hand signal? What about movements such as my heart beating? What about situations where a person does something privately that does not involve any observable movement at all; e.g., Jack does some mental math calculations, closes his eyes and tries to remember where he left his keys, or works on an anagram “in his head”? Absent observable movement, should we count these as behaviors?

How, then, does DP address this question regarding one of psychology’s most fundamental concepts, that of “behavior?” We may begin by noting that all behavior is *describable* as an attempt on the part of a person to effect a change from one state of affairs to another (Ossorio, 2006, p. 49). Jill combs her hair, drives to work, reads a book, makes herself a pot of coffee, and mentally calculates how many bottles of wine she will need for her upcoming party. In all of these simple behaviors, whether they involve overt physical movements or not, she is attempting to bring about a change from one state of affairs to another -- to change her unkempt hair to a more presentable state, to shift from being unclear to being clear about how

many bottles of wine she must purchase, and so forth. (NB: It may be noted that this characterization of behavior excludes phenomena such as my patellar reflex movement, and includes acts such as mentally calculating or working on anagrams.)

Going beyond this general characterization, DP maintains that human behavior is an empirical phenomenon that is amenable, not to definition, but to parametric analysis. (Compare: the concept “color” cannot be formally defined, but the phenomenon can be captured completely for scientific purposes by employing a system which specifies values for three parameters or dimensions: hue, saturation, and brightness.) In DP, any behavior is a complex state of affairs that has as constituents component states of affairs. (Compare: the state of affairs “car moving down the street” is a complex state of affairs that includes component states of affairs “engine running,” “tires rotating,” and much more).

In DP, whenever a behavior (e.g., John calling his girlfriend for a dinner date) is the case, something of each of the following kinds (i.e., the parameters) is *ipso facto* the case: something concerning whose action it is (I), what state of affairs was wanted (W), which distinctions / concepts were acted upon (K), what personal know-how came into play (K-H), what physical performances were involved (P), what difference the behavior made (A), what personal characteristics of the actor were expressed (PC), and what significance the behavior had (S). Lest there be any doubt about the necessity of any of these parameters, consider what happens if we try to dispense with any of them: “John called his girl friend for a dinner date, but...no one made the call (I)...no distinctions were involved between telephones and other objects, invitations vs. other messages, etc. (K)...no outcome was sought (W)...no personal know-how came into play in the act (K-H)... no performance of a vocal or other sort took place (P)...nothing was different by virtue of the behavior occurring (A)...no personal characteristic of John’s was expressed (PC)...or, finally, no more inclusive pattern of behavior (e.g. no courting behavior) was enacted by virtue of enacting the behavior in question (S).

DP employs the following formalism to capture this idea:

$\langle B \rangle = \langle I, W, K, KH, P, A, PC, S \rangle$ , where...

B = Behavior (e.g., the behavior of John calling his girlfriend for a dinner date)

I = Identity: the identity of the person whose behavior it is (e.g., John)

W = Want: the state of affairs which is to be brought about and which serves as the logical criterion for the success or failure of the behavior (e.g., having the invitation issued, getting his girlfriend's acceptance)

K = Know: the distinctions which are being made and acted on; the concepts being acted on (e.g., telephone vs. other objects, girlfriend vs. other persons, dining vs. other activities)

KH= Know-How: the competence that is being employed (e.g., skill at speaking English, at using the telephone, at issuing invitations)

P = Performance: the process, or procedural aspects of the behavior, including all bodily postures, movements, and processes which are involved in the behavior. This includes all of the physical processes entailed in John making the phone call, which could in principle be described at any level of analysis appropriate to the describer's needs, from molar vocal and manual grasping events, finer muscular events, molecular brain and other central nervous system events, etc.)

A = Achievement: the outcome of the behavior; the difference that the behavior makes (e.g., having the invitation issued, getting his girlfriend's acceptance)

PC= Personal Characteristics: the personal characteristics of which the behavior in question is an expression; these may include Powers (abilities, knowledge, values), Dispositions (traits, attitudes, interests, styles) or Derivatives (capacities, embodiments, states, statuses) (e.g., John's love for his girlfriend, his desire to spend time with her, and his preference for private, intimate, conversational dates)

S = Significance: the more inclusive patterns of behavior enacted by virtue of enacting the behavior in question (e.g., by extending his invitation, John participates in the broader social practices of

dating and of courting a prospective life partner) (Ossorio, 2006).

Parameters, in science or in everyday life, are a means by which we specify the ways in which one instance of a concept (e.g., a behavior or a color) can be the same as, or different from, another instance. If all of the values for two behaviors are identical, the behaviors are identical (compare: if hue, saturation and brightness are identical for two patches of color, they are the same color). If one or more values are different, the behaviors are different. For example, suppose that Terry and Pat engage in the same overt performance of uttering the words "I love you" to each other. However, the value of the W (Want) parameter for Terry is "to get Pat's money," while the value of the W parameter for Pat is "to express love for Terry." This parametric difference renders Terry's behavior a different behavior than Pat's. Colloquially, we characterize this difference by saying that Terry is "gold-digging," while Pat is "expressing love."

In principle, one could give an exhaustive description of any behavior by specifying all of the values of all of the above parameters. In practice, however, on any given occasion, whether scientific, therapeutic, or everyday interactional, persons make descriptive commitments to those parameters which serve their purposes in the giving of the specific description. They commit (at least) to the W parameter when they want to describe what Terry is doing as gold-digging. They commit to the K (Know / distinction made) parameter when they want to describe what Lauren is doing as a case of treating the remark she just heard as a joke rather than an insult. They commit to the PC (Personal Characteristic, subtype Trait) parameter when they want to characterize Senator Smith's vote on a child care bill as an expression of political ambition, not humanitarianism.

Thus, the DP formulation of behavior contrasts sharply with mainstream psychology's notion of behavior as observable physical movement. Unlike the latter, it provides entree to the descriptions of behavior that are virtually always at issue in human discourse; for example, questions regarding the nature of a person's behavior are virtually never requests for another to describe the already known visible movements that that person is making. It covers mental acts such as planning, calculating, or problem solving "in one's head," and excludes involuntary movements such as the patellar and eyeblink reflex actions. The DP conception does not require, like the mainstream view, the creation of some sort of human mechanics designed to

causally reattach such things as motives, thoughts, or personality traits to the observable physical movements of persons. Finally, going well beyond what space permits here into matters that one can perhaps only glimpse from the foregoing discussion: the DP conception articulates the calculational system *that persons in fact employ* in the giving of behavior descriptions (see Ossorio, 2006, for an in-depth discussion of this matter).

