Living in the Question

Foundations

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Introduction

These essays are about becoming. In these pages we will explore the human condition and look at how we might shift towards becoming the human being we aspire to be. It is important to appreciate this is a journey of enrichment and not the pursuit of becoming a perfect being living a perfect life. In my view, that is unattainable and a fool's errand. Rather, the aim is to provide a framework in which you can nurture and experience a richer, more coherent and fulfilling life.

The focus is on the question of what it means to be human; a question asked down through the ages and which has spawned a wide range of approaches and interpretations. In the 21st Century, this question is still being addressed by many disciplines.

The world of science continues to provide a deeply grounded and materialistic view of aspects of the human condition. In particular, the growing field of neuroscience has added some new dimensions to the answers of what it means to be human, although it has also exposed some inconsistencies in traditional approaches, which I aim to resolve.

In the world of philosophy, the new areas of exploration seem to focus on what philosopher David Chalmers refers to as the 'hard problem' of consciousness. This hard problem focuses on the question of why we have a subjective experience in the first place, what consciousness is and why it has provided an evolutionary edge to humankind.

The basis of my work is an ontological approach originally developed by Fernando Flores. In earlier ontological coaching approaches, there has been a great deal of effort directed to understanding our being and less so how we live in and experience time. I believe time and how we experience it, notably through language, are central to understanding the human condition.

Language is the key to how we create our interpretations of the world, our relationships, and social structures. In this context of creation, language is a set of actions and not simply a way of describing the world as is traditionally understood. Yet this view of language as action is not widely appreciated. Most people learn about language in school, where they are taught how to spell, use grammar and so on but rarely do they learn how to effectively utilise language to make effective requests, or the role and importance of promises in our daily life. They do not learn how we use language to create our sense of reality and self. The idea of language as an action rather than just description is also critical to appreciating how we use language to create a sense of time and so is central to this work.

These essays ultimately sets out an approach to the human condition in a temporal context. This exploration begins with the establishment of a basic premise that will form the foundation for alignment for all the concepts and offers a framework within which to explore life in general.

After looking at various alternatives, I have concluded my approach has to be materialistic in nature. There is a simple rationale behind this. This is a practical, risk-based approach that demands an explanation of how things work, and the materialistic

approach offers the most satisfactory explanations. Being materialistic in nature, this approach assumes the physical universe is the basis for everything; consciousness arises from a physical universe and is not a separate entity to our physical being.

Any dualist approach, such as one involving a human soul, separates body and mind and is always faced with the same intractable problem – how do the two interact? No well-grounded explanation has ever been given for this interaction and so to hold onto dualism as a basis for an approach is hard to defend.

It is important to state my approach is not an attempt at a universal truth. Indeed, the idea anyone can objectively know the 'Truth' would be an internal contradiction. Rather I seek new explanations that might be valid for you and any community of people who are seeking to find answers to old questions and pose new questions they have never thought to ask. Accordingly, this approach is often at odds with how most people live their life. As a result, it may be confronting yet provides a context in which to explore old problems in a new way.

Let us begin with an overview of the ten key ideas in this essay.

Ten Key Ideas

1. **The human experience of life is entirely subjective, internal, and bounded.** Our life consists wholly and solely of our experience of living. We live in our own world, a world of our own making. We each go through every day in our bounded experience dealing with other people going through their own unique and bounded experience. Yet we mostly assume that their experience is like ours.

2. **The present is not a space in time but infinitesimally fine boundary between the past and the future.** This idea of the present as a boundary undermines a common idea we exist in some nebulous present moment, which is really the immediate past and the immediate future on our temporal arrow. This new distinction of the present as a boundary does not mean we have to overthrow our sense of a present moment but does allow us to explore the human condition through a different lens; one of always '**stepping into the future**'.

3. As we share a similar biology with other humans, it is reasonable to assume similarities in our experiences. This assumption allows us to relate more effectively with others and create a '**social reality**'. We can put our observations of them into the context of our experiences and seek to make sense of what they will do. We can get a sense of how they feel and empathise with those feelings by appreciating how we would feel in that situation. However, the key is to appreciate our interpretations of others are simply our best guesses about their experience and not their actual experience.

4. In his book, 'A Theory of Everything', Ken Wilber identified four aspects that are always present with the human experience. He called these four aspects, the '**Four Quadrants**'. These four aspects reflect the interior and exterior aspects of individuals and collectives. In other words, the four aspects reflect the subjective experiences of our individual life, those shared in relationship with others and a more concrete perspective of individuals and communities. **Ken Wilber called the four quadrants 'I', 'We', 'It' and 'Its'**.

5. The 'I' Quadrant is seen in the human condition as a coherence of three domains – **physical being (body), emotional being (moods and emotions) and linguistic being (language)**. Rather than these domains being seen just as a set of lenses into the human condition, **they are defined as a hierarchy of predispositions**. The idea is the lower level of the hierarchy creates the conditions where higher levels tend to produce certain states or dynamics. Our physical being (body) sits at the bottom of the hierarchy and supports all the other domains. Think of it this way. Without a body, there is no emotion, no language, no experience at all.

