

What Is A Changed Person?

An exploration of the three components of personal change.

“Truth does not inhabit only the inner man, or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself.”

— Maurice Merleau-Ponty

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Are We the Ingredients or the End Result?

The fundamental question for all therapy—maybe even for all forms of learning—is, “What is a changed person?” Almost every answer we’re given avoids the question. The behaviorists say a person changes when their behavior changes. The mechanists say consciousness reduces to a mix of chemicals, hormones, electrical signals, or neural structures. For them, we change when these structures change. “Structures and behaviors; that’s all there is,” they tell us.

In extreme cases, a change in behavior is good enough. If a person was delusional and acted as if they were hearing voices—who knows exactly what they were hearing—and now they see things like we see things and hear only their own conscience, then we’re apt to say they’ve changed. Similarly, a person who was addicted or ill and who is now free of addiction or illness, has changed. But are they better, healed, or cured? It would be more accurate to say that they’re doing better but, as is typical, we confound doing with being and say they *are* better.



The King of Action and the Queen of Feeling

It is as if—underneath all the kerfuffle about our multiple identities, intelligences, and emotions—we have two reigning powers of person-hood. We have a king of action who rules what we do, and a queen of emotion who reigns over how we feel. From the separateness of these two—an Adam and Eve who have left the Eden of our united sense of self—arises our confusion with action and essence, between what we do and how we are. The next time you're asked, "How are you?" Reflect on whether you're being asked how you're doing, or how you are being.

I'm reminded of **Figure-8 Train Racing**, a creative, stock-car spectacle that involves a figure-8 track where, at the center, the racetrack going in one direction crosses the racetrack going in the other. Contestants who race through this intersecting course attempt to make the best time while avoiding T-boning each other at the intersection—for which there is no right-of-way. But to make the spectacle all the more absurd, the contestants drive in pairs of cars chained to each other. The front car does all the pulling; the rear car does all the braking.

This, it seems, is the model of self-hood that we're asked to believe: a pair of mismatched partners of thought and feeling attempting to avoid a collision as they careen through the obstacles of life. Consider **this video** as a metaphor for life.

To say that a changed person is a person who can now do something that they could not do before is a phony answer. It does not require any change in one's person-hood to perform differently. Yet, this is the claim of nearly all learning, teaching, therapy, and healing programs. "If you act better, you are better," is the message. And if we don't believe we're better, then we're deluded, malingering, or, maybe, we just need more training.

This is the educational approach taken by schooling, and the therapeutic approach taken by cognitive behavioral therapy. When a person is in mental distress and they're asked, "Where does it hurt?" The presumption is that the hurting is a kind of conscious action, and the remedy is to change how one consciously acts.



Is the Essence of Cake in the Making or the Eating?

The wonderful phrase “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny” is a model for so much of what we are. The phrase comes from evolutionary biology and, taken loosely, means that our structure reflects the processes that shaped us. To be more precise, it means that our growth as individuals reflects our evolution: the zygote passes through all stages of evolution to reach human form. This applies to so much more than embryos and archeology.

“Development is embedded in structure” applies to how we think, feel, and what we do. What we are now, reflects how we got here. We are holograms of all we’ve experienced—mixed, boiled, stewed, simmered, and scorched— with our past often well-hidden in the sum of who we are. Retracing your steps underlies much of my helpful intentions to understand how you think and feel, in order to understand how you are now.

Because I have a large reservoir of my own personal experience, I recreate in myself someone else’s attitudes. I recreate in myself a real-life model of my client’s worlds. It is for this reason that I loath to call myself a “therapist,” as I’m really just a colleague. I use empathy and adventure to map someone else’s labyrinth and find a way out.

Acting Differently

In T.H.White’s *The Once And Future King*, the tutor-magician Merlin turns the future King Arthur into an

ant in order to understand the mentality of insects, and thereby the mentality of people. In the ant world, everything is either “done” or “not done,” nothing else exists so nothing else matters. The overarching rule of the hive is “everything that is not forbidden is compulsory.” In this world to think is unthinkable, and to consider, or to stop for any reason, is insane.

Like most anthropomorphic metaphors, its truth lies more in what it says about people. And while our genetic tree does not branch off from insects, we have more in common with insects than you’d think. We share many of the same developmental forces and dependencies. Where complexity was needed for survival, insects developed the hive while we developed the mind. This is the proper comparison between the two—the similarities between the insect hive and the human mind—and in this regard, the insect metaphor can help explore the question of what makes a changed person.