### ***The Concept of a “Person”***

As in the case of “behavior,” psychology to date has arrived at no consensus definition or other formulation of the concept “person”. When discussing persons, the usual approach is simply to assume that we all know and all agree on what this term means. When it is defined at all, the predominant tendency has been to define a “person” as a certain kind of *organism*. A person is taken to be a highly evolved specimen of the species *homo sapiens*, a species that via evolution has acquired certain physical features, most importantly a large, complex brain that renders this species capable of consciousness and higher mental accomplishments such as using language and solving complex logical problems.

The DP formulation of persons differs fundamentally from this. It begins by honoring the traditional intellectual custom of not defining things--things like chairs, automobiles, dollars, radios, chess pawns, and computers-- in terms of what they are made of or of how this “stuff” is organized. They are defined instead in terms of what they *do--the roles they play, the ways they function* in the human scheme of things. A pawn, whether it be ivory, wood, or onyx, is something that functions a certain way in the game of chess. A computer, whether composed of ancient vacuum tubes or modern semiconductors, is a device for carrying out various operations involving the processing of information. A chair, whether wooden rocker or leather beanbag, is a piece of furniture designed to seat a single person.

Employing this functionalist approach, Ossorio defined a “person” as “... *an individual whose history is paradigmatically a history of deliberate action*”<sup>[2]</sup> A person is an individual, in other words, that (paradigmatically) has the ability to *behave* in the full sense of that term--to engage in some behavior B, knowing that he or she is doing B rather than other behaviors that he or she distinguishes, and having chosen B as being the thing to do from among a set of

distinguished behavioral alternatives. In the vernacular, such behavior is characterized as "knowing what you're doing and doing it on purpose." Such behaviors as making a carefully considered move in a board game, ordering from a restaurant menu, or phrasing a verbal reply so as not to offend another represent clear, everyday examples of deliberate actions.

("Paradigmatically" gets at the point that persons are not *always* engaging in deliberate action; e.g., when they are asleep or if they have been knocked unconscious.)

Defending this conception further against the view that "person" designates a certain kind of organism, Ossorio (2006) has argued that at one time the only kind of airplane was a wooden, propellor-driven one, and the only kind of computer was a vacuum tube model. At the present historical juncture, the only completely unarguable example of a person is homo sapiens type human beings. However, many scientists have long believed that there is a strong possibility that there are persons who are aliens, and extensive efforts have been made to establish communication with such persons. Further, another longstanding endeavor exists to create computers and robots with all of the features of humans. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that at some point ones are created that are capable of entertaining behavioral options and selecting from among them--i.e., computers that, like such cinematic "characters" as Hal in "2001: A Space Odyssey," or R2D2 in the "Star Wars" series, are persons. Third and finally, ongoing programs of research explore the linguistic, communicational, and behavioral capabilities of gorillas, chimpanzees, dolphins, and other infrahuman species. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that such creatures become regarded as persons. Even if none of these possibilities came to fruition, the conceptual point has already been made. Our concept of "person" is not confined to organisms with homo sapiens embodiment, but extends beyond it to any creature that exhibits a certain kind of functioning. Scientists -- as well as ordinary citizens who are moviegoers, science fiction devotees, science news consumers, and even believers in such religious entities as angels and devils -- extend the concept to creatures whose embodiment, whose "stuff", is not homo sapiens.

***Individual persons.*** If the conceptual system for a science of psychology is to provide conceptual access to all facts and possible facts about persons and their behavior, it must not merely capture the concept of *Person* in general, but it must also provide descriptive resources for describing *individual persons*. Whether we are psychologists, historians, biographers, or just

persons leading our everyday social lives, we do and must distinguish persons, not merely on the basis of identity (“that’s John Smith”), but on basis of *what kind of persons they are*.

Descriptive Psychology provides the conceptual resources for doing so with the following parametric analysis, one again that captures what persons actually do in undertaking this essential life task:

$\langle PC \rangle = \langle Ds, P, Dr \dots \rangle$ , where...

- Ds = Dispositons, the various inclinations or tendencies, ordinarily observable in a person by virtue of a pattern of frequency in their behavior. These include *Traits* (dispositions to engage in a certain kind of behavior such as hostile or generous behavior), *Attitudes* (dispositons to regard and treat different objects (e.g., the bible or a presidential candidate) or certain classes of object (e.g., liberals or conservatives) in certain characteristic ways (e.g, contemptuously or reverently); *Interests* (dispositions to find certain topics (e.g., world affairs or sports) captivating; and *Styles* (dispositions having to do, not with what a person does, but with how he or she does it (e.g., in a sophisticated, naive, graceful, or awkward fashion).
- P = Powers, concepts having to do with what is possible and not possible for a given person. These include the person’s *Abilities* (the person’s capabilities with reference to some kind of achievement such as shooting a basketball, playing chess, or learning languages); *Knowledge* (the set of facts the person has the ability to act on, such as the rules of chess or the requirements for making a good omelet); and *Values* (the set of motivational priorities that the person is routinely able to act on, such as a value for honesty or for an adventurous way of life).
- Dr = Derivatives, concepts which, unlike the two categories

above, do not have a direct connection to behavior but are defined by their reference instead to Dispositions and Powers. These include *States* (states of affairs in which there is a systematic difference in the ordinary powers or dispositions of a person, such as being sick or exhausted or drunk); *Capacities* (the potential to acquire personal characteristics, such as a capacity to acquire mathematical skills or to learn languages; and *Embodiment* (the physical characteristics of a person, such as being six feet tall, weighing 180 pounds, or having brown eyes).[2]

In essence, we describe what kind of person John Smith is by giving values to these parameters. As a research psychologist, clinical psychologist, organizational personnel selector, and more, I might have reason to do this in a highly formalized and rigorous way. As a prospective life partner, business associate, friend, or voter, I might have occasion to do so far more informally. In either case, what I am doing is making commitments to some number of these parameters pertaining to the kind of person John is. When I describe John as “honest,” I commit to (one value of) the Trait parameter; when “flamboyant” to the Style parameter; when “obsessed with making money” to the Values parameter; when “very good with numbers” to the Ability parameter (of course, all of these parameters will have multiple values--honesty will not be John’s *only* trait). And I am saying in essence: “This is the kind of behavior, style, motivational priority, ability, etc. that you can expect (not certainly but probabilistically) to observe in John.