6. If we accept the future is always unknown to us, then always stepping into it implies we are always moving into the unknown and therefore uncertainty. Our way of being is always focused on dealing with that uncertainty by making guesses about what the immediate future holds and then testing them against sensory data. **The better our guesses, the better we navigate the uncertainty.**

7. Ken Wilber's concept of the Big 3 - 'I, We and It' - provides a useful framework to address this challenge and achieve a more fulfilling life. This framework is based

on three aspects of life – our **concerns** (who and what matters to us), what we can **control** and who and what we can **influence**. We can think of this in terms of three circles extending outwards - Control, Influence, Concerns - that speak to our capacity to address our concerns.

8. Our 'Circle of Control' is limited to ourselves. To be in control, we must make a conscious choice and so our Circle of Control is limited to the conscious choices we enact. **'Control = Awareness + Choice'**

9. Our 'Circle of Influence' and is related to the extent and quality of our relationships and the quality of the conversations occurring within those relationships. When done well, influence is based on our capacity to build trust and authority with others and gain substantive promises from them. The bigger the promises we can gain from others, the bigger the impact on our 'Circle of Concern'. When done poorly, we seek to control others leading to a process of forcing people to choose what we want them to choose.

10. Our fundamental core concern is that we will continue to exist, making our **physical safety** our primary core concern. Beyond that I utilise David Rock's 'SCARF' model; an acronym for five domains of concern - **Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness**.

The Human Experience

American philosopher Thomas Nagel is famous in part for asking the question, "*What is it like to be a bat?*" Nagel was seeking to address an age-old question of subjectivity and consciousness, but he was also challenging the extent of our own subjective experience. Simply put, he was proposing human beings could never know what it is like to have the subjective experience of being a bat but, if we accepted the bat did have an experience, then we were also accepting it was conscious.

The same question can be applied to every human being. Consider the question, "*What is it like to be Bob Dylan?*"

The answer is only Bob Dylan can ever really know. You could listen to his music and gain some insight into his worldview. You could even sit down with him and he could spend hours telling you about his experience of life, but you would still not be able to have his experience of living. You would simply have your experience of Dylan telling you about his life and making sense of his story in the context of your own worldview. Although his music and a conversation might provide some insights into his life experience, it is not the same as having that experience.

This is so for each one of us. Our life consists wholly and solely of our experience of living. We live in our own world, a world of our own making. We each go through every day in our bounded experience dealing with other people going through their own unique and bounded experience. Yet we mostly assume that their experience is like ours. We assume they see what we see, hear what we hear, feel what we feel and so on. But this is not the case. At some stage, we may start to recognise that others do not see what we see, but many do not. If we do, we also start to appreciate they observe and interpret the world differently to us. The extent to which we can do this speaks to our psychological development. This ability to appreciate other points of view also provides us with a capacity to develop better explanations of the world in which we live and our place in that world. It allows us to see and deal with greater complexity.

All our experience of living is confined to our internal world. As an individual, we know nothing beyond that internal experience. When Bob Dylan tells you about his life, you put his words into the context of your own experience. This process is so transparent to us we easily fall into the trap of thinking we can fully understand others' experiences. We cannot. Yet, as social beings, this assumption that others experience what we do has some value.

As we share a similar biology with other humans, it is reasonable to assume similarities in our experiences. This assumption allows us to relate more effectively with others and create a '**social reality**'. We can put our observations of them into the context of our experiences and seek to make sense of what they will do. We can get a sense of how they feel and empathise with those feelings by appreciating how we would feel in that situation. However, the key is to appreciate our interpretations of others are simply our best guesses about their experience and not their actual experience.

This assumption does not just apply to other people but to the world at large. It is so easy to assume we have direct access to the world around us and experience the world as it is. Again, this is just not the case.

We can see this in the example of human sight. It is easy to think of seeing in terms of a camera where the light enters our eye and is directly projected into our brain as what we see. Indeed, the act of seeing is an internal physiological function triggered by photons of light. But the photons of light do not pass directly into the brain creating a direct image of what we see. Rather, they trigger our internal structure, mainly our neural system, and create our sense of seeing. We do not see what is, we actively create what we see.

So, this leads us to the first tenet of my approach.

The human experience of life is entirely subjective, internal, and bounded.

There is another aspect of the human condition ubiquitous to our existence. This is our relationship with time.

Our experience of time is often thought of as being on the 'arrow of time'. In this paradigm, we live our life on a conveyor belt of time, constantly leaving the past and moving into the future. We can recall aspects of the past, but the future is always unknown to us. Despite this sense of past and future, our experience of time is living in a constant present.