Thinking Differently

On the one hand, giving too much credit to thinking is short-sighted. Thought is a consequence of perception and emotion, and not a driver of it. Thinking is the last car in the train of thought. Our personality is the anus of our consciousness, the terminus from which we leave our mark. You no more teach a person how to play chess by teaching them how to move their hands, than you would teach a person to feel better by encouraging them to practice thinking nice thoughts.

On the other hand, consciousness is not a sequential affair. It is not like chess which has an unambiguous start and finish. Consciousness is both wide-ranging and constantly reflective, or it can be. Just as your mind and body are not separate—one controlling the other—so, also, your perceptions and behaviors are not separate. You are constantly perceiving yourself. In fact, you spend far more time self-perceiving than you do perceiving anything else.

A large part of how you feel is constructed on what you feel. Happiness makes you happy; feel sadness you may become sad. Who is it inside us that is different from what we tell ourselves we are? How does one be “of the world and not in the world?”

Let’s take this approach: in you there are two actors, the do-er and the be-er. There is at least this pair, probably others, but let’s just simplify it to this. Consider yourself a direct and uncomplicated person and, in this, there is a part of you that acts out certain thoughts and another part of you that has the feelings. This simple model underlies much of what we’re told about ourselves.

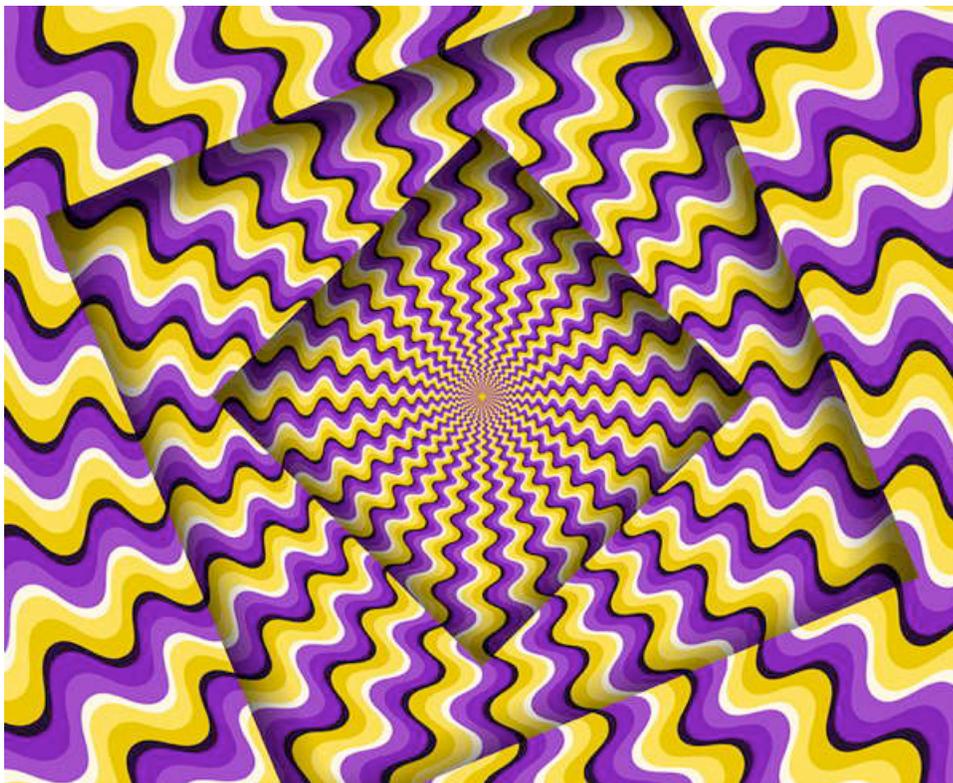
Perceiving Differently

Reality is the weak point in the Be-er and Do-er model. Someone has got to be responsible for it. Who judges what’s real? Reality does not “just happen.”

Most people take perception for granted. This is the first level of consciousness: you are awake and you react to what’s in front of you. But how much are you aware of, and is what you’re aware of real?

My book *Becoming Lucid* used our sleep and waking states as exercises in awareness. We have different imaginary realms, with different perceptions in each. We have some control in each, and we want control. Yet, it is our lack of control that makes our world real. The point I make in *Becoming Lucid* is that the breadth of our experience is not proportional to our control, but to our awareness.

If we’re talking about how a person changes, and we’ve considered changes in their feelings and thinking, then we must certainly include changes in awareness. But what is awareness, and what might it mean to change one’s awareness?



