An Innovative Acceptance and Commitment Approach to Career Theory and Practice: Why, What and How?

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Poll question 1

How familiar are you with ACT, the Acceptance and Commitment approach?

1. I know (practically) nothing about ACT
2. I know a few things about ACT
3. I know the six core processes of ACT
4. I use elements of ACT
5. I am a skilled ACT practitioner

Paradigm

- conceptual framework
- universally applied model
- a lens through which we see the world

A thinking I/self

collects and processes info, understands, decides, plans and executes.

Self-knowledge (abilities and wants)	+	Knowledge about alternatives in the world	→	Vocational choice; career self-direction

Paradigm is old

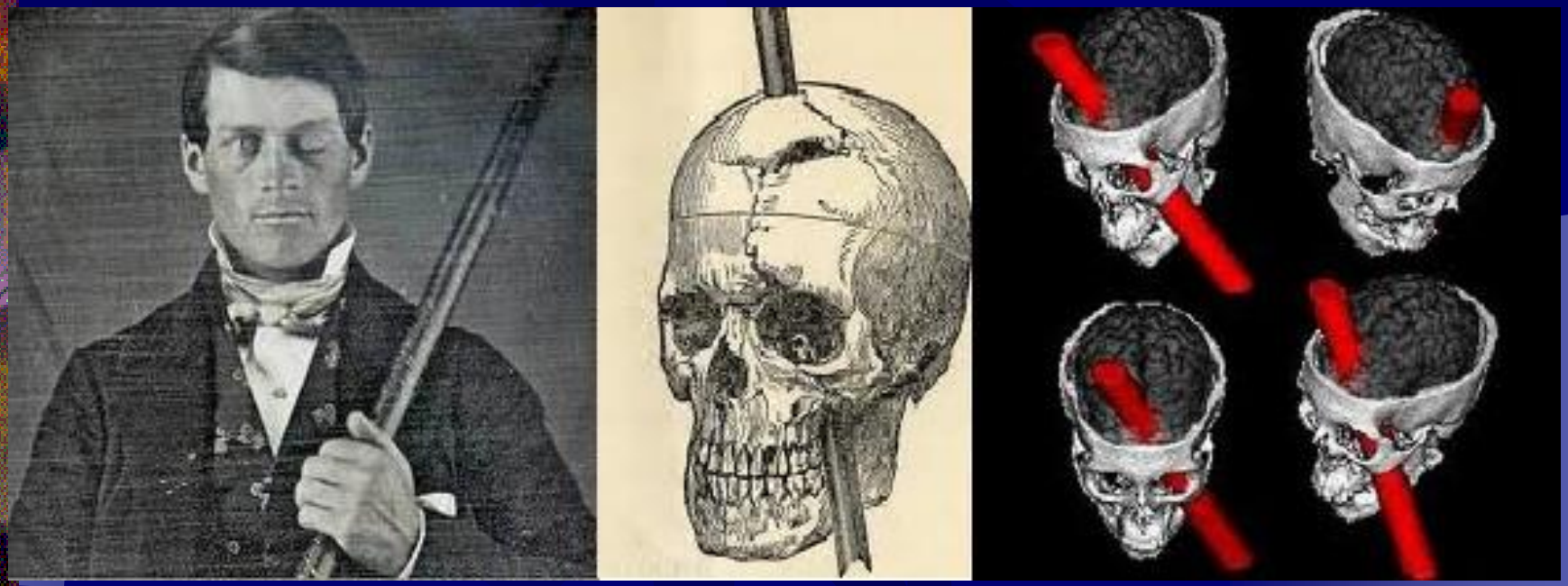
In the wise choice of a vocation there are three broad factors: (1) a clear understanding of yourself, your aptitudes, abilities, interests, ambitions, resources, limitations, and their causes; (2) a knowledge of the requirements and conditions of success, advantages and disadvantages, compensation, opportunities, and prospects in different lines of work; (3) true reasoning on the relations of these two groups of facts.