How we define the present creates a challenge. If we are to speak of a present, what are the boundaries that delineate the present from the past and the future. I invite you to consider this question for yourself, "*when is now?*" This is not a question many people ask themselves, but your response underlies many assumptions you will have about life. You might like to take some time to reflect on the idea before continuing.

If we experience time as a stream, then defining the present becomes a challenge. Is the present the current minute, or ten seconds or 1 second or a millisecond or even less than that? If we hold to the arrow of time paradigm, then we are in constant motion through time. **This leads to the conclusion that the present is not a space in time but infinitesimally fine boundary between the past and the future**.

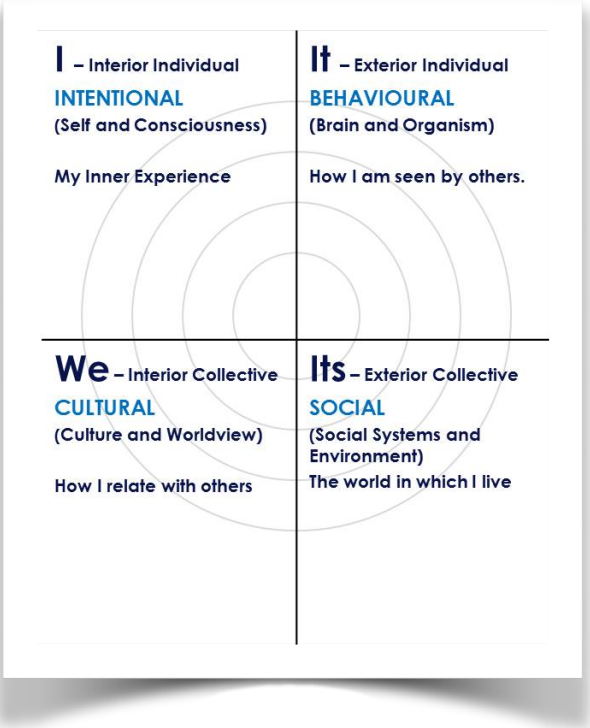
This idea of the present as a boundary undermines a common idea we exist in some nebulous present moment, which is really the immediate past and the immediate future on our temporal arrow. This new distinction of the present as a boundary does not mean we have to overthrow our sense of a present moment but does allow us to explore the human condition through a different lens; one of always 'stepping into the future'.

If we are always stepping into the future, then we are always stepping into the unknown. Given the unknown is always uncertain, dealing with that uncertainty defines much about our experience of life and how we relate to others and the world at large. We can combine these two key ideas into a basic premise that underpins this approach:

> ***Every human life is an entirely subjective, internal, and bounded experience. We define our life on a timeline of past, present and future, yet we experience time as a self-constructed and constantly changing present moment that is always focused on the immediate future.***

An Holistic View

Although all we know is our own inner experience of life, our concerns extend to others and the world at large. Our experiences and our ways of being are also shaped by our interactions with others and the world at large. If we are to better understand the human condition, then it is imperative we also appreciate the context within which we exist. As no two people have had the exact same life experiences, we can say everyone lives their life in a different context; everyone is a **unique human being**. We live in various places, we grew up in different societies and different families, went to different schools, had different friends and so on. Even twins, who have grown up in the same family will still have had different experiences and therefore a different life context. It would seem to be impractical to find a way to explore this vast variety of contexts, but this is not the case.



In his book, '*A Theory of Everything*', Ken Wilber identified four aspects that are always present with the human experience. He called these four aspects, the '**Four Quadrants**'. These four aspects reflect the interior and exterior aspects of individuals and collectives. In other words, the four aspects reflect the subjective experiences of our individual life, those shared in relationship with others and a more concrete perspective of individuals and communities. Ken Wilber called the four quadrants 'I', 'We', 'It' and 'Its'.

The 'I' Quadrant

The 'I' Quadrant refers to our own individual experience of living. It is the subjective life unique to each of us - our inner experience of perception, awareness and consciousness. It is our personal experience of our body, our emotional life and our thoughts. I propose that the 'I' Quadrant is all ever know.

The 'We' Quadrant

The 'We' Quadrant relates to experiences we share with others. This can be one-to-one relationships as well as the web of relationships within a community. It includes shared beliefs, stories and purposes, which are often formalised into the systems that in part comprise the 'Its' Quadrant. As we are all unique beings, the extent to which we share experience will always be less than complete, even though we may believe otherwise. We may share an experience such as a having a meal or going to a concert together, but the link is those situations and not our individual experience of those situations, which are unique to us.

The 'It' Quadrant

The 'It' Quadrant refers to observations about the exterior of an individual. It includes our anatomy, behaviour, appearance and so on. As this quadrant is empirical in nature, we can assert things to be true or false about them. We use our observations of others to form our interpretations of them as people. For example, we will draw conclusions about an individual's values and motivations based on the way they dress and interact with others. We even go so far as to categorise people based on their gender or race, where they live and the car they drive. We can easily start to believe we know someone based on what we observe about them, yet we cannot know the inner experience ('I') accompanying their actions etc.