Recognizing Awareness

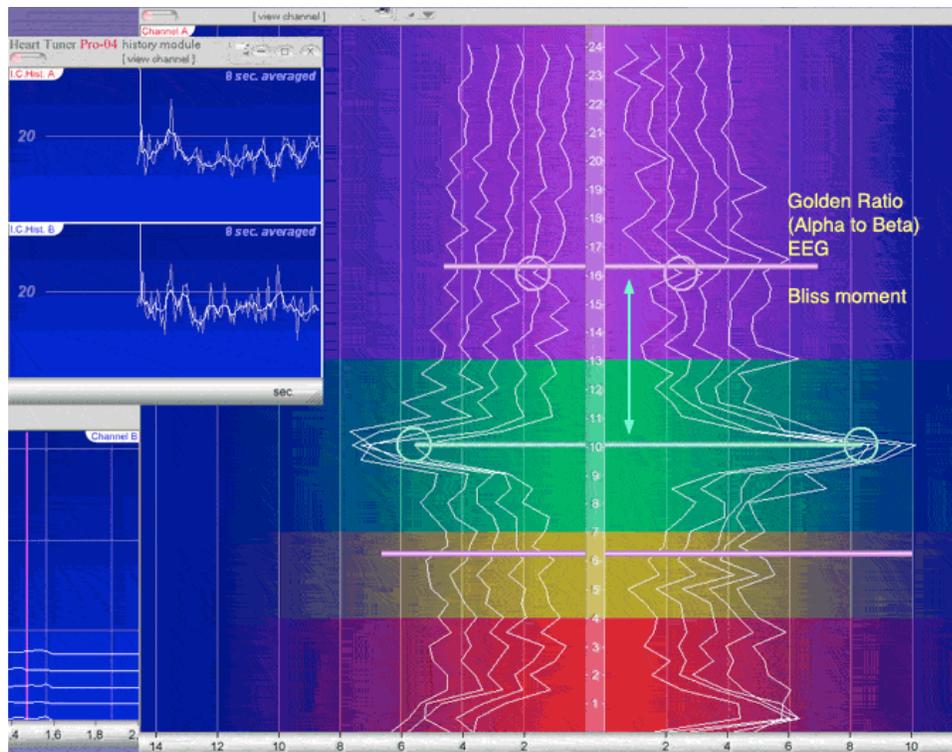
The history of western philosophy stands on the two legs of the Do-ers and the Be-ers. The Do-ers base understanding on what can be done. They construct machines, interact with the world, and perform experiments in the field. They are the empiricists. The Be-ers base understanding on thinking, they are guided by reason and doubt everything else. They are the rationalists. This divided history of thought underpins the behaviorist and the mechanistic camps of health care.

Strangely, considerations of awareness never gained much currency in Western thought. Levels of awareness played a great role in the Greek pre-Socratics, but Plato seemed intent on extirpating it. By the time Aristotle came along alternate forms of perceptions were relegated to religious experience, a property of the church.

If there is one thing that made the Dark Ages dark, it was demanding only one reality about which there was to be no discussion. Not a lot of original art or theater came out of the Dark Ages.

It was this that so incensed Dante to strike one of the first blows to authority in his exploration of the hellish, purgatorial, and heavenly levels of his *Divine Comedy*. This “crisis of humanity,” as philosopher Edmund Husserl called it in the early 1900s, persists today in spite of the work of Husserl and the school of phenomenology that followed him.

Eastern philosophy—still the unwelcome relative of academic philosophy—continues to percolate into the still-closed Western consciousness through popular culture. Progress, measured one grave at a time, is bringing in our social consciousness ideas from yoga, Buddhism, indigenous culture, and deep ecology. Alternative perception is making inroads in health care in the still marginal areas of trans-personal and—now and for some time to come—psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy.



Neurofeedback

Neurofeedback involves generating changes in awareness by directly changing a person’s brain processes.

Unlike rationalist approaches based on intellectual awareness, and unlike the mechanistic approach of neurology and pharmacology, neurofeedback attributes consciousness to the interaction of thought, perception, and reality.

Neurofeedback does not invade the space of mind to tinker and reframe. It is not invasive. Instead, it shows the mind itself and asks the mind to play with itself on the assumption that this is a creative opportunity. Seeing itself illuminated, clothed in different fashions of perceptions as it were, rather than being closeted in the dark, our minds start hamming it up.