### ***The Concept of “Real World”***

DP, as noted above, is a conceptual framework designed to give descriptive access to all facts and possible facts about persons and their behavior -- to this characterization, Peter Ossorio at times appended the clause, “and therefore about everything else”. Consider a few statements

that we might encounter in everyday life. “She read her child a fairy tale.” “He stopped when the light turned red.” “She took along an umbrella in case it rained.” Each of these is a description of someone’s behavior. And each of them *includes a reference to the real world* -- to the world that includes fairy tales, stop lights (and their significance), umbrellas, and rain. And, of course, each of these persons and each of their actions is also part of the real world.

Going back to our earlier analogy, if a person lacked the vocabulary of baseball (“balls,” “strikes,” “home runs,” etc.), he could not describe a baseball game--what happened in the game yesterday, what he would like to see happen in the game tomorrow, or what happens in a fictional account like “Casey at the bat”. In the same way, if a person had no vocabulary for distinguishing aspects of the real world, he or she would lack something completely indispensable for describing persons and their behavior. Persons, a part of the world themselves, behave in the world. If we did not have reality concepts -- concepts of Objects, Processes, Events, and States of affairs, real or imagined, present or future -- we would not be able to describe anything! Therefore, a conceptual system designed to give formal access to all facts and possible facts about persons and their behavior necessarily requires reality concepts.

Consider a few further statements. “He prayed to God to forgive him for his sins.” ” She came very close to being the first to discover the structure of DNA.” “He has always been intrigued by the Shakespearean quote, ‘We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little lives are rounded with a sleep’.” “She sat down to compose a song in his honor.” Here we have statements pertaining to four different domains, the worlds respectively of religion, science, drama, and music. Behavior descriptions can literally go anywhere, go to any of the myriad domains of the real world. A conceptual system for articulating all facts and possible facts must therefore be able to go anywhere -- to the worlds above as well as to those of mathematics, athletics, poetry, finance, and so on ad infinitum. This does not of course mean that every person must have an expert’s command of the conceptual system of all these domains. It means, rather, that *the conceptual system itself* must have the conceptual resources to go anywhere. (Compare: the *system* of mathematics contains the resources to go anywhere in the world of numbers, but most persons will never explore such things as Fibonacci numbers or Pascal’s triangle, or acquire the competence to do so.) Now we can see the sense of Ossorio’s addendum, “and therefore about everything else.”

Let us make explicit one other place where Descriptive Psychology, or any conceptual system with the same aspirations, must go. As previously discussed, Isaac Newton required a conceptual system capable of distinguishing and articulating every fact and possible fact about physical bodies and their motions. His system, however, did not have to conceptualize anything *about Newton himself*, or about any other person insofar as that person was giving descriptions and explanations of the world. In contrast, any system whose goal it is to give formal access to all facts about persons and their behavior must provide coverage of the behavior of the person writing the theory, as well as all other persons giving descriptions and explanations of the world. That is to say, it must be *reflexive*. It cannot be, as in Newton's case, a system for use by persons in a purely spectating role. If it does not cover us and our doings, it is incomplete.

With all of the above considerations in mind, DP contains the following:

1. The concept of the "*Real World*" (or "*Reality*") itself, conceived simply as "the state of affairs that includes all other states of affairs." (Compare Wittgenstein: "The world is all that is the case".)
2. A set of concepts, designated the "Reality Concepts", for distinguishing what there is or could be in the world. These are the concepts of "*Object*," "*Process*," "*Event*," and "*State of Affairs*".
3. A system for articulating the relations between these concepts. (Compare: Newton defined his concepts in terms of their systematic relationships to each other; thus, "a *force* is any influence that causes a *body* to be *accelerated*".). In DP, these are designated the "transition rules" for the Reality Concepts.
4. A set of Descriptive Formats for describing/conceptualizing any actual or possible Object, Process, Event, or State of affairs from any real world domain in such detail that any one exemplar of these can be differentiated from any other. .

While we cannot explore the very considerable complexities of this system in an

introductory overview such as this, we can say that the four elements just noted comprise what is known as the “State of Affairs System.” This system and its operations allow us to conceptualize the objects, processes, events, and states of affairs from any domain of human activity -- baseball, mathematics, music, finance, etc. -- and to describe in highly useful ways the behavior of persons operating within these domains.

### ***The Concept of “Verbal Behavior”***

The fourth and final indispensable concept, if we are to succeed in providing a conceptual framework that gives descriptive access to all facts and possible facts about persons and their behavior, must be that of *Verbal Behavior*. Why is this so? First of all, it is a truism to say that verbal behavior is a kind of behavior. It is a further truism to say that it is a part of the real world. But why, we might ask, should we regard it as such an *important* part?

Again, recall that a conceptual framework adequate to the task must be *reflexive*. It cannot be, like most of our general psychological *theories*, a portrayal of reality that provides no formal access to the behavior of the author of the theory or to his or her linguistic products themselves. The authors of these theories are clearly engaging in *verbal behavior*. Failing the reflexivity requirement, they are left making the following self-contradictory claim: “We have given you a general theory of human behavior, but we have nothing to say about *our own verbal behavior* of writing this framework. And of course, by extension, we have nothing to say about the verbal behavior of other creators such as Newton, Aristotle, Einstein, Darwin, Shakespeare, Dante, or Copernicus.”

Further supporting the critical importance of language and verbal behavior in a comprehensive conceptual framework, it is obvious that we could not understand, not only the material you are now reading or the works of countless authors such as those just cited, but *any* written or spoken communication *anywhere*, without resort to language. We could not understand what others said to us, the signs on the highway, the newspaper story, the latest novel, the television program, or an indefinitely large number of other verbal products that we

encounter in our lives. Nor could we engage in the arguably central activity of our lives -- that of communicating with other persons via the medium of spoken or written language.

Finally, we frame our basic worlds in language. We formulate our conceptions of ourselves, of other persons, of our place in the scheme of things, and of what sort of world this is and what possibilities it contains for us, via the medium of language.

For all of these reasons, any conceptual framework that purports to give formal access to all facts and possible facts about persons and their behavior must include a formulation of verbal behavior -- of language and its use by persons.

