

L. Michael Hall, Ph.D. Response

Steve Andreas has asked that I write a statement about my use of the term “meta.” I have done that in the following pages. My understanding of our differences is that Steve limits the term and processes it solely in of primary states. On the other hand, I follow the idea of *self-reflexivity* as Korzybski developed it and the unlimited iterations that can occur so that I see and use *meta* in many other ways. For me *meta* leads to the meta-levels that we call “logical levels,” to the theory of multiordinality (as Korzybski used the term), to meta-states (as I developed in the Meta-States Model), to the process of meta-detailing, and to many applications.

THE TERM “META” AND ITS USES

In NLP, *meta* has always been a central concept and term. And no wonder, from the beginning NLP has been recognized as a meta-discipline— one focused on *the structure of experience*. Accordingly in the early years (1972-1976), before the name “Neuro-Linguistic Program” was chosen, NLP was called “Meta.”

Similarly, in the first books of NLP, *The Structure of Magic, I and II* (1975, 1976) *meta* occurs all over the place. There you will find such expressions as— meta-models, meta-representational systems, meta-tactics, meta-form, meta-distinctions, meta-messages, meta-questions, meta-position, meta-commenting, etc.

“The representational system which is presupposed by your clients’ predicates is what we calla *Meta-form*.” (1976, p. 16)

“The Meta-Tactic of switching representational systems allows the client to overcome the pain or the block of further growth and change.” (1976, p. 19)

“Retaining the meta distinction is useful for us in our work.” (p. 41)

The Term “Meta”

The Greek term “*meta*” literally refers to something “above, beyond, or about” something else. As a relational term *meta* speaks about a thought *about* a thought, a feeling *about* a feeling. In meta-communication we communicate about our communications. In meta-linguistics, we use and/or develop language so we can talk about our language.

“The ability to communicate about communication, to comment upon the meaningful actions of oneself and others, is essential for successful social intercourse. In any normal relationship there is a constant interchange of meta-communicative messages such as ‘What do you mean?’ or ‘Why did you do that?’ or ‘Are you kidding me?’ and so on.” (Bateson, 1972, p. 215)

In the NLP Strategy Model, the *meta-move* is a move along a set of representational steps in which a person as it were “steps back” or “reflects back” onto a previous step or response and responds *to* that response. (*NLP, Volume I*, pp. 90, 91-92, 96, 109-110)

Steve has identified three definitions of “meta” and detailed them with some thought

experiments. I fully agree with those and then see several additional definitions of “meta,” especially the role of self-reflexive consciousness. My guess is that this is the source of our differences, hence the emphasis (below) on self-reflexivity.

Relying on both Korzybski and Bateson, I have relied on and run with the idea that Korzybski put forward about “the theory of multi-ordinality” as the source of so many human disasters. “Going meta” for him meant that the ability for an infinite regress of responses explained how the same word at different logical levels would have very different meanings, his introduction of multi-ordinality as an important linguistic distinction.

From that I developed the Meta-States Model as one expression of delving into a theory of multi-ordinality. When Richard Bandler asked me to review the history of the Meta-Model and write a book that we would jointly author, I added “multi-ordinality” to the extended Meta-Model (*Communication Magic*, 2001).

The “Meta” Source

In the human experience, the meta-function operates due to the kind of mind that we have—*our self-reflexive consciousness*. That is, as we think-and-feel in regard to something “out there” in the world (a primary state), perhaps experiencing joy, fear, love, anger, stress, etc., we can then as it were “step back” from ourselves and entertain additional (secondary) thoughts-and-feelings *about* our experience. When we fear our state of fear, we construct a meta-state. We can love our joy, fear our anger, feel ashamed of our fear, feel sad about our misunderstanding. The second state is *about* the first state. Here consciousness becomes richly complex. Here we do not just *add* another thought or feeling so that we have more thoughts and feelings in reference to something. Here we *multiply*.

Infinite

Nor does it stop at one level. Korzybski said that humans can “go meta” infinitely, that is, it is a process without end. With animals, the reflecting back onto one’s experience ends, not so with humans. With the reflexive consciousness of humans, whatever you think and/or feel, you can step back and think yet another thought/feeling about that.