The 'Its' Quadrant

The 'Its' Quadrant refers to the environment, both natural and man-made, in which a community exists. The legal system, the transport system, the buildings and anything else making up the concrete external world fall into this domain. The systems we create will codify the norms of a society based on those in power. They are designed to maintain those norms. As with the 'It' Quadrant, the 'Its' Quadrant is empirical in nature and we can point to its factuality as a common point of reference with others.

Ken Wilber ultimately distilled his Four Quadrants (I, We, It & Its) into three domains he termed the 'Big 3' – I, We & It and I will use this idea for future reference.

The Big 3 domains provide the context for our experience. They form the backdrop to our life allowing us to make sense of what we observe, relate to others and create things in the world. They are ever-present in everyone's lives. They also continually impact on each other. Our subjective experience manifests our behaviour which is observed by others. We respond to the behaviour of others and that shifts our inner life. Our beliefs about how things should be done are often formalised in a system or structure, which in turn tends to influence how we experience situations and behave.

It is important to remember the role of these impacts as we delve deeper into the 'I' Quadrant and the human condition.

The Domains of the Human Condition

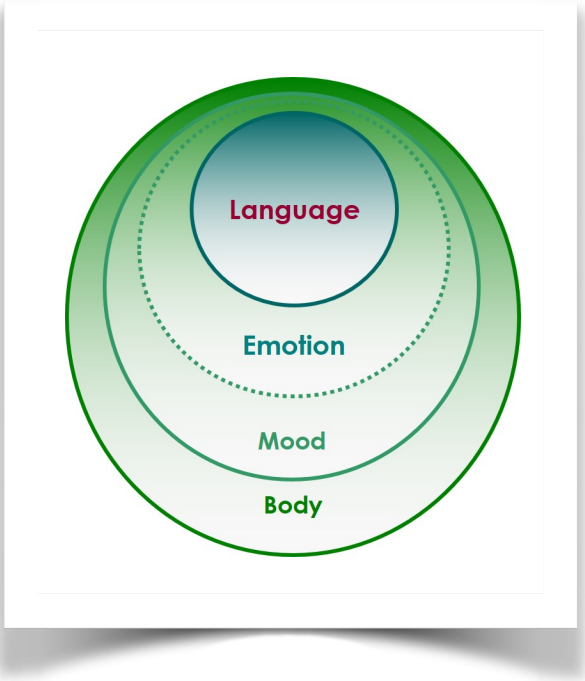
To effectively explore the human condition ('I' domain), we have to distinguish it in a way that allows for deeper understanding whilst retaining a sense of the whole.

In this approach, the human condition is a coherence of three domains – **physical being (body), emotional being (moods and emotions) and linguistic being (language)**.

Rather than these domains being seen just as a set of lenses into the human condition, they are defined as a **hierarchy of predispositions**. The idea is the lower level of the hierarchy creates the conditions where higher levels tend to produce certain states or dynamics. Our physical being (body) sits at the bottom of the hierarchy and supports all the other domains. Think of it this way. Without a body, there is no emotion, no language, no experience at all. Without a body you do not exist.

Our **physical being** embraces all aspects of our physical structure, the dynamics of our structure and the energy levels and flow through our structure. It holds all our memories, formed by our previous experiences. Our current physical being also holds all of our possible ways of engaging with the world at this moment. The implication is our physical being holds all of our predispositions for action.

Our **emotional being** is divided into moods and emotions. All humans have a generalised body experience of internal sensations known as 'affect'. Affect is broken into two aspects, '**valence**' and '**arousal**' where valence is a scale of pleasantness and arousal is a scale of energy. Our moods are reflections of our habitual stances to and ways of engaging the world and provide an ever-present sense of feeling, meaning we can always be said to be in a mood. Affect reflects the current state of balance of our physical structure, dynamics and energy level and flow and so our physical being predisposes our mood. As such, awareness of our mood provides a feedback loop about our current stance to the world and how we are generally predisposed to act.



Consider this example. You wake up in the morning after a good night's sleep, feeling well rested and energetic. How are you likely to feel within yourself and about the day ahead? What about the alternative. After a late night of over-indulgence and broken sleep, you wake up feeling rather unpleasant and low in energy. Now how do you feel within yourself and about the day ahead?

We take our mood into the day and engage with life from the context of that mood. Let's take the first mood state from the last paragraph. You feel energised and you are looking forward to the day. You head to the kitchen for breakfast and find your two housemates having an argument. How do you react? Now put yourself in the same situation but in the context of the second mood where you feel unpleasant and lacking in energy.

Chances are you will find yourself in a different emotional state as you deal your arguing housemates. In other words, a mood state predisposes emotional states in any given situation.

