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KNOWHOW> THE MIND IN ACTION> MINDSCAPES



JOHN HERON: Psyche and Personhood

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[Caption](#)

John Heron: mind and person

John Heron sees mind, or psyche, as a property of persons grounded in feeling. In his formulation this is not a description of the components of mind but rather a catalogue of recipes through which we may, if we choose, bake ourselves afresh.

This perspective arises out of Heron's several decades of work in the cooperative or experiential inquiry tradition (what some people would call grounded theory), developing a facilitative approach to personal and professional development, and especially education. It continues to have a big influence on my own work in these fields.

Up-hierarchy of the psyche

As an antidote to the prevailing top-down hierarchies of intellectual, scientific, cultural, and social life, Heron proposes a model of the mind in the form of an up-hierarchy, in which influence is generated from below (see opposite). I'll give a broad-brush account first, then take you into some of the detail.

A *practical* domain of action and intention, making, doing, and undoing at the top of the up-hierarchy is influenced and shaped by a *conceptual* domain of discrimination and reflection, in which we think through, evaluate, consider, and make choices using language, concepts, and number. The quality and content of these two domains is in turn influenced and shaped by an *imaginal* domain, the inner world of imagery—notions, dreams, ideas, fantasies, and intuition, our capacity to perceive situations as a whole.

Lastly, the quality and contents of these three upper domains is shaped or influenced by an *affective* domain which includes the emotionality that arises as the body copes with challenge and change, and feelings—indications of the quality and value of our relations with others.



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Awareness

Heron sees each of these domains as being able to function more or less autonomously, so that we may live from the conceptual and practical domains with little or no awareness, or even active denial of the value of the imaginal and affective domains. Some people, for example artists, writers, and musicians, may live primarily from the imaginal and emotional domains and have great difficulty with thinking through how to take their creations into the world of action. Many people may live primarily from the affective domain and have considerable difficulty with the world of work and decisions. And of course this biasing is likely to be true for each of us some of the time.

For Heron, 'The person is a seamless whole, an interacting system which in simplified form has four psychological modes of being: willing is the diamond apex whose facets are cut by the aware discrimination of thinking, which is made wise by the holistic receptivity of intuition, and grounded in the participation in being of feeling... The four psychological modes converge upon enterprise and endeavour. From our felt participation in the world, we open intuitively to grasp a total situation, then discriminate thoughtfully in order to act within it.'

The developing mind

This is an ambitious vision of the mind that integrates the lived detail of individual daily life with the broad sweep of community living, and it is highly congruent with the unfolding developing mind.

We emerge from the womb immersed in emotion and feeling, and through participation with our carers, see **Schore**, we gradually absorb an extended world of fantasy

and story—Snow White and Thomas the Tank Engine—that consolidates naming and talking—the toddler's 'nandical gaga' becomes 'mechanical digger', and eventually we learn to read, along with thinking and choosing for ourselves. Threaded through this are increasing practical skills of managing ourselves—getting dressed, tying shoe laces, and so on.

Out of each of these successive experiences our mind grows and deepens, we are increasingly able to cope with emotional challenge, participate more effectively in relationships, imagine our way out of difficulties, and think through and discuss with others how to approach a task and then implement the plans we come up with.

Listening to the heart

Heron identifies three prompts from the domain of feeling that, if listened to, may at any time, separately or in combination, shape the growing emerging mind.

1. INDIVIDUATE OR PARTICIPATE; to take time to be with ourselves, to be distinct from others around us, or to engage with other people in social, family, or communal events.

2. CONSOLIDATE OR REORGANIZE; improve develop consolidate and deepen our present way of relating to ourselves and others, or re-assess, re-evaluate, or seek new perspectives, perhaps try out new and different life strategies.

3. MORE VITAL IN LIVING OR MORE ENGAGED IN LEARNING; put energy into making, doing, building, and achieving, or apply ourselves to learning and development.

Being willing and able to listen and respond to these prompts has a deep formative effect on the unfolding of mind and the life that we live through and with it.

more

Splitting

However, whether we are able to listen to these prompts depends to some extent on an additional dimension of mind that arises through the acquisition of language. Heron contends that the acquisition of language promotes a subject/object split. Language requires the capacity to handle concepts and classes of thing—categories. Through language we move toward mistaking the category for the thing and in so doing tend to lose sight of the way that categories are the result of an imaging process shaped and informed by our feeling and emotional life. We become disengaged observers peering out at a world of things and people that are ‘separate’, ‘over there’. Once this split has been consolidated by the daily repetitions of it in the world around us, it congeals into a literalness of perception that feeds off itself.