Levels as Hierarchical

Bateson noted that the term *meta* creates a hierarchic series whether we are speaking about “change,” “learning,” “contexts,” etc.

“Within the field of pure communication theory, the steps of an hierarchic series may be constructed by successive use of the word ‘about,’ or ‘meta.’ Our hierarchical series will consist of message, meta-message, meta-meta-message, and so on.” (1972, p. 247-8)

He also noted that with the *meta* level structures that’s within communication and consciousness there are inherent complications.

“Further complications are added ... by noting that message may be about (or ‘meta’ to) the relationship between messages of different levels. ... In human relations another sort of complexity may be generated; e.g., message may be emitted forbidding the subject to make the meta connection. ... The hierarchy of messages and contexts thus becomes a complex branching

structure.” (1972, p. 248)

Teasing Out the Levels

Given that we can create communication-about-communication, and states-about-states, and these states merge and permeate to generate gestalt states (or experiences). What was *meta* or higher does not stay higher because, as the system operates, it eventually becomes incorporated within the state. When you *transcend and include*, you apply higher levels to the lower levels and eventually the higher levels *permeate* the lower levels— they coalesce.

Responsibility coalesces into commitment to a goal in a situation of fear and so “courage” then emerges as a gestalt state— more than and different from the sum of the parts.

Conversely, we can tease out the higher levels by simply inquiring about *the quality* of a state.

What’s the quality of your anger? That is, when you feel anger, what is that like for you? Do you like yourself when you are angry? Are you respectful and thoughtful when you’re angry? Do you lose your head and go ballistic when you get angry? Can you maintain civility and patience when you’re feeling upset or angry? Or do you become impatient and insulting?

Asking about the quality of a state *flushes out* the higher level frame that’s governing the state. Inside that “frame” are thoughts, understandings, beliefs, identifications, decisions, memories, imaginations, etc. These *meta-states* are the states that you have previously brought to the experience, the experience now is a member of these frames.

The Multiple and Rich Significance of Meta-Levels

Given all of this, when you move to, or create, a meta-level, *you are doing multiple things* simultaneously. You are creating a *frame* that classifies the experience, setting an internal *context* that controls the meaning of the test, establishing a “game” that has inner rules, etc.

Start with a second thought *about* a first thought. This creates a frame-of-reference for the first thought and within that frame are multiple understandings. We call them by various meta-terms: beliefs, understandings, identity, memories, imaginations, permissions, etc.

An example: Access a thought-emotion of joy (delight, fun, playfulness) about learning. This *joy* (second thought or emotion) is *about* the state of learning (being receptive, changing perception, etc.). In doing this, you set a *frame* of joy about learning. The *joy* also becomes your inner context about learning. *Learning* now becomes a member of the class of *Joyful* things. Now you probably *believe* in learning as being fun. You might even define yourself as a joyful learner.

This is where terminology, critically important becomes challenging. Because the abstractions we use are reified (treated as a real thing and coded as nominalizations). This terminology itself makes understanding and clarity difficult. Bateson note how much language restrains us and creates problems for clear thinking when we move to this realm.

“These signals are evidently of higher Logical Type than the messages they classify. Among human beings this framing and labeling of messages and meaningful actions

reaches considerable complexity, with the peculiarity that our vocabulary for such discrimination is still very poorly developed...” (Bateson, 1972, p. 203).

Speaking about abstractions in language such as “hostility,” “love,” “dependence,” etc. as if real things, he noted that “this is epistemology backwards,” and says—

“We are so befuddled by language that we cannot think straight...” (p. 275)

The Meta Functions

Lots of things happen simultaneously in the meta process. By “going meta” you 1) *classify* an item. You put it in a certain category and this delimits what’s in that category. 2) *Qualify* or texture the items in that classification. 3) *Govern* the experience as it sets up the “rules” for how the experience now operates.

1) Classify. “The context (or meta-message) *classifies* the message...” (Bateson, 1972, p. 247). “In human life ... there occur signals whose major function is to *classify* contexts” ... context markers (Bateson, 1972, p. 289). With each new frame we simultaneously set *an internal context* for our experience. Each meta-level is simultaneously a meta-state, named by some meta-term, a frame, an inner context.