Our emotional states provide a feedback loop augmenting our interpretation of what is happening and further establishing a predisposition for our **linguistic being** and different thought processes, conversations, and actions.

This hierarchy of predispositions is ever present and the state of our being at a given point in time will establish predispositions for the actions we will take whether intentional or habitual. In the moment, our physical being will predispose our emotional being which in turn will predispose our linguistic being.

Our physical, emotional and linguistic being provide feedback loops regarding our predispositions. Without any intervention, those predispositions will simply play out as habitual actions. However, human beings are gifted with a capacity for complex language. Through language, we can develop nuanced interpretations of all aspects of our being. We can create meaning in those feedback loops and make decisions about what action to take. We do not have to be a slave to our predispositions.

We can use language for more than just intervention in response to our internal feedback loops. We can use it to seek to create new habitual predispositions. Our cascade of predispositions speaks to the habitual nature of the human condition. Habits born of a lifetime of experiences have shaped our physical, emotional, and linguistic being and then continue to establish how we live. **Through language, we can design our new recurrent experiences and create the possibility of new ways of being.** This idea is a recurrent and central theme in my work.

More on Our Relationship with Time

It is hard to imagine life without a clear sense of a past, present and future, yet some people do. ‘Anterograde amnesia’ is a condition occurring when there is damage to part of the brain known as the hippocampus. This form of amnesia results in a person retaining their short-term memory and existing long-term memories, but they can no longer create new long-term memories. As a result, the rest of their life occurs as an ever-rolling sense of a present lasting for a few seconds, before disappearing into darkness. People with this condition clearly struggle to live a normal life and are generally institutionalised.

However, most of us have a strong, but largely transparent, relationship with time. It is transparent because we rarely, if ever, think about that relationship beyond the obvious. What we did yesterday, what we are doing now and what will might do in the future.

We speak of the present but never think about what the present means. We speak of the past and generally assume our recollections to be pure and true. We look to the future with hope or trepidation and prefer not to believe it to be unknown. Yet, our relationship with time is much more profound.

Most people assume we live life on an ‘arrow of time’ and experience it that way. This idea is ancient and is encapsulated in our use of a clock and calendar to define time.

On the arrow of time, time passes as if we are on a temporal conveyor belt. However, our experience is one of constantly being in the present. Even so, every second that ticks over for us becomes our history. Our last breath is history. Our last thought is history. It seems we are on a conveyor that never stops. This provides one of the great paradoxes for whilst moving through time, we constantly live in the present. It is though we are in this bubble of experience that is always now but is always moving.

For me, this begged a question. If we are indeed experiencing life on an arrow of time when is our present? How big is that bubble? This is not a simple question to answer because on the arrow of time there must be a boundary between the past and the present and another found between the present and the future. This means we must define the boundaries of the present for it to exist as we think it does.

When is Now?

I have already defined the present, not as a space in time but a boundary between the past and the future. So, why do we have such a powerful sense of the present as a space in time? For this to be the case, then the 'present moment must really involve aspects of immediate past and maybe the immediate future. This may sound a bit far-fetched. After all, we have experienced the past but not yet the future, but bear with me.

Two key aspects of the human condition can help us appreciate our sense of the present moment – memory and a brain constantly predicting what is about to happen. Please bear in mind that what follows are my ideas of how the present moment may manifest and it is not based on any particular scientific theory.

There would be no sense of past in the human experience if not for memory. I have already touched on the impact of people with 'anterograde amnesia' but imagine if we could not recall anything. Not just what has happened, but what things are, who people are, even who we are. Simply put, without memory we would not be able to function.

I will cover memory in more detail later but for now let's just touch on aspects of memory that relate to our creation of a present moment. Researchers into human memory generally divide it into five memory systems. It is important to appreciate that I am referring to these memory systems as theoretical constructs and not specific functions or parts of the brain.Two of the five systems relate to short-term memory which I believe are critical when considering the present moment – '**sensory memory**' and '**working memory**'.

Sensory memory is the short-term lingering recollection of sensory input.

Have you ever had this happen to you? Someone asks you a question whilst you are doing something else and you get the sense you did not hear all they said. You ask them to repeat themselves, and, as they start to do so, you tell them not to continue as you remember what they have said. In this case, you had retained the question in your sensory memory, it had just been outside of your awareness.

Sensory memory associated with hearing is termed 'echoic memory' and what has been heard is retained for four to five seconds.

Our visual sensory memory is known as 'iconic memory'. Iconic memory enables us to maintain a sense of a steady picture of the world even though our eyes perceive in 200-millisecond bursts called 'saccades'. Each saccade gives us a snapshot of one part of the world; our iconic memory allows us to piece these bursts together like a mosaic giving us the steady picture.

Although most research has been done into echoic and iconic memory, it appears we also have sensory memory associated with smell, taste and touch.