***The Descriptive formulation of verbal behavior.*** Let us take as our simple paradigm case the everyday occurrence of "Jack says X to Jill." X here might be "I love you", "Stop it", "Checkmate", "Please put the cap back on the tooth paste", "The cat is on the mat," or an indefinitely large number of other utterances. On the traditional mainstream view, what is the behavior here? As discussed previously, it is the observable, vocal/physiological performance of the utterance in question. It is the making of the sound conventionally assigned to some locution such as, for example, "Stop it!"

What is wrong with this picture? For starters, it largely omits the entire idea of *meaning*. We observe, trivially and obviously, that words have meaning. We observe that certain sounds we make such as "checkmate!" mean something, while others like "grk" (or a cough or a belch) do not. There is something radically different about making these sounds. We read or hear sentences, often for the first time and thus with no learning history in relation to them -- "the principle of special relativity states that....", "We are such stuff as dreams are made on"; "President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas in 1963" -- and they *communicate* something to us; they *tell us* something; they have some *significance*. Mainstream accounts, even cognitive science ones focussing on "information processing", do not contain formulations of language wherein this feature of meaning is represented (see Searle, 1984, on the "Chinese Room" thought experiment).

Is this fair to the mainstream point of view? Does not everyone, mainstream psychologists included, know the simple truth that words have meaning? Do they not point to

that old paradigm wherein our parents pointed to things and said “chair” or “horse,” or “red,” and by this means we learned the meanings of these terms, this meaning being essentially that which they stood for? Two brief remarks only. First, this view of language and meaning has long since been discredited, most notably by Wittgenstein (e.g., who asked, for example, what objects or properties do words like “hello” or “hooray” or “shut up” designate?). Second, even if we accepted this view, it would not solve the problem. It is after all, a *theory* of meaning. One of the concepts included in the theory is that of “language” or of “word”. But, just as Newton had to define the term “force” *before he could theorize* that “the force operating on the apple is the same as that operating on the moon,” so we need a definition or other specification of the concept “language” *before we can offer a theory of it*. The commonsense account in question contains no such pre-empirical, conceptual articulation. When mommy pointed to the picture and said “horsie”, on the mainstream account her vocal behavior remained nothing more than a performance.

A second obvious difficulty with this standard notion of language as vocal performance has already been mentioned in another connection, and will be reiterated here only briefly. On the vocal performance account, saying, for example, “I love you,” being the same performance, is in every context the same behavior. However, this is transparently false. Saying, for example, “Hit me”, might be a directive to the card dealer to provide another card or the request of the masochist for further gratification. Saying “I love you” might be declaring one’s love, trying to con a wealthy widow out of her money, reciting one’s part in a play, jokingly declaring one’s affection for one’s shiny new car, and many other things. In everyday life, when someone asks of the speaker, “What were you doing?.” and they merely state that they were uttering the words in question (“I was saying “Hit me’.”), this is generally regarded as an evasive, ignorant, or a lamely humorous response. It is not regarded as an adequate response to the question: “What behavior were you engaging in?”. The mainstream view, as we saw in the case of behavior in general, in essence tries to strip all else but the performance from the behavior and patch it all back in as something separate -- as the motivation or the context, for example. It is as if they said to Romeo: “No, you were not declaring your love to Juliet--that is not what you were doing--what you were doing was uttering the words “I love you” in the context of a certain situation, certain feelings of affection, and certain motivations. Oh, and by the way, we are working on a science

that may one day be able to link all these things together empirically. ”

***The Descriptive position.*** Language is not necessary for the making of distinctions. With no evidence of any involvement of language, the rat can distinguish the red triangle from blue square and jump to it; the gazelle can distinguish the odor of the lion from that of the grass, and bolt; the human infant can distinguish the bottle from other stimuli, and reach for it. What each of them cannot do, so far as we know, is *distinguish the distinctions they are making*. The rat merely discriminates red triangle from blue square. It cannot distinguish *that it distinguished* triangle from square, or jumping to triangle from jumping to square. For this, language is required.

In DP, language is fundamentally about, going beyond the mere making of distinctions, the distinguishing or marking off of these distinctions with specific, public, communicable locutions -- i.e., words. These distinctions, or concepts, may be about objects (e.g., “rock”), processes (e.g., snow melting), events (e.g., the light going out), properties (e.g., being red), relationships (e.g., the cat being *on* the mat), or other states of affairs. Their communication may occur in the context of different forms such as giving information (“The cat is on the mat”), issuing orders (“Stop!”), asking questions (“Where are the keys?”), exclaiming (“Hooray!”), and many others. What language is essential for is for us to be able to distinguish which distinctions these are and to communicate this to others via public, communally agreed upon words. Without language, I can distinguish the red triangle from the blue square, but, like the rat, I cannot know that that’s what I’m doing and I cannot communicate it to another. I can’t know that *what* I’m distinguishing is red triangle from blue square, or jumping from not jumping, or landing on vs. alongside of the red triangle. And I also can’t know that *what* I’m doing is distinguishing one state of affairs from another state of affairs.

One more thing: without language, I can distinguish the red triangle from the blue square, but I can only do it *in the presence of the red triangle and the blue square*. That is, I can only distinguish them if they are there to be distinguished. In contrast, with language I am freed from this restriction and can distinguish them any time or any place. For example, right here and right now, with no such “stimuli” present, I can say to you, “Think of the difference between a red triangle and a blue square”, and you can do so. Via language, we can distinguish them, discuss them, and communicate with each other about something we both understand precisely because

we both possess this non-stimulus bound vehicle for doing so: our public, shared, communicable language.

All of this indicates a final reason why language must be a core element in any conceptual framework for human behavior. If I cannot distinguish doing one thing from doing another -- if I cannot select from among distinguished behavioral alternatives -- then I cannot engage in deliberate action. Thus, for us persons, such an ability to distinguish the distinctions we are making (the burger vs. the fried chicken, the red jacket vs. the blue coat), including the distinction of behavioral options open to us (ordering the burger, putting on the red jacket) is a sine qua non for deliberate action -- and thus for *being a person*. What could be more central than that? No language, no persons.