2) Qualify. “All messages and parts of messages are like phrases or segments of equations which a mathematician puts in brackets. Outside the brackets there may always be a qualifier or multiplier which will alter the whole tenor of the phrase.” (Bateson, 1972, p. 232). As a higher level is set to classify members of the set, it modulates and qualifies their members.

3) Govern. “... in the process of therapy, there must have been communication at a level *meta* to these rules. There must have been communication about a *change* in rules.” (Bateson, 1972, p. 191). The higher modulates the lower as *the bias* set in a thermostat controls the range of flexibility of temperature in a room.

4) Expand Perspective. The process of moving up to a meta or higher level simultaneously expands one’s perspective. When a person moves from a particular to more general and abstract level (the class or category), the person at the same time gains a broader perspective of a large horizon.

5) Gestalt and Emergence. The process of “going meta” is not always additive, in fact, it is more typically exponential. It multiplies things so that a gestalt experience arises. Then something “more than and different from the sum of the parts” arise. This is an emergent property in a system of multiple variables. Many complex states (courage, forgiveness, self-esteem, seeing opportunity, etc.) are gestalt states.

Two Worlds: Newtonian (Substance) and Communication (Form)

Bateson constantly spoke about two worlds which operate by different principles and “dynamics.” He emphasized that while the term “dynamics” can be used literally for the Newtonian world, it can only be used metaphorically for the inner world of communication.

“The difference between *the Newtonian world* and *the world of communication* is simply this: that the Newtonian world ascribes reality to objects and achieves its simplicity by excluding the context of the context— excluding indeed all meta-relationships—a fortiori excluding an infinite regress of such relations.” (Bateson, 1972, p. 250, italics added)
“The explanatory world of *substance* can invoke no differences and no ideas but only forces and impacts. And per contra, the world of *form* and communication invokes no things, forces, or impacts but only differences and ideas.” (Bateson, 1972, p. 271, also p. 489)

For the world of communication, we use our self-reflexivity to move up a logical level to set a frame-of-reference about our experience in the Newtonian world. Doing this creates a meta-level state, an inner context of understanding, which then defines the pattern— “a contextual structure, a set of rules for how to put the information together” (Bateson, p. 276). Together all of these variables make up the human mind-body-emotion system. This gives us a holistic system with feedback and feed-forward communication loops.

The Meta of Meta-States

Structurally, a meta-state stands in special relationship to a state. The second state relates to the primary state as a higher awareness *about* the lower state. The junior state functions as a *member* of the class defined by the higher state. The higher or meta-state functions as a category for understanding and feeling *about* the lower.

That’s why “fear of our anger” (fearful anger) differs in texture so much from “respect of our anger” (respectful anger).

That’s why “shame about getting angry because it only turns things nasty” differs so much in texture to “appreciation of my powers to get angry because it informs me that some perceived value or understanding feels violated and allows me to respectfully explore the situation *anger*.”

As a higher logical level, the mental and emotional *frames* that we bring to our primary experiences represent *the governing influences* of beliefs, decisions, identities, etc. The higher frame, as a message about the lower experience, modulates, organizes, and governs it. It functions like a self-organizing attractor in the mind-body system. In your meta-states, you will find values, beliefs, expectations, understandings, identifications, etc. Some will be obvious and explicit, others will be hidden and covert.

Framing

A word that is a close synonym of *meta* is frame. A frame is a perceptual filter, it sets a category or a class, it is an interpretative schema as a structure whereby we attribute meaning to things. And similar to *meta*, it does many things simultaneously. As such it manages meaning, governs attention, controls responses, creates an orientation, orders (organizes) perception, punctuates a series of events, etc.