The mind is a poseur, obsessed with itself, as well it should be. Unlike fashion, which is an addition, perception feels absolute. What you don't see might as well not exist, at least for the moment. And everything we do see has our reflection in it.

The mind always has an ear out for its own footsteps, and eye for what disappears around the corner. Ever superstitious, our minds know that ghosts exist because—in spite of the indisputable reality around us—our world is dominated by ghosts. Incorporal and insubstantial fabricators of what's real, these ghosts are us, and we can't see them.

Mindfulness

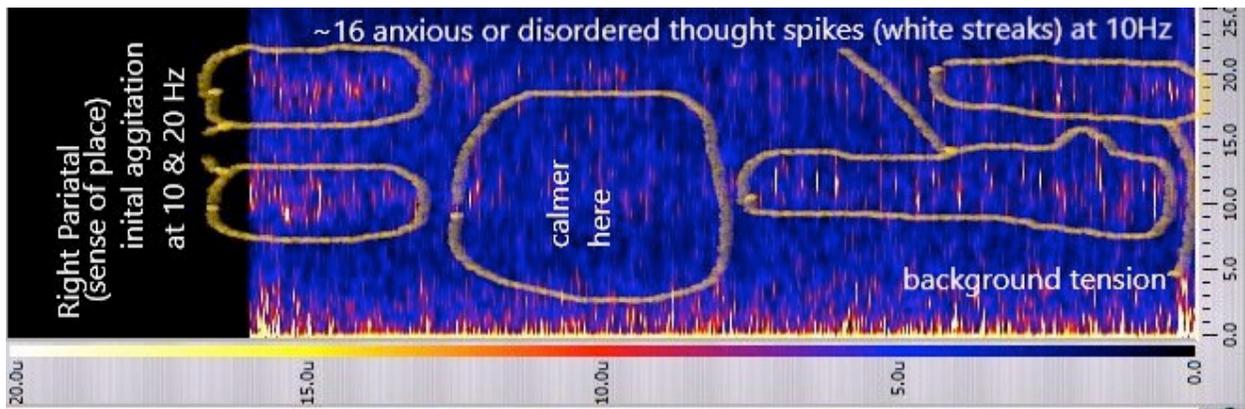
Mindfulness, which is a kind of yoga without postures, says almost nothing specific. Instead, it encourages practitioners to recognize the role of their mind in their experience of reality. There is nothing quantitative or dogmatic about mindfulness, and this is by design. Mindfulness finds a place in the Western medical system by not contradicting anything.

Yoga doesn't fit in Western medicine because it refers to things and relationships contrary to medicine's inanimate, reductive world view. Mindfulness fits where yoga fails because it says nothing about energy or the relationship of spirit. Where Western medicine and yoga are in conflict, mindfulness has been designed to create no conflict.

Mindfulness has no structure. It creates space but puts nothing into it. Mindful meditation—as that's what it is: a meditation practice—clears away the brambles of disorganized thinking assuming that a more orderly, second growth will fill in.

This works to some extent, but where the brambles are a natural consequence of our environment they will take over again. Just because you clear away some invasive species, like Kudzu vine or Water Chestnut, doesn't mean the native species will recover. Just because you've stopped addictive behavior does not mean that addiction will not return. At its root, all thinking is a form of addiction.

This is the difference between mindfulness and neurofeedback. Mindfulness assumes one's natural rhythms will recover once disorganized thinking is removed. Neurofeedback trains organized thinking and protect until it reestablishes itself. Where mindfulness sets one's broken bones and leaves, neurofeedback puts on a cast for the bones to heal.