Working memory is a short-term memory system used for both temporary storage and as a mental workspace where experience from other memory systems is processed. Some believe our working memory is our consciousness or awareness, although this is certainly not a universal view.

Working memory has two key functions:

1. It keeps information for short periods of time

2. It is the gateway for laying down long-term memories

These two memory systems engage us with the last few seconds of our experience and expand our sense of the present into the immediate past.

A recently created theory of how the human brain works provides a further element to experiencing a present moment. Rather than simply reacting to external stimuli, it seems more and more likely that our brains are predictive - also known as predictive coding or predictive processing. Rather than lying dormant waiting to be stimulated, our neurons are constantly firing, stimulating one another at various rates. Known as 'intrinsic brain activity', this one of the great recent discoveries in neuroscience. This activity constantly creates millions of predictions of what we will encounter next in the world and is based on our past experience. These predictions involve all aspects of our experience including the input from all our senses. We are predicting what we will hear next, see next and so on. Even though this is happening outside awareness, it can be said our way of being is constantly engaged with the future.

If we combine our predictive brain with our short-term memory, it seems plausible we can create the sense of an experience of the present as being more than simply a boundary between the past and the future. It can appear to us as being a sense of what just happened and what might happen next. It is our present moment.

Even though we might have a sense of experiencing a present moment, it does not conceptually change the present as it occurs in the arrow of time. It is still just a boundary.

The present as simply a boundary between the past and the future is more than semantics; it also opens an opportunity to explore the human condition through a different lens. One where, rather than existing in the present, we are always **stepping into the future**.

Stepping into the Future

This distinction between existing in a present moment or stepping into the future may seem trivial, but it has significant implications about our way of being. In a present moment, it can appear we have time to take in what is happening, process it and act. Indeed, common sense tells us this is what we do. It then appears we act with intent and we are in control. We get a feeling of certainty about what is going on.

Conversely, if we accept the future is always unknown to us, then always stepping into it implies we are always moving into the unknown and therefore uncertainty. In this case, our way of being is always focused on dealing with that uncertainty. To do this our way of being is geared towards making guesses about what the immediate future holds and then testing them against sensory data. The better our guesses, the better we navigate the uncertainty.

As the immediate future will happen in and because of our immediate environment, it is easy to have a feeling of certainty about what will happen next due to sensory information about our current environment. However that is an illusion. Think of this in terms of risk. Think about a time you were surprised. Being surprised speaks to this illusion. What we expected to happen, did not. Now you may not often be surprised, but the fact you can be means there is always a level of risk surrounding our

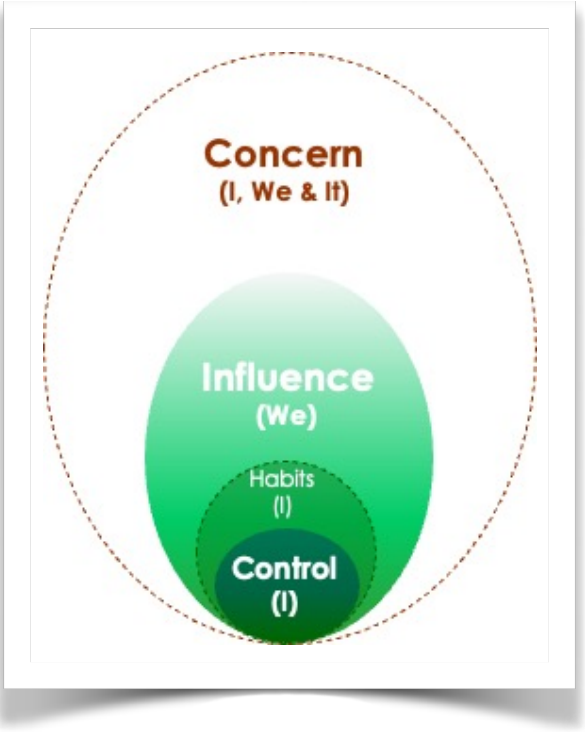
predictions. The closer the future is to us, the less the risk our guesses will be inaccurate but that risk is still there. However, we live in a society that values control and certainty over risk and uncertainty. We learn it is vital to be in control and be certain about the future. That is how we guarantee success. And so, we seek to live life as though this is possible, when it is not. This desire for control and certainty is so strong, it makes it one of our core concerns.

Whether we are aware of it or not, we are always engaged in dealing with the next moment. Our way of being - physical, emotional and linguistic - at any given time is engaged in making interpretations of what will happen next. Those interpretations, born of our past experiences, are simulations of our best guess of the immediate future. The concepts espoused in predictive brain theory support this premise.[1]

Control, Habit, Influence and Concern

Our relationship with the future throws up two major apprehensions about life. The first relates to the one certainty of our life – our death; a certainty we all have to address at some stage in our life. Fortunately however, most of us do not have to confront our ultimate doom on a daily basis.