“Within dream or fantasy the dreamer does not operate with the concept ‘untrue.’ He operates with all sorts of statements but with a curious inability to achieve meta-statements. He cannot ... dream a statement referring to (i.e., framing) his dream.” (Bateson, 1972, p. 185)

“The first step in defining a psychological frame might be to say that it is (or delimits) a class or

set of messages.” (p. 186)

“While the analogy of the mathematical set is perhaps over abstract, the analogy of the picture frame is excessively concrete. The psychological concept which we are trying to define is neither physical nor logical. ... Psychological frames are exclusive, i.e., by including certain messages within a frame, certain other messages are excluded. Psychological frames are inclusive, i.e., by excluding certain messages certain others are included. ...” (187)

“A frame is meta-communicative. Any message, which either explicitly or implicitly defines a frame, *ipso facto* gives the receiver instructions or aids in his attempt to understand the messages included within the frame.” (188)

When *Meta* becomes Systemic

When we tease apart the structure of our higher frames-of-references (or meta-states) from the primary experiences we do so to create clarity about the inherent structure within complex states. In actual practice, however, primary and meta levels of experiences or states merge into *one unit*. Research scientist Arthur Koestler introduced the term “holons” to describe reality as composed of “*whole/parts*.” These whole/parts *holons* refer to any “entity” that is itself *a whole* and yet simultaneously *a part* of some other whole.

“To explain the observed phenomena we *always* have to consider the wider context of the learning experiment.” Why? “The larger context may change the sign of the reinforcement proposed by a given message, and evidently the larger context may also change the mnode— may place the message in the category of humor, metaphor, etc. ... The context (or meta-message) *classifies* the message, but can never meet it on equal terms.” (Bateson, 1972, p. 246-247)

This means several things. First as holons, we experience our “states” as a whole. We experience confidence, courage, commitment, playfulness, joy, flow, etc. as a whole experience and not as the various variables that make up the experience. Yet second, each exists as a part of some larger whole. Within the holistic experience there is a part/whole structured experience— inner contexts and contexts-of-contexts.

As a system, we now have systemic properties arising. We have the *emergence* of new qualities. By transcending the current state or experience and including it, we put the experience within a higher frame.

In systems, the new *gestalt* is “more than and different from the sum of the parts.” Merely *adding* all of the parts together does not, and cannot, explain what emerges. *Emergence* occurs as new properties arise and there is a leap upward to a higher form of organization.

“So there are both discontinuities in evolution —mind cannot be reduced to life, and life cannot be reduced to matter; and there are continuities ..” (Ken Wilber, 1996, p. 24)

Each higher level *embraces* and *engulfs* the lower. When you take a primary state like anger or confidence and set various frames on it, you create the possibility for new emergent properties to emerge.

Imagine embracing your anger with acceptance, appreciation, and then wonder. Imagine engulfing it in love, respect, and honor. Imagine applying mindfulness, values, and patience to it. Imagine bringing ecology concerns, moral uprightness, and honor to it. Mix well. Put into the oven of your mind, let it bake for awhile...

Imagine embracing your power to take action in the world with acceptance and appreciation. Imagine engulfing it with ownership, excitement, and joy. Imagine applying hope, desired outcomes, willingness to take intelligent risks, love, and concern for others, to it. Mix all of these well in a state of contemplative relaxation. Let it bake as you learn and explore and develop...

Do this and you will *texture* your state. You can now create *calm respectful anger*. If you take charge of the process, you can design the kind of quality states that will enhance your life. To transcend an everyday state, begin with the primary level of consciousness, notice your thoughts and feelings *about* something. As your primary state, your awareness focuses on something external to yourself. You fear driving fast, closed in places, particular tones of voices. You get angry at insults. You delight in and enjoy the beauty of a scene or a piece of music.

You then *transcend* this experience *including it* as you move up to a chose meta-awareness. This creates a new level of organization. You now have something *higher* that still contains the essentials of the lower *plus something else*.

In respect, considerate, and patient anger—you still have anger. You still have the sense of threat or danger to your person, yet the *anger* is now textured in larger levels of mind and emotion causing something new to emerge. You have the anger state *plus* something that transcends the anger. Perhaps you have thoughtful anger or respectful anger.

By transcending the lower, you *add* new features, qualities, properties, and characteristics. You now have the ability to engineer new emergent properties for your states. It gives us the key to the structure of subjectivity as experiences become more complex and layered.

When your learning is *taken up into* playfulness and appreciation, when you *engulf* it with passion and the intention to improve the quality of life—something new emerges. You have a passionate and accelerated learning state.