So how, more technically, can we articulate the concept of verbal behavior? Earlier, we presented a formulation that captured the concept of Behavior in general:

$$\langle B \rangle = \langle I, W, K, KH, P, A, PC, S \rangle$$

Verbal behavior is, of course, a kind of behavior, and so is amenable to being analyzed with this formula. The following formula, however, takes the matter further and addresses the question of what, in addition to being a case of behavior, must be the case for a given behavior to be a case specifically of *verbal* behavior. In other words, it is designed to capture the concept itself of *Verbal Behavior*:

$$\langle V \rangle = \langle C, L, B \rangle, \text{ where}$$

V = Verbal Behavior (e.g., the behavior of Jack saying  
"Point to the triangle" to Jill)

C = A Concept, which is also a distinction C vs C',  
where C' is a set of alternatives to C. (e.g., triangle  
vs. non-triangle).

L = A Locution, i.e., a word, phrase, or sentence that is spoken  
on the occasion in question (e.g. "Point to the triangle.")

B = A set of Behaviors, B<sub>c</sub>, each member of which qualifies as  
acting on the concept in question (e.g., teaching geometry,

building structures using triangular configurations  
of materials).

A detailed explanation of this formulation is beyond the scope of this introductory presentation. However, expressing the matter in everyday language, we might say the following: Verbal behavior -- for example, a behavior such as “Jack said ‘Point to the red triangle’ to Jill” -- is a kind of behavior. As such, it conforms to the formula for all behavior,  $\langle B \rangle = \langle I, W, K, KH, P, A, PC, S \rangle$ . But, it is a special kind of behavior with three special features. First of all, it involves as a value of the P (Performance) parameter a Locution (L); i.e., some spoken word, phrase, or sentence, here “Point to the triangle.” Second, it involves as a value of the K parameter there being some concept(s) such as “triangle”, which concept not only itself has criteria for its correct employment (3 straight sides, etc.), but also represents a distinction between it and other concepts (triangle vs. non-triangle), which distinction is a publicly shared one in some linguistic community (e.g., that of all English speakers). What is distinguished in the verbal behavior is this concept (or concepts). It is because C represents a selection from a set of alternatives (such as non-triangles) and represents a publicly shared, communicable distinction (unlike “grk”) that verbal behavior can be informative in a way that swimming or chopping wood cannot. Third and finally, there needs to exist some set of behaviors,  $B_c$ , such that each represents a way of acting on the concept C. After all, Plato notwithstanding, concepts do not have any sort of independent, freestanding existence. Their only real world existence is as distinctions made in some person’s behavior, and were there no behavior calling for this distinction, there would be no such concept. Thus, a condition for something to be a concept in the first place is that there be a set of behaviors that call for this distinction. This might be as concrete and obvious as the behavior of sweetening one’s coffee calling for the concept “sugar”, or as obscure and abstruse as the behavior of having a philosophical discussion of the mind-body problem calling for the concept “supervenience”.

In the interests of clarity, it might be helpful to express this matter negatively. If we were discussing triangles (instead of verbal behavior), we could say things like, “If it doesn’t have three sides...isn’t enclosed, etc....then it can’t be an instance of the concept “triangle.” Paralleling this, and coming back to verbal behavior, we can say the following. (1) If there is no vocal (or

gestural) performance of some locution -- if no one says, for example, "The cat is on the mat" -- there is no verbal behavior here. (2) If there are no publicly shared concepts/distinctions corresponding to these locutions -- no concepts of "cat", "mat" or "on" -- then there is no verbal behavior here (but perhaps there is nonsensical vocal noise of some sort -- "grk" again). (3) If there does not exist any way to act on the concept(s) in question -- if it makes no difference anywhere in anyone's social practices or forms of life, then there is no verbal behavior here (although again we might have that vocalized noise such as "grk").

### **Applications of the Descriptive Framework**

The concepts of *Behavior, Person, Real World, and Verbal Behavior* are the four most basic concepts in the vast network of concepts that is DP. Given limitations of space, others will not be pursued here (the interested reader is referred to Ossorio, 2006). In this section, attention is turned to some applications of DP. The method of presentation will be to provide brief excerpts from published works covering different topics to which DP has been applied. Regrettably, many of the linkages between these works and the concepts just discussed cannot be drawn here. While DP's conceptual analyses have in the past often struck readers as difficult, abstract, and even arcane, its ultimate products and applications have typically emerged as possessing a clear, concrete, common sensical character.

#### ***On the Descriptive Approach to Psychotherapy***

"As psychotherapists, our primary time-honored paths to change have been through modifying our clients' behaviors, cognitions, insights into unconscious factors, and patterns of interaction with significant others. This book presents a further powerful therapeutic option -- that of bringing about changes in our clients' *statuses*, an approach referred to as '*status dynamics*' " (Bergner, 1999, p. 201).

"The status dynamic therapist occupies a world of places. Our particular interest is in places that

carry power -- places from which our clients can act effectively in their worlds to bring about personal change. And, as active agents of change, our interest is in helping our clients to occupy such positions of power. We would like to position them to fight downhill battles and not uphill ones, to be 'in the driver's seat' and not the passenger one. We would like them to approach their problems as proactive, in-control actors and not helpless victims. We would like them to attack these problems from the position of acceptable, sense-making, care-meriting persons who bring ample strengths, resources, and past successes to the solution of their difficulties. We would like them to proceed from reconstructed worlds, and from places within these worlds, in which they are eligible and able to participate in life in meaningful and fulfilling ways" (Bergner, 2007, p. xi)

### ***On the Positive Therapeutic Relationship***

"The plot of the 1938 film classic, "Boys' Town," may be helpful in understanding the positive therapeutic relationship as conceived in a status dynamic way. In this loosely biographical film, a priest, Father Flanagan, runs a community charged with the care of boys who have been in trouble with the law. His core philosophy is expressed in the motto, "There's no such thing as a bad boy." Consistent with this philosophy, Father Flanagan *pre-conceives* each new boy who enters Boys' Town to be at heart a good boy -- in other words, he does so, not on the basis of observation, but *a priori*. Furthermore, there is almost nothing the boy can do to change the priest's view of him. Should the boy misbehave in some manner, this is always seen by Father Flanagan, in one way or another, as a bad or misguided act *by a good boy*. It is never taken as grounds to reconsider the young man's basic status as a good person.

Father Flanagan's philosophy infuses all of his actions toward his boys. Not only does he view them as good, but he unfailingly *treats* them as such. Because the boys regard him as a highly estimable and credible person, his unwavering treatment of them as good eventually leads them to view themselves as he views them. In their own eyes, they become basically good people. Finally, with this recasting of themselves as acceptable individuals, they rethink their basic eligibilities in society. From outcaste positions -- "delinquents," "bad seeds," "losers," and the like -- they see themselves as having moved to positions of full membership in society, and

with this as having acquired the enhanced eligibilities for relationships, vocations, and ways of life that go with this new position.