The EEG of Phenomenology

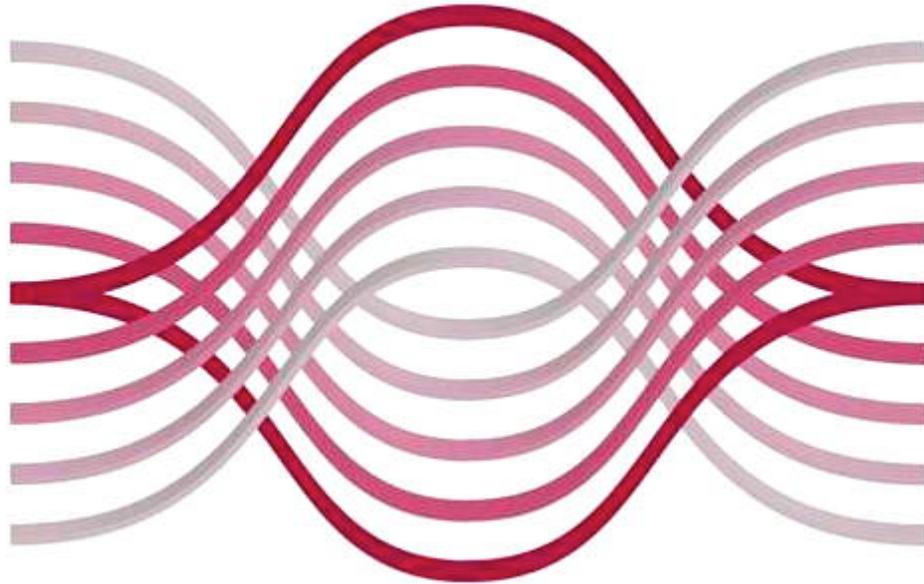
Consciousness is composed of rhythms of attention. These synchronize and combine verbal patterns, conceptual associations, graphic memory, and visceral feelings. I don't know which frequencies correspond to which abilities—I doubt there is a one-to-one mapping—but certain connections are obvious.

The above spectrogram was recorded from one of my clients during a hypnotherapy session. Time is on the horizontal axis, frequency on the vertical axis, and color indicates the intensity of brainwave oscillations. The time-span is 30 minutes, running from zero on the left to 30 minutes on the right. Brain oscillations at zero frequency lie along the bottom edge and oscillations at twenty-five cycles per second lie along the top. Black color indicates no brainwaves present at a given time and frequency, grading in color from blue to red to white which represents an amplitude of around 20 millivolts. None of this is particularly important. What are important are the changes over time.

Two oval areas on the left highlight areas of verbal attention and agitation that persist for five minutes, giving way to ten minutes of calm. In the second fifteen minutes, white streaks mark disordered, sudden activation at frequencies of verbal attention. I associate this with “disordered thoughts,” and background tension in the last five minutes.

Thinking, that is being conscious, is a combination of events. You are both a source of ideas and you react to them. You have to be a witness as well as an actor. You have to be self-aware.

The spectrogram is not a map of thoughts, it's a history of the arrangement of attention. This “arrangement” relates to what a person is able to perceive; what they are listening for.



Music and Mind

Thinking is similar to music. What you hear depends on how you listen, which depends on how many sounds you can follow and remember at any one time.

For example, an unskilled listener will hear a Bach fugue as a wash of sound with various melodic motifs emerging and retreating into a landscape of harmonies. A skilled listener, on the other hand, will know the fugue consists of four voices simultaneously singing for separate songs, each in a consonant tempo and similar key. The skilled listener can simultaneously hear and follow the four separate voices and, for them, the fugue is an entirely different experience. You can only begin to understand what you can clearly perceive.

In much the same way, a person in a state of agitation will experience agitated thoughts and an anxious experience. A calm and blissful person will engage and entrain with peaceful ideation. The person skilled in listening to their mind, like the person skilled in listening to music, will know there are separate and simultaneously overlapped rhythms. They will follow each without getting lost in the whole experience of mind. This is what the spectrogram shows: a person's states of attention: how they come and go and change over time.

There are connections between how you attend and what you think. It is difficult to have calm thoughts when you're in an anxious state, or to have anxious thoughts when you're in a calm state. It's difficult to appreciate the breadth and scope of a situation when you're focused on the shape and edge to each moment, and this remains true regardless of whether the situation is another person's love, the intentions of a group, or the emotions of a customer.

I work with clients using discussion, suggestion, and hypnosis. They have certain issues. They also have certain states of awareness, some of which appear on the spectrogram, and some of this I am able to read best from the spectrogram.

From an analytical point of view, we typically explore whether we are reaching the "right" conclusions. From an emotional point of view, we consider whether we are feeling fully and honestly. And from the point of view of awareness, we wonder if we're fully awake, aware, and engaged at the right frequencies with the concepts and events of our lives.

Brainwaves are the closest I've come to a science of phenomenology. The brainwave picture is a wave picture of broad attention that's complementary to the particulate perspective of focused reason.

What a Changed Person Is

By combining these approaches I believe we can get a reasonable answer to the question of what change is.

Change is what happens when you attend differently to your thoughts in such a way that thoughts and feelings establish a harmonious, stable pattern.

The three approaches are the rational, emotional, and the phenomenological. The three elements of change are difference, harmony, and stability. If there is no difference, there is no change. If there is no harmony, there is conflict. And if there is no stability, the change is not sustainable.

“To understand is to experience harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance.”

— Maurice Merleau-Ponty



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