Psycho-Logical Levels and States

When we put a state like anger or fear *inside* another state (i.e., calmness, respect, gentleness, courage, etc.), *we change the internal logic of our nervous system*. And in doing this we also change our way of thinking. We create what Alfred Korzybski called “psycho-logic.”

Anger now becomes a member of the class of calmness. Or it could become a member of the class of respect. This completely re-creates one’s “logic,” way of reasoning and generates a very new and different way of responding. Normally (what’s the norm in most cultures) anger is a member of the class of threatening things or personal insult. To put it into a new classification re-creates a new *psycho-logic* for a person’s state and experience.

“Levels” and “Types” as Synonyms

When we move from one *level* to the next higher “logical” level, to its classification, it is simultaneously at a higher logical *type*. In this the terminology of *level* and *type* are synonyms of each other. When you put one thought-feeling at a meta-relationship to another, the higher

level operates as a category of the lower level. This is what we mean by both “logical types” and “logical levels.” One state is a “logical” relationship to another so it is at a higher *level* and is *about* the other.

The phrase “logical level” is comprised of two abstractions or nominalizations. For “logical” we have logic, logos, so the hidden verb is *reasoning*, a way of computing information. For “level” we have layers and the hidden verb *layering*. So with a “logical level” we refer to the process of reasoning that layers one thing upon another. When you hunt for a “logical type or level” you look at how a mind is classifying, categorizing, or punctuating things. That’s where a “logical type or level” exists—in a mind that represents categories and levels or orders of abstractions.

What is a *logical level*?

"In our brain structure, language, and perceptual systems there are natural *hierarchies* or levels of experiences. The effect of each level is to *organize and control the information on the level below it*. Changing something on an upper level would necessarily change things on the lower levels; changing something on a lower level could but would not necessarily affect the upper levels." (Dilts, Epstein, Dilts, 1991, p. 26, *italics added*).

"Logical Levels: an internal hierarchy in which each level is progressively more psychologically *encompassing and impactful*" (1990: 217, *italics added*).

"*Logical typing* occurs where there is a *discontinuity* (as opposed to a continuity, as with the hierarchies) between levels of classification. This kind of discontinuity is exemplified:

- a) in mathematic, by the restriction that a class cannot be a member of itself nor can one of the members *be* the class.
- b) in logic, by the solution to the classic logical paradox, 'This statement is false.' (If the statement is true, it is false, and if it is false, then it is true, and so on.) The actual truth value of the statement is of a different logical type than the statement itself.
- c) in behavior, by the fact that the reinforcement rules for exploration in animals is of a completely different nature than those for the process of testing that occurs in the act of exploration." (1983: 24).

"The informational effects between levels and types is called *feedback* and is probably the major distinguishing feature of cybernetic systems." (1983: 39)

"Differences of the same or different logical type interacting at different levels (hierarchical or logical respectively) will result in the modulation of the difference on the lower level." (1983: 49)

Gregory Bateson:

A Logical Type: 1) The name is not the thing named but is of different logical type, higher than the thing named. 2) The class is of different logical type, higher than that of its members. (Mary Catherine Bateson, 1987, pp. 209-210).

Criteria for “logical levels:”

1. *Hierarchies* of experience.
2. Higher levels *organize and control* information on lower levels.
3. The *modulation* effect of the system necessarily works downward.
4. The modulation effect of the system does not necessarily work upward.

5. Higher levels operate more *encompassing and impactful* than the lower levels.
6. There exists a *discontinuity* between the levels—a break.
7. The relationship of logic between levels creates "paradox" if we don't sort phenomena on different levels.
8. Hierarchical logical levels function as a *system*, the higher levels arise *out of* the lower and *feed back* information into the system to influence the lower levels. This creates recursiveness within logical levels.
9. As a cybernetic system, as information moves up logical levels *new features emerge* that does not exist at the lower levels. This emergence at higher levels involve, in systems language, summitivity. In other words, the emergent property does not exist only as the sum of the parts, but new properties and qualities arise over "time" within the system.
10. *Reflexivity* describes one of the new features that emerge in logical levels. In living organisms this results in self-reflexiveness or self-consciousness.
11. As a system with feedback properties, logical levels operates by self-reflexiveness, the whole system becomes cybernetic. It becomes a "system that feeds back onto and changes itself" (Dilts, 1990, 33). This makes it self-organizing.