This story illustrates an informal version of what Ossorio (2005/1978) has termed an “accreditation ceremony.” In such ceremonies, one person, who occupies a position of high status and credibility, regards other individuals in a highly affirming and accrediting way, and steadfastly treats them accordingly. This accrediting treatment benefits these individuals when they accept the statuses assigned, resulting in significantly enhanced conceptions of themselves and their eligibilities to participate in society.

Conceived as an ongoing, informal version of such an accreditation ceremony, the positive therapeutic relationship comprises the following elements:

1. The therapist assigns certain accrediting statuses to the client on an a priori basis.
2. The therapist treats the client accordingly.
3. The client regards the therapist as a credible status assigner.
4. The client recognizes the status assignments that the therapist is making.
5. The client accepts the therapist's status assignments; that is, appraises himself or herself in these ways” (Bergner, 2007, pp. 11-12).

### ***On Worlds and World Reconstruction***

“Worlds are not once and forever things. Once formulated, the overall structure of a person’s world and the states of affairs that make up that world have to be maintained or they may be lost. ....A person not only constructs and maintains a world, but also can reconstruct that world in ways that give him or her more behavior potential” (Roberts, 1985, p. 21).

“If a person turns to a Descriptive psychotherapist for help, the Descriptive therapist, operating in accordance with the choice principles for doing psychotherapy and status dynamic maxims developed by Peter G. Ossorio, looks to see what it is about a client’s world formulation that is leaving the client in an impossible position. After identifying the problem, the therapist comes up with a reformulation of the client’s world, a reformulation that opens up new possibilities and alternatives for the client” (Roberts, 1985, p. 26),

### *On Self-concepts and Self-concept Change*

“On the present account, an individual's self-concept is conceived as that individual's *summary formulation of his or her status*. [12] This conception differs significantly from traditional ones in which the self-concept is universally considered to be a kind of organized informational summary of perceived facts about oneself, including such things as one's traits, values, social roles, interests, physical characteristics, and personal history. For this reason, and because the notion of "status" will be unfamiliar to most readers, this section will be devoted to explaining the present conception.

A helpful means for making the transition from thinking in informational summary terms to thinking in status terms is to consider what we might naturally say to a child if we were teaching her the game of chess. Suppose that we have a board set up, the pieces arrayed in a mid-game situation, and we are explaining what a ‘knight’ is. In doing so, it is highly unlikely that we would use an informational summary approach, which would include telling her such things as that our knights were made of onyx, weighed 2 ounces, were forty years old, and were made in Mexico. Rather, we would provide her with information that has to do with the knight's *place* or *position* in the total scheme of things. Thus, we would describe what a knight is by informing her of its relationships to the other pieces in the game (e.g., its ability to capture them, to block their movements, to move vis-a-vis them only in a certain distinctive fashion, etc.). Further, looking at any given knight's position relative to other pieces in the game situation displayed, we would help her to understand its current strategic importance. The crucial point here is that our thinking about the knight, indeed our thinking about *what it is to be a knight*, is quintessentially relational or positional in nature. When we have completed our description, what we have given our child is a summary formulation of the knight's *status*---its *overall place in the scheme of things*---not an informational summary of many different kinds of facts about knights.

Returning from chess pieces to persons, the status dynamic view maintains that the self-concept is most usefully identified, not with an organized summary of myriad perceived facts about oneself, but with *one's summary formulation of one's status*. That is to say, it is one's

overall conception of one's place or position in relation to all of the elements in one's world, including oneself. In a simple and humorous, yet illuminating, illustration of this notion, cartoon character Charlie Brown once lamented that he was unable to initiate a relationship with a little girl on the playground because 'I'm a nothing and she's a something.' He then went on to relate that, if he were a 'something,' or she a 'nothing,' he could pursue her, but that, since 'nothings' cannot hope to succeed with 'somethings,' he could not act. In this example, Charlie provides us with a simplified illustration of the self-concept as a summary formulation of one's status ('nothing' existing in a world comprised of 'somethings' and 'nothings'); and illustrates how what is fundamental about self-concepts is not that they are informational summaries of myriad facts about oneself, but that they *place one somewhere in the scheme of things*" (Bergner & Holmes, 2000, p. 37).

### ***On Love and Barriers to Love***

"It is vitally important that psychotherapists bring a strong understanding of the nature of love to their work with the many clients who are struggling, in one way or another, with love relationships. With this in mind, the present paper is designed to accomplish two purposes. The first of these is to provide an adequate answer to an old and perplexing question: "What is romantic love?", and to do so in a way that illuminates why this one relationship possesses the extraordinary importance and centrality in human existence that it so clearly does. The second is to identify and discuss the most common barriers to persons being able to love that are encountered in clinical practice.

...To say that "Romeo loves Juliet" (or vice versa) in the romantic sense of that term is to say that Romeo has a certain kind of *relationship* to Juliet. This relationship is one in which he has given Juliet a certain kind of *place*, or *status*, in his world. This place is one of extraordinary honor, value, and centrality; and is perhaps the ultimate such place that one human being can bestow upon another. In the giving of it, which at the outset has the quality, not of choosing, but of "falling" in love, a highly affirming relationship is established between Romeo and Juliet. The characteristics of this relationship will be the subject of this section.

\_\_\_\_\_ "...Singer (1984) articulates this dimension of love (investment in the well-being of the

other) well when he says: “The lover takes an interest in the beloved as a person, and not merely as a commodity.... He bestows importance on her needs and her desires, even when they do not further the satisfaction of his own.... In relation to the lover, the beloved has become valuable for her own sake” (p. 6). In love, then, Juliet is invested in the well-being of Romeo *for his own sake*, and not merely for how his well-being might benefit her. In Kantian terms, he has become for her an “end” and not merely a “means” to her ends. Such an investment in the well-being of the beloved is expressed as a willingness to act--and even to give one’s utmost if need be--on behalf of the beloved. This might include such things as acting to further his interests and goals, supporting or assisting him in times of need, and avoiding or preventing anything from happening that would harm or hurt him. In love, Romeo is not for Juliet a mere “commodity”--is not an entity that, like her automobile or her garage mechanic, has a place in her world which consists essentially of satisfying her needs. (This is not to say, of course, that in any relationship there is not some admixture of love and self-interest.)