Parsons (1909, p. 5)

Paradigm still stands, e.g.:

- Cognitive Information Processing Theory (Osborn et al., 2019’
  - A central role for knowledge and thinking
- Narrative approach; Career Construction Theory & Practice
  - “self-conscious reflection through language is the process that makes a self” (Savickas, 2013, p. 148)
  - Autobiography → career theme → goals
- The Living Systems Theory of Vocational Behavior and Development (Vondracek, Ford, & Porfeli, 2014)
  - goal setting by conscious thinking
- The Systems Theory Framework of Career Development (Patton & McMahon, 2014).
  - the framework is used as an instrument for collecting information about self and world

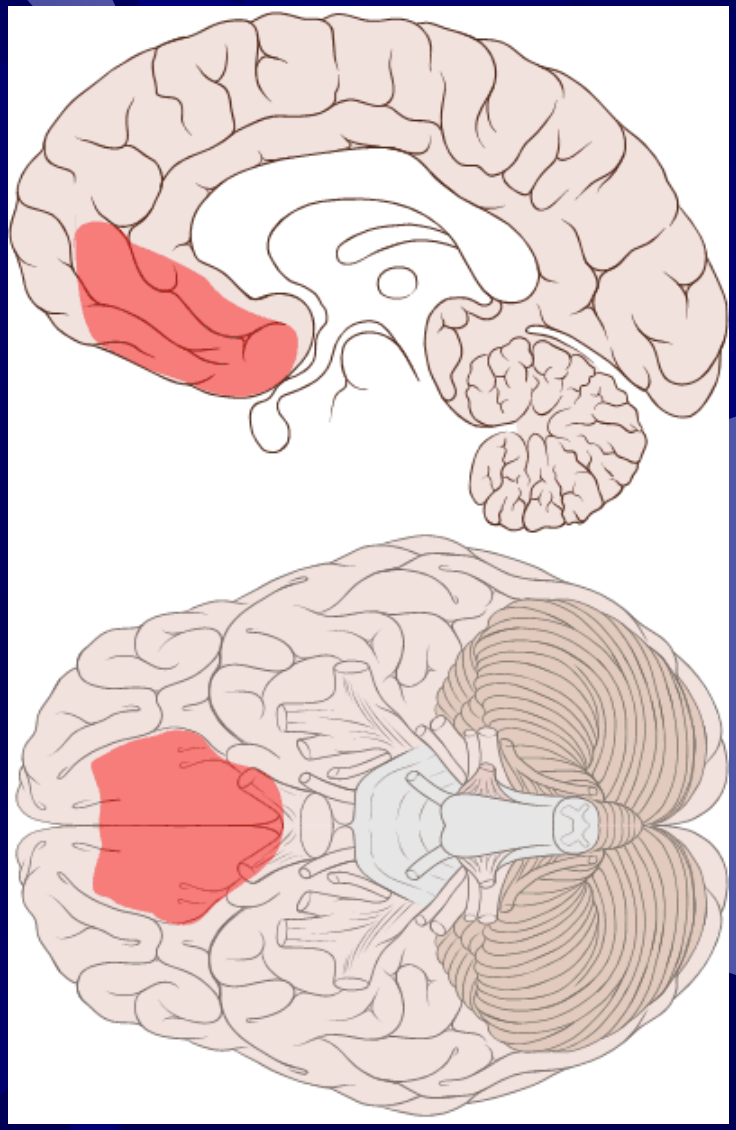
Thinking can not direct us



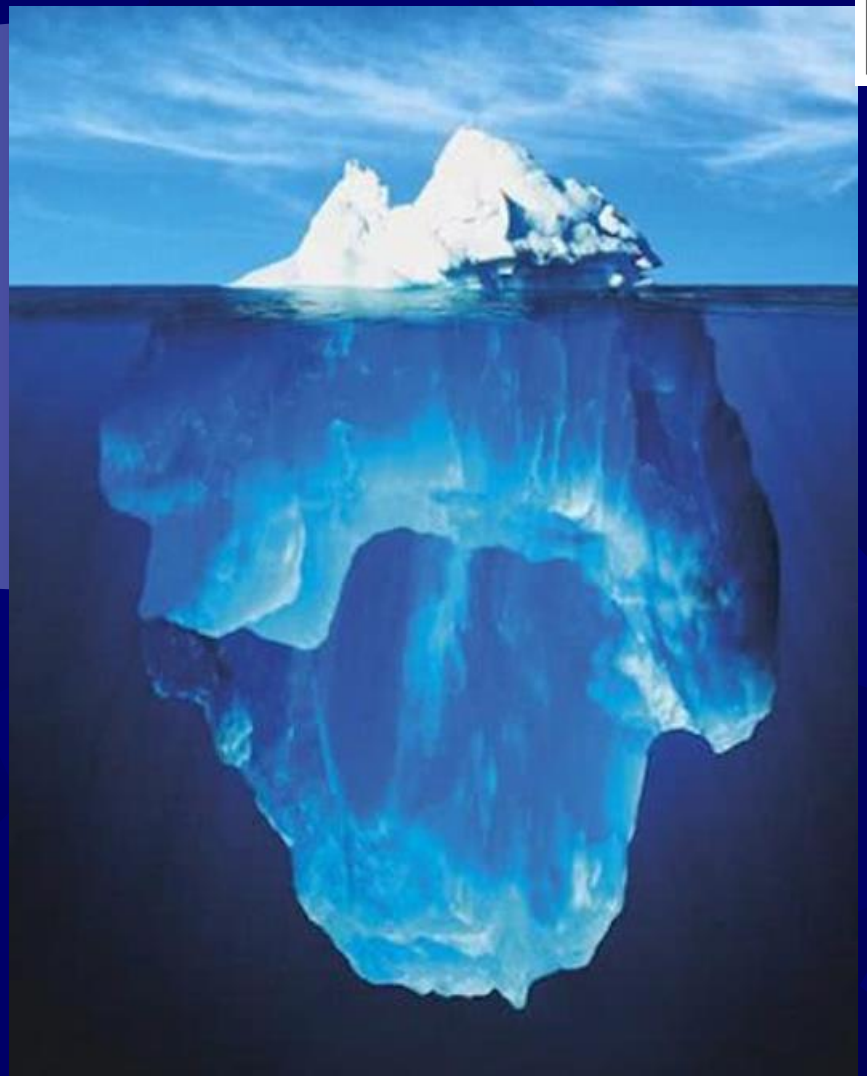
- Phineas Gage (Damasio, 1994)
- Patiënt R. (Stuss,1991)
- Elliot (Seligman, et al., 2016)