In the index of Bateson's book *Mind and Nature* (1979), he writes this under the list of "*Logical Types*." A series of examines is in order:

1. The name is not the thing named but is of different logical type, higher than the thing named.
2. The class is of different logical type, higher than that of its members.
3. The injunctions issues by, or control emanating from, the bias of the house thermostat is of higher logical type than the control issued by the thermometer.
4. The word "tumbleweed" is of the same logical type as "bush" or "tree." It is not the name of a species or genus of plants; rather, it is the name of a class of plants whose members share a particular style of growth and dissemination.
5. "Acceleration" is of a higher logical type than "velocity."

In another place Bateson defined *logical types* in the following way:

Logical Type: 1) The name is not the thing named but is of different logical type, higher than the thing named. 2) The class is of different logical type, higher than that of its members. (Mary Catherine Bateson, 1987, pp. 209-210).

Bateson's interchangeable use of "Levels" and "Types"

In *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972/2000), Bateson defines "logical types" in terms of levels of abstraction and quotes Korzybski's map-territory distinction (p. 180). The following highlights his use of levels and types.

"... a frame is meta-communicative. Any message, which either explicitly or implicitly defines a frame, *ipso facto* gives the receiver instructions or aids in his attempt to understand the message included within the frame.

... Every meta-communicative or meta-linguistic message defines, either explicitly or implicitly, the set of messages about which it communicates, i.e., every

meta-communicative message is or defines a psychological frame. (p. 188)

“No class can be a member of itself. The picture frame then, because it delimits a background, is here regarded as an external representation of a very special and important type of psychological frame—namely a frame whose function is to delimit a *logical type*.” (189)

In his chapter “Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia” Bateson describes “how humans handle communication involving multiple Logical Types” (p. 203). In that section he writes the following:

“Multiple levels of learning and the Logical Typing of signals. These are two *inseparable sets of phenomena—inseparable* because the ability to handle the multiple types of signals is itself a *learned* skill and therefore a function of the multiple *levels* of learning.” (204)

From *Mind and Nature* (1979), Bateson defines “mind” as involving processes of transformation that discloses “a hierarchy of logical *types* immanent in the phenomena.” (p. 122).

“I shall try to drive home the importance of this criterion by exhibiting cases in which the discrimination of *levels* of communication has been so confused or distorted that various sorts of frustration and pathology have been the result.” (122)

He then speaks about signals that we emit and then about another *class* of information that tells us about the coding of messages or indications from the person. These he calls meta-messages (p. 122-123). In so explaining “logical types” he then says,

“All this is premised on the existence of *levels* whose nature I am here trying to make clear. We start with a potential differentiation between action in context and action or behavior which defines context or makes context intelligible. ... I refer to the latter type of communication as *meta-communication*... A function, an effect, of the meta-message is in fact to classify the messages that occur within its contexts.” (p. 124).

“The more appropriate question would be: At what *level* of *logical typing* does genetic command act in the determining of this characteristic? The answer to this question will always take the form: At one *logical level* *higher* than the observed ability of the organism to achieve learning or bodily change by somatic process.” (175)

“In sum, each of these disasters will be found to contain an error in *logical typing*. In spite of immediate gain at one *logical level*, the sign is reversed and benefit becomes calamity in some other, larger and longer, context.” (189)

In describing the “levels of control of house temperature” Bateson used arrows to mark the direction of control in the system. It zigzagged from Personal status to Genetics and training to personal threshold, to “too cold” or “too hot” to bias to oscillating temperature. To all of this Bateson commented:

“With each zigzag of the ladder, the sphere of relevance increases. In other words, there is a change in *logical typing* of the information collected by the sense organ at each *level*.” (215)

“To jump downward two or more steps in the hierarchy is likewise undesirable ... the effect of any such jumping of levels, upward or downward, is that information appropriate as a basis for decision at one level will be used as basis for decision at some other *level*, a common variety of error in *logical typing*.” (216)

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