If love has an essential characteristic, it is this feature of investment in the well-being of the beloved for his or her own sake. It is the one characteristic that transcends all of the different varieties of personal love such as romantic love, parental love, brotherly love, deep friendship, and Christian love or ‘agape.’ Conceptually, consider the contradiction inherent in saying of any alleged love relationship: ‘She loves him, but she has little interest in his well-being, and values him only insofar as he can satisfy her needs’ (cf. ‘She loves him, but her investment in him is entirely narcissistic.’)

“...In this section, a number of important barriers to persons being able to love that are encountered frequently in clinical practice will be discussed. Gleaned from the author’s 31 years of clinical experience, from research, and from the observations of other clinicians, some of these barriers represent limitations that are confined primarily to one of the parameters of love, while others affect the entirety of them. These barriers are, in the order that they will be discussed, (a) an inability to understand and treat persons as persons, (b) a lack of understanding and appreciation for love itself, (c) personal needs or motives that preclude deep investment in the person of another, (d) hypercritical tendencies that interfere with respecting and admiring others, and (e) senses of personal ineligibility for the love of other persons” (Bergner, 2000, pp. 1-17).

***On Clinical Approaches to Persons Who Find Life Meaningless***

“Consider the excellent example of an absurd world captured in the following suicide note: ‘Imagine a happy group of morons who are engaged in work. They are carrying bricks in an open field. As soon as they have stacked all the bricks at one end of the field, they proceed to transport them to the opposite end. This continues without stop and every day of every year they are busy doing the same thing. One day one of the morons stops long enough to ask himself what he is doing. He wonders what purpose there is in carrying the bricks. And from that point on, he is not quite as content with his occupation as he had been before. I am the moron who wonders why he is carrying the bricks’” (Yalom, 1980, p. 419).

This description, highly reminiscent of Camus' classical description of Sisyphus, may be usefully contrasted with our paradigm case of meaningful action. When viewed thus, what emerges is that the absurd world it describes is the diametric opposite of our paradigm case. The man's precise complaint is that, in the world as he finds it, there is no instrumental, intrinsic, or spiritual significance. His actions, analogized as a pointless carrying of bricks back and forth, accomplish no valued utilitarian end that he can detect. They possess no intrinsic value for him. And, unlike Sisyphus, he can find no spiritual or transcendent value in the activity that might enable him to endure or even to affirm it. The absurd, the quintessence of meaninglessness, is precisely what is generated when instrumental, intrinsic, and spiritual value are missing from human behavior” (Bergner, 1998, p. 3).

***On the Treatment of Sexual Addiction***

“The central theses comprising the present theory are the following: (1) Sexually compulsive individuals are obsessed with the enactment of certain *preferred sexual scenarios*. (2) These preferred scenarios have their origins in early experiences of *degradation*, and represent *attempts to recover from this degradation*. They embody interpersonal transactions that, were they to occur in reality, would (or so persons envision) lift them from their degraded positions among other persons to new and more viable ones, and in so doing convey personal redemption and recovery. (3) These scenarios function as *impossible standards* against which

compulsive individuals measure their actual relationships, activities, and achievements, with the result that the latter are found not to measure up and thus not to satisfy them. (4) Finally, these recovery attempts are *unsuccessful*. While momentarily gratifying, they do not in fact bring about recovery, and typically leave their enactors feeling more degraded than before. Thus, they engender ever greater needs to reenact the preferred sexual scenario in the future, and set up a compulsive cycle” (Bergner, 2002, p. 373).

### ***On the Treatment of Bulimia***

“Bulimic binge eating represents a rebellious reaction against ... coercive and self-disregarding methods of familial and self governance. Bulimic purging represents a reinstatement of the coercive regime, and sets the stage for further rebellion in the future. A critical practical implication of this formulation is that therapeutic emphasis should be placed on changing the self-governance strategies of bulimic individuals” (Bergner, 2005, p. 295).

### ***On Communities***

“The formulation of the Communities paradigm may be expressed as:

$\langle C \rangle = \langle M, S, Ct, L, P, W \rangle$ , where

M = Members

S = Statuses

Ct = Concepts

L = Locutions

P = Practices

W = World

The *Members* of a Community are Persons.....To have a *Status* is, fundamentally, to have a place in the Practices of a given Community....The Members of a Community can ordinarily expect (indeed, require) each other to be competent in using the Community’s *Concepts*, and would typically be surprised to encounter a Member who lacked such competence. At the least, one expects another Member to be able to use the Core Concepts of the Community -- those

which are necessary to make distinctions required for participation in the Core Practices...One of the more readily observable facts about a given community is its use of characteristic *Locutions* (or its use of characteristic, non-standard use of standard locutions). ..*Social Practices* ...are, literally, the significant aspects of a community. After all, the point of being a Member is to be eligible to engage in the Community's Practices...In 'What Actually Happens' (Ossorio, 1971/78), the real world is taken to consist of objects, processes, events, and states of affairs, and the point is made that different real worlds result from different choices of ultimate objects, processes, etc. The step to the Communities paradigm is a small one: Observe that, just as there are no private concepts, there are no one-person real worlds...The fact of there being a given real world is fundamentally a fact about a Community, rather than about any particular individual; further Communities differ in which objects, etc. are ultimate for them--in short, in their *Worlds* (Putman, 1981pp. 196, 97)."

### ***On Organizations***

"An organization is a human community, and therefore is characterized [in terms of its parameters] fundamentally by its members, practices, statuses, choice principles, concepts, locutions, and world . An organization exists for the accomplishment of its mission--a specific, valued state of affairs--and its core practices are directly related to mission. The mission provides both pragmatically and ethically an anchoring point for the choice principles of the organization. A special mission-related status, that of manager, exists to see to the effective and efficient pursuit of the mission; authority is invested in managers for the accomplishment of mission, and all other members agree to subordinate their independent agency to management authority. Members are either part of the line--directly involved in accomplishing the mission--or staff, involved in supporting the line. The world of the organization looks different depending on which systematic logic one uses: three important organizational worlds are those in which people, machines and numbers are the ultimate objects (Putman, 1990, p. 31).