The second concern relates to the inherent uncertainty of the future. A concern that is far more present given we are always stepping into a future unknown. How we face up to our uncertain future plays a large part in our self-story and ways of being.



Ken Wilber's concept of the Big 3 - 'I, We and It' - provides a useful framework to address this challenge and achieve a more fulfilling life. This framework is based on three aspects of life – who and what matters to us, who and what we can control and who and what we can influence. We can think of this in terms of three circles extending outwards and that speak to our capacity to address our concerns. Let us start with some definitions.

Our concerns are everything that matters to us. This implies that we must be aware of, something (or someone) for it to be of concern but does not mean we have to be in direct contact. For example, I could be concerned about all of humankind without

[1] *See essay, 'Our Physical Being'*

knowing about all of humankind. As we shall soon see, we also have some core concerns, that draw much of our attention in life.

Although we may have many concerns, there is a large percentage of them that we can do nothing about. For example, most people have an interest in the weather and its impact on their daily life; yet can do nothing to about it as a daily event. It is a concern over which, as yet, we no have ability to manipulate on a day to day basis. However, what is within our control is how we approach being in the weather. We can take an umbrella if it is raining or wear a sun hat if it is warm and sunny. It is also within our remit to do things that will impact the climate or long term weather patterns. Dealing with a changing climate might be seen as requiring nations to take action, but nations are comprised of many individuals who can all do their bit.

It is useful to recognise there is much in the world that matters to us that we can do little or nothing to influence. One vital skill for a more fulfilling life is recognising and accepting what we cannot change.

This sentiment is articulately voiced in the Serenity Prayer:

> *"God, give me grace to accept with serenity*
>
> *the things that cannot be changed,*
>
> *Courage to change the things*
>
> *which should be changed,*
>
> *and the Wisdom to distinguish*
>
> *the one from the other."*

What concerns we can impact are those that fall into the domains of what we can control and what we can influence.

'Control' is what we can do regardless of the agreement of others. The implication is control is what we can do unaided. However, the idea of control also implies intent and for human beings this presents an issue as we are habitual beings far more than intentional ones.

Even though, we would like to think we and others always act with intent, this is generally not the case. To illustrate this, some researchers have proposed that our brain's process up to 20 million bits of data every second outside of consciousness compared to 40 bits inside it. This is a staggering ratio of 1:500,000. Other studies have come up with a lesser ratio of around 1:10,000. Despite the significant difference in the studies, it is clear that most of what we do is outside consciousness and this is not surprising when we think about it. Our brain is constantly managing our body's activity, anticipating what is about happen and assigning our body's resources accordingly. Every organ is connected through the nervous system to our brain. Yet, we are not aware of the functioning of our kidneys, liver and so on. Take the largest organ of all, our skin. As you sit and read this, you are most likely largely unaware of the feel of your clothing on your skin. However, having just read that sentence you are also now likely to be more aware of it. We go through the day only occasionally noticing sensations and this is as it must be. Imagine how you would cope if you were

constantly aware of all the possible sensations you body could produce. You would simply be overwhelmed.

As well as being unaware of our constant internal activity, most of our outward actions are also habitual and done with little recognition. Walking, talking, putting on clothes, cleaning our teeth and many other actions are generally repeated without thought. At some point in life, we learnt and embedded those habits yet rarely, if ever, do we think about them. This has obvious evolutionary advantages as we can take multiple actions at the same time without having to focus on them thereby allowing us to focus on what really does matter. However, unless we are aware and seek to control those habitual actions, then they are unintentional and therefore outside our control. This does not mean we cannot seek to create new habits through intention, but this normally takes self-awareness, effort and time.

Unfortunately, our habitual nature can also lead us to the point of addiction where our habits constantly overwhelm us regardless of what we may intend. Although we may be well aware of our habits and seek to change them, this is much easier said than done. Most of us have had the experience of trying to give up something such as alcohol, cigarettes or sugar to no avail. Clearly this speaks to a lack of control and many people berate themselves for not being able to break a habit.

I appreciate this definition of control may well appear controversial. That we act with intent and are in control of ourselves is one of our basic assumptions and can be found everywhere. Among many examples, our legal systems are based on the idea that people largely act with intent. Indeed, we commonly assume that others act with intent rather than blindly out of habit and we are always wanting to know why someone did what they did. Yet, the evidence suggests something else.

When we become aware of our habits, we can seek to create new and more useful ones. In doing so, we can create greater alignment for ourselves leading to a greater sense of authenticity. The creation of new habits falls can fall within our control yet requires daily practice of awareness and choice to establish them and the initial challenge involves self-awareness; a challenge many people quickly fail.

Ultimately, I have concluded that to be in control, we must make a **conscious choice and so our Circle of Control is limited to the conscious choices we enact**.