Heron points to a second aspect of growing up that further deepens this inner/outer split—the near inevitability that socialization and education lead to psychological wounding. Parts of the child may be so hurtfully attacked, psychically or physically, that survival demands that the pain of this hurt be relegated to unconsciousness. If, because of this, the child’s openness to experiencing delight, joy, and creativity are denied or compromised, then some or most of these capacities are pushed out of awareness to live on in the affective domain. This hidden pain means that we can no longer take the risk of knowing ourselves.

Heron contends that the splitting off of feeling and emotion, due to language acquisition, coupled with the peer and other pressures of socialization, builds a ‘conventional self’ that knows how to navigate in the prevailing culture but is

likely to be out of touch with imaginal and emotional realities. Alongside this, the splitting due to wounding builds an alienated ‘compulsive self’, driven by the split-off pain that is out of awareness.

Feeling—hallmark of personhood

The wide mistrust and denigration in our culture of feeling and emotion, reinforced throughout traditional education, is the result of failing to distinguish emotional distress from the intrinsic embodied human capacity for feeling and emotion. Heron argues that ‘Participative feeling... is the absolute hallmark of personhood, not reason’.

To sum up so far, the Heron model of mind or psyche sees feeling as a high form of embodied consciousness shaping and influencing all the other levels of mind; providing the spring that creativity taps into and which is the seat of our sense of well-being. He argues that, so far as we are able to demolish the crust of alienated reason that convention and culture leads us to suppose is reality, the imaginal and affective domains open up and with them the capacity of feelings to connect us to each other and better intuit our own and other’s needs.

The needy psyche

One of the consequences of the Heron model of the mind that I have found very helpful, both personally and as a practitioner, is that each of the four domains has associated needs which shapes what we seek in daily life.

PRACTICAL: we have a need to chose and be chosen—zest and exhilaration

CONCEPTUAL: we have a need to understand and be understood—interest and self-interest

more

IMAGINAL: we have a need to image and be imaged—
appreciation and self-appreciation

AFFECTIVE: we have a need to love and be loved—delight
and self-esteem

Blocking, denial, or compromise of these needs is likely to
lay down distress emotions in the bodymind.

A blocked capacity to love and to be loved leads to grief.

A blocked capacity to image and be imaged leads to boredom.

A blocked capacity for understanding and being under-
stood leads to fear and anxiety.

If our freedom to choose is blocked without just reason,
anger is likely.

As a rule of thumb for individuals and practitioners
engaged in personal development, this catalogue of needs
and the corresponding damage that is likely to arise from
their distortion or interruption, opens up a rich geography of
educational and personal development strategies. Many of
them appear elsewhere in *The Mind Gymnasium*; for a selec-
tion check the ‘See also’ menu (right).

Mind—an ongoing inquiry

In the sense that a recipe is not a description of a dish or a
meal, it is very important to appreciate that Heron’s model is
not a description of the mind but rather a group of recipes for
making sense of our experience, practical prescriptions, possi-
ble ways of inquiring into and managing some aspects of living
and learning. The model derives from experience and is
intended to inform and enhance our ongoing experience.

[more](#)

[See also ▼](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Schorer: Attachment](#)

[Damasio: The biology
of consciousness](#)

[Lakoff: Embodied
metaphor](#)

[Heron: Psyche and
personhood](#)

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Heron: Model of the Psyche

Heron sees the psyche/mind as an up-hierarchy of modes, each of which influence and shape the mode above. Each mode is relatively autonomous and waking consciousness may not draw on all of the four modes, though as the model suggests, behaviour will be affected by the modes that are out of consciousness.

next

Intense localized affect, centred around the fulfillment or frustration of basic needs, joy, love, zest, fear, grief, anger.

emotion

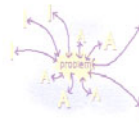
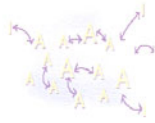


feeling



AFFECTIVE

Participation, attunement, and resonance with other persons, places, communities, and situations.



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next

Perception, memory, dreaming, visions, creative imagination, analogy, metaphor, brain-storming, myth, story.

imagery



intuition

Insight, immediate comprehensive knowing, grasping a system or a pattern and knowing what it means.