### ***On Applying DP in Healthcare Organizations.***

“A 15-year intervention to better integrate medical and mental health care in a large multispecialty medical group is reviewed. This quest to heal the ‘mind-body split’ in healthcare employs the metaphor of ‘creating a new game’ to help clarify why this task has been so difficult to accomplish in most mainstream health care systems and to move existing change strategies to a new level. Integrating care is viewed not as a problem to be solved but as creating a ‘new game’ that eventually becomes a ‘national pastime’ played on ‘fields’ all over the country. Casting current healthcare practice in the game metaphor, the mind-body-split in healthcare is characterized as the ‘organism game’ (biomedicine) running in parallel to a ‘mind game’ (mental health), each with its own objectives, rules, players, tools, and playing fields. The problems of forced choice for patients and clinicians between these two ‘games’ are reviewed and how these games are gradually being integrated into a ‘person game’, with biomedical and psychosocial factors well integrated by teams of physicians and mental health clinicians” (Peek & Heinrich, 2006, p. 267).

### *On Spirituality*

“By ‘spirituality’ I mean paradigmatically a relationship which a human person consciously enters into with an ultimate, transcendent Other, be it a person or thing or state of affairs. The relationship may be taken to that of the finite with the infinite, the creature with the creator, a human child with a divine parent, the relative with the absolute, these being only a few of the possible models. For convenience I shall refer to this person, thing or state of affairs simply as the Other--capitalized. It is to be understood as a place-holder concept, which can hold such content as ‘God’, or ‘the energy that pervades the universe’, or a ‘state of blessedness’ or ‘nothingness’, or a wide variety of other contents which are likely to be specified differently by different traditions and, within traditions, by different individuals.

First I shall propose an articulation of the domain of spirituality, using the (Descriptive Psychological) method of parametric analysis. Second, I shall inquire into how we know that domain, and third, I shall deal with a few of the specific problems that arise in connection with the study of the life of the spirit” (Shideler, 1990, p. 201).

“...I shall merely summarize two general topics that are fundamental in Descriptive

Psychology. The first, comprising a parametric analysis of the domain of spirituality, is based primarily on material that is easily available, notably the transcript of Peter Ossorio's seminar *Positive Health and Transcendental Theories* (Ossorio, 1977), and his lecture '*Religion without Doctrine*' (1978). In them, he specifies three parameters which, when the domain in question is the real world ('the state of affairs that includes all other states of affairs'), are called the 'transcendental concepts': totality, ultimacy, and boundary condition. To these I have added three which are peculiar to the domain of spirituality: transcendence, eternity, and holiness" (p. 202).

### ***On Religion without Doctrine***

"I would suggest that the spiritual domain is anchored in these notions (i.e., *ultimates, totalities, and boundary conditions*). You're into the spiritual domain when you ask ultimate questions--'what's the ultimate meaning of life?', when you deal with totalities--'What is the entire world like? What is my whole life like? How should I live my whole life?' And 'boundary conditions' is a little harder to explain, but think in terms of, "When have I reached the limit?' For example, if I tell you that I know something, you may ask me how I know and I may be able to give you an answer. Then when I give you the answer, that has to be something else that I know, and so you may ask me about it, and I may give you an answer. But ultimately, we reach some kind of end because I can't give you answers forever. All knowledge has that structure, that you can back up some knowledge with other knowledge, and you can back that up with some other, but there is never an infinite sequence of backing up. You do reach an end point. The fact that you reach an end point is an example of a boundary condition with respect to knowledge, that knowledge is not founded on an infinite set of foundations, nor is it founded on a secure foundation. A secure foundation is just some other fact that one can ask questions about.. So knowledge starts somewhere, and it doesn't start from further knowledge, ultimately. And it's in dealing with such questions as, 'Where does our knowledge come from? What is its

foundations? What kind of confidence can we have in it?' -- these kinds of questions, I think are what you're dealing with when you think of a religion.

I think of a religion as a theory in this domain. A religion is one that primarily provides answers to these kinds of questions. And because it works that way, you can operate in this domain from understanding and ability without a specifically religious doctrine..." (Ossorio, 1978, p. xx).

### ***On Consciousness***

"An approach to conceptualizing, analyzing, and formally representing the phenomenon of consciousness is developed. The basis of the approach is the State of Affairs System. The State of Affairs System formulation provides a conceptual and technical basis for formal, rigorous, but non-reductionist descriptions of the real world, including a person acting in the world. With this formulation, consciousness can be formulated as  $C = \langle I, W, P \rangle$ , where I is the individual whose consciousness this is, W is the world the person is conscious of, and P is the position in that world that the person is conscious as. Experience and feelings are shown to be aspects of the relationship between a person and their world, specifically of the unique position a person occupies in their world. A Consciousness Change Formula is presented, which specifies in terms of actions and worlds the principles that govern consciousness change. The formulation is used to address (1) how consciousness arises, (2) the physical basis for consciousness, (3) the rigorous but non-reductionist scientific study of consciousness, and (4) the possibility of computer-based consciousness." (Jeffrey, 1998, p. 67).

### ***On Cognitive Psychology***

"This paper, grounded in an intellectual framework known as Descriptive Psychology [1][2], will have the following structure. First, I will articulate more formally the mainstream

point of view and program of contemporary cognitive psychology regarding underlying cognitive micro-processes. Second, I will critique this point of view. To anticipate, I will argue that the primary problem is with a critical part of what might be termed its “software program”--in particular, its attempt to discover nature's underlying, unconscious, and in principle unobservable cognitive micro-processes--as opposed to its “hardware” program that concerns itself with the biological structures, processes, and events involved in various kinds of human mental acts. Third and finally, I shall comment on the latter program, cognitive neuropsychology, not with respect to the considerable value of what it has and undoubtedly will discover in the future, but with respect to the interpretation that would appropriately be placed on its findings” (Bergner, 2006, p. 154).

### ***On whether Biological Explanations Will Replace Psychological Ones***

“The hypothesis that our current psychological forms of description and explanation will one day be replaced by biological ones, while not universally held, is wide-spread and highly influential in both the scientific community and the broader culture. The purpose of this paper is to examine this hypothesis. It will be argued that, while biology has had and will undoubtedly continue to have many extremely valuable and illuminating findings, it cannot and will not *replace* psychological explanations and concepts in our understanding, scientific and otherwise, of human behavioral phenomena. That is to say, the science of biology will not replace or subsume that of psychology.” (from Bergner, 2004, p. 49).

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