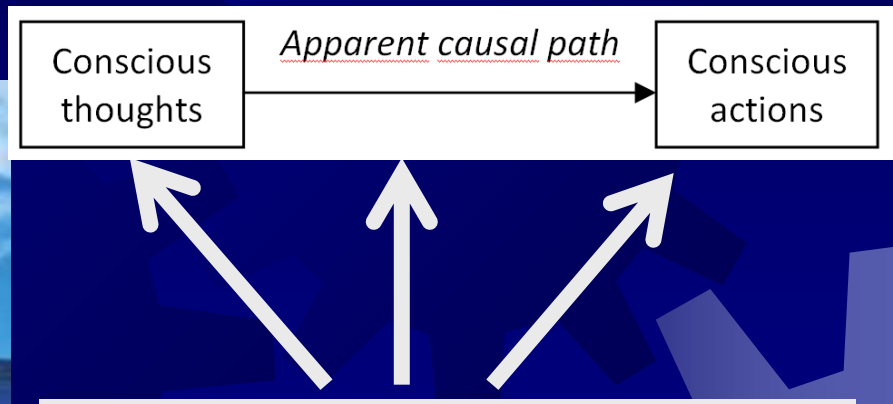
Needed:

- “Affective forecasting”
- “Somatic markers”
- Ventromedial prefrontal cortex



Paradigm is too much focused on conscious part





Unconscious processes

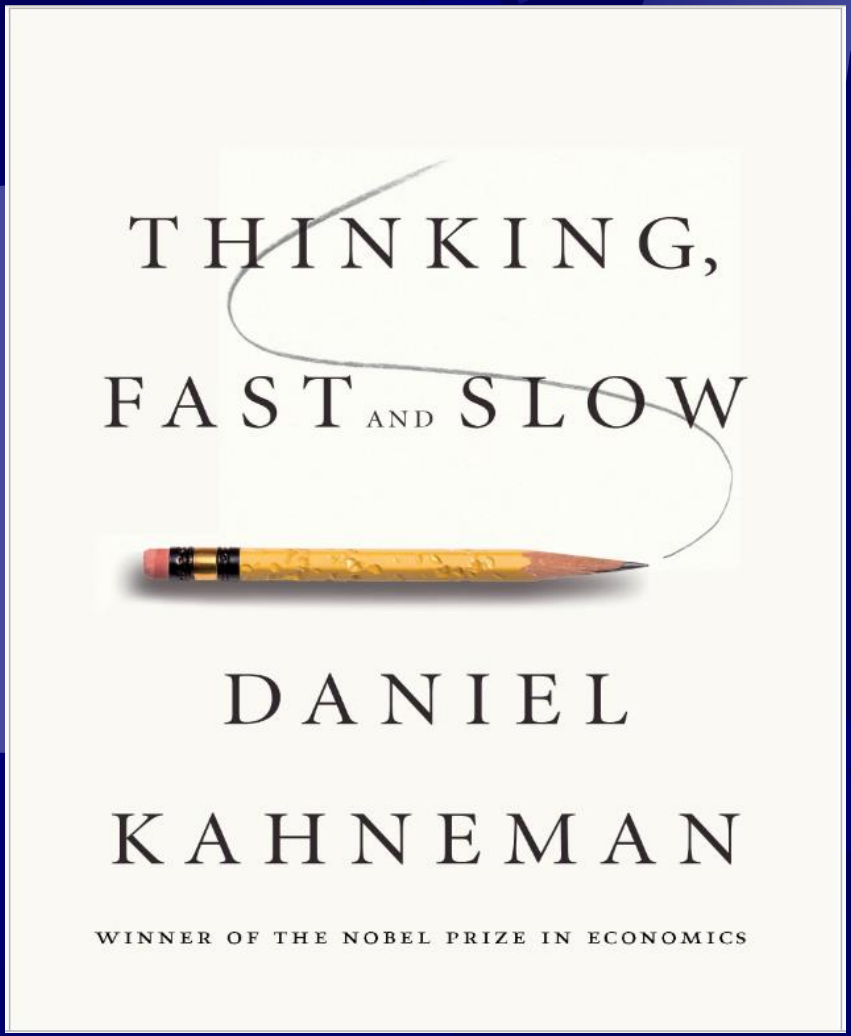
Poll question 2

Thought experiment:

Suppose you are asked to participate in a medical experiment. Unfortunately, it will be very painful. But afterwards you will receive a pill that will completely wipe out any memory of the episode. You will not experience any negative consequences.