‘Control = Awareness + Choice’

We are also able to impact on our ‘Circle of Concern’ through others. This is our ‘Circle of Influence’ and is related to the extent and quality of our relationships and the quality of the conversations occurring within those relationships. When done well, influence is based on our capacity to build trust and authority with others and gain substantive promises from them. The bigger the promises we can gain from others, the bigger the impact on our ‘Circle of Concern’. When done poorly, we seek to control others leading to a process of forcing people to choose what we want them to choose. I will explore the implications of this later.

The challenge of dealing with an uncertain future lies in part in our belief in our capacity to deal with that uncertainty. The concepts of control, influence and concern provide a useful framework in which to address specific challenges and better navigate the unavoidable uncertainty in life that is the future.

Our Core Concerns

We do not step into the future in a vacuum. Based on our life to this point, we have certain concerns that are important to us and that we take into the future with us. These concerns establish a framework within which we predict and interpret what is happening.

Our interpretations of the world include interpretations of ourselves as human beings and it is commonly assumed that people generally act with intent. If you have ever been cut off in traffic you will know what I mean. Clearly the other driver meant to make my life difficult by cutting lanes in front of me!

Yet you only have to reflect on your own experience to know this is not valid. Rather than always acting intentionally, we mainly act habitually to take care of our concerns. Although we may have many concerns in life, there are some that seem to be common and central to the human condition. These are our '**core concerns**'.

Above all else, our concern is that we will continue to exist. This makes our **physical safety our primary core concern**. Some will run from danger, others will fight, but we will generally seek to preserve our existence. If we feel physically safe enough, then other concerns will come to the fore.

David Rock's work from the field of social neuroscience well-defines those other core concerns. He claims that human beings can be seen to exhibit overarching organising principles in relation to **minimising threat** and **maximising reward**. This is aligned with the notion of conservative and expansive tendencies as put forward by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela and the NeuroLinguistic Programming meta-program of 'moving away' and 'moving toward'. This can also be seen as taking a 'constructive' or 'defensive' stance to the world, which I utilise through my work.

David Rock developed the '**SCARF**' model; an acronym for five domains of concern - Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness.

Status is our sense of worth and relevant importance to others. For many, it also represents success. It might manifest as a need for power or the trappings of success such as the big house and flashy car. This concern is often rooted in a self-centred approach to developing a sense of self - a desire to feel superior to others, gain their approval or be seen as a trusted and respected member of the community. It can also relate to our our evaluation of our authority with others and, with it, our ability to get things done. If we feel our status is enhanced or diminished then correspondingly our possibilities are enhanced or diminished.

Certainty correlates to our ability to predict the future. We want to know what is happened and what will happen. Ironically, the future is inherently unknown and therefore uncertain. Yet this does not stop us craving certainty. We do this by seeking control and predictability. The scientific method has been able to provide a wonderful means of accurately making predictions, but there is a difference between a prediction and certainty. Prediction has an element of risk, certainty does not. It is important to appreciate we can learn how to make very good predictions but this does not mean we know absolutely what will happen. It is also to appreciate that making predictions about inanimate objects is much easier than dealing with living beings, including other

people. If we expect certainty, then we will be challenged when faced with the unexpected. The challenge is to appreciate our predictions are simply our best guess and always involve risk. How we deal with risk in life is central to this core concern.

Autonomy is our capacity to author and control our future. We want to be able to make decisions for ourselves and see our desires bear fruit. Authority given to us by others, and by ourselves, is central to this capacity. Autonomy is linked to status and relatedness as they are the basis of authority given by others. It is also linked to certainty by a need for control and can often see people seeking control over others.

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

Fairness relates to our perception of how people, including ourselves, should be treated by others. We learn the rules and norms of our community and expect others to subscribe to them.

Everyone will value these five concerns differently. Some people will place great store in status and less on relationships. Some will see fairness only in the context of themselves and not others. Yet, others will have a need for a high level of certainty, whilst others will not. There is great diversity in our core concerns, yet each of the five play some role in our existence and our sense of self.

As human beings create meaning to navigate our daily lives, we develop stories of others and ourselves. Our core concerns are central to this process. Our sense of our own dignity, or self-esteem, is the story we create and hold about ourselves as we assess ourselves against our core concerns and what matters to us. How valuable am I to others? How well can I deal with an uncertain future? To what extent do others treat me as a valid human being and give me the authority to play a role in their life? How meaningful and intimate are my relationships with others? How fairly do others treat me? To varying degrees, we are always in these questions. Our answers speak to our sense of self and our dignity.

Our issues in life often stem from a need to take care of our dignity and we act in ways to protect or enhance our core concerns. For example, if others treat us in a way that we interpret means they see little value in what we have to offer, we may become

withdrawn or aggressive in response to their actions. Such responses are generally come with significant emotion. In other words, our emotions in a situation may point to a challenge to our dignity.

Our personal ways of being – physical being, emotional being and linguistic being - have evolved to address our concerns over our lifetime, and we will explore those aspects of our being in more depth in other essays.