IMAGINAL



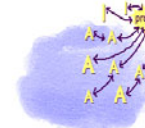
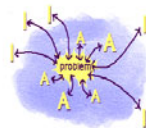
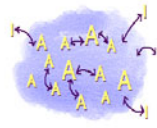
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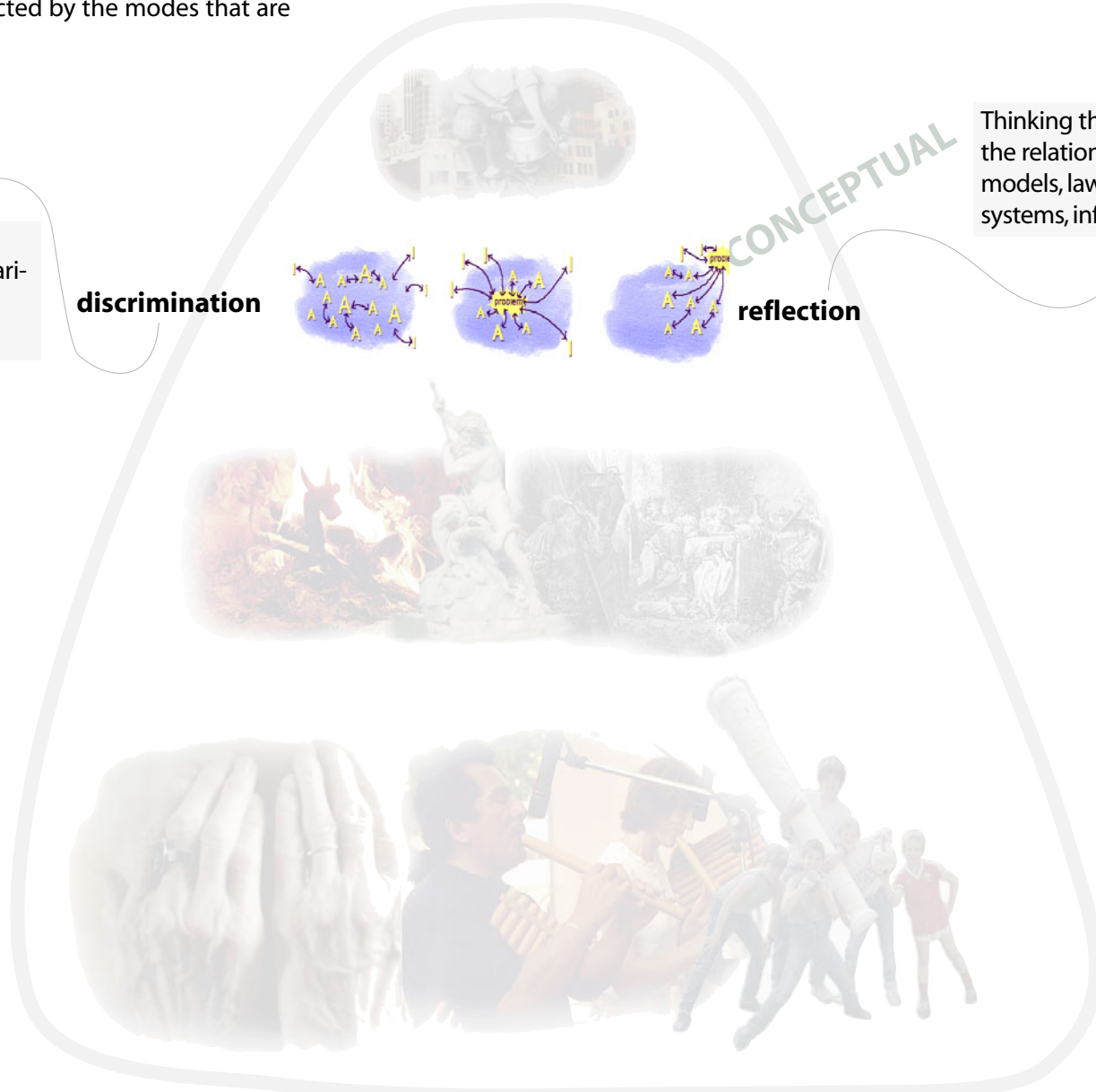
Categorize, classify, define, differentiate, identify similarities and differences, language mastery.

discrimination



reflection

Thinking through and about, the relations between things, models, laws, theories and systems, inference, deduction.



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next

Consciously chosen behaviour,
will, personal responsibility.

action



intention

Purposes, planning, design,
policy, strategy, tactics.

PRACTICAL



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more

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action

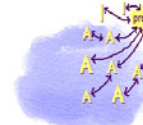
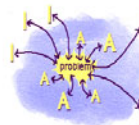
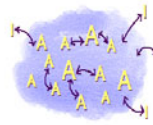


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