

On interfaces and people

Any discussion is carried out through what is called an “interface” of concepts: We postulate certain “fundamental” concepts that relate to each other in postulated ways, and for the sake of discussion we do not care whether this is “correct” or not in any larger sense. That is, we do not break these fundamentals into smaller pieces: to do so would be to have a different discussion. I don’t claim that everybody forms interfaces explicitly, but I think everybody does it.

The concepts (and the relations between them) that we choose to form an interface should be precise and simple enough so that the discussion can be crisp, yet general enough so that it can be fruitful. The choice of appropriate interface can often mean the difference between success and failure, as the reader may verify by trying to discuss human love using the interface of the concepts of quantum physics. (Please explain first what a human is, in these terms.) When an interface is properly chosen, we have found the right concepts to talk about an idea. Not only does the particular discussion become a joy, but often we may have found a whole new way of looking at the world.

People use many different interfaces for discussing people and their interactions. I have often found that these interfaces are very imprecise, and hence not well understood by their users. As I mentioned above, any interface brings with it certain assumptions, and the more assumptions you have, the more unwieldy and unfocussed a discussion becomes.

Recently, I was boggled while listening to the conversations of some political scientists, whose (long) discussions consisted almost entirely of words I have never heard of, each of which was used about once. With so many concepts, and with no explicit understanding of the assumptions they use to link these concepts, it was no surprise that their discussions were so unclear and unfocussed. (Unfortunately, these are also people who have been taught to accept this lack of clarity, and to nod silently rather than ask for clarification. In other words: they are academics.)

By contrast, I have a simple and powerful interface for discussing people. Simple, in that it could be explained to a 5-year old; general, in that I use it time and time again to understand and solve all the problems I come across in my life.

Here is my interface, my worldview: There are only individual people, their desires, their actions, and their reactions to the actions of others.

Some might worry that, like the physics example above, this interface is too spare to allow fluid reasoning. Well, it was chosen to be spare, after years of frustrating conversations involving concepts whose meanings were far from clear. But in fact I have had very little difficulty reasoning about the world using this interface, and moreover it has vastly simplified situations which seemed so complex in the other terminology. This is not surprising: Poor interfaces create their own problems.

I would like my readers to take a test drive with this interface. Take your time, work slowly, and try to explain the following concepts according to my interface: ‘taxes’, ‘monogamous relationships’, ‘government’, ‘community’, ‘force’. Please make a serious effort before going on.

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Seriously. Put the paper down. If you find yourself asking a lot of questions, ask yourself: “Are these questions irrelevancies brought about because of the inadequacy of the interface? Or are they relevant questions that I have never asked myself before, possibly because other interfaces I used did not reveal these questions?” .

The final exercise: Compare ‘crime’ and ‘punishment’. This is rather revealing. Afterwards, ask yourself what the consequences are of treating two very similar things as being very different.

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