What is the smallest reward that would make you participate?

1. $ 100
2. $ 1,000
3. $ 10,000
4. $ 100,000
5. No reward would make me participate

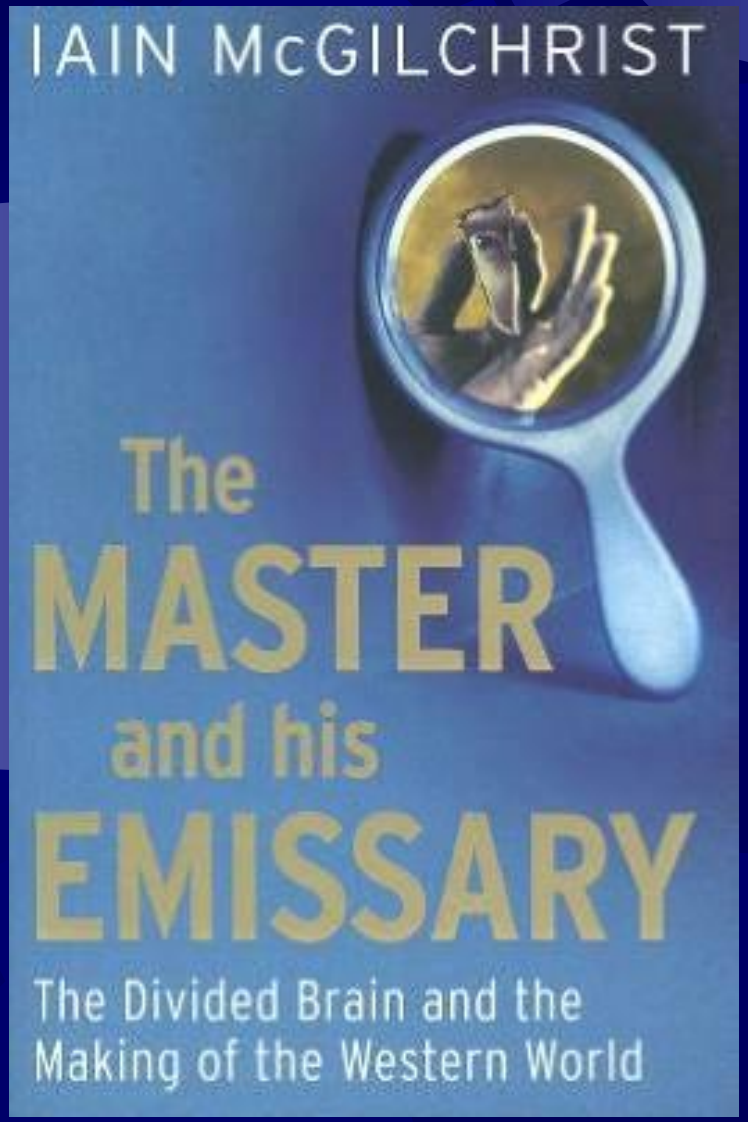


We identify with our ***remembering self***. This leads us to “manifestly absurd choices” (p. 408) at the expense of the ***experiencing self***.

The smart unconscious: Thinking with feeling

Conscious thinking impairs achievements in many circumstances (e.g., face recognition, wine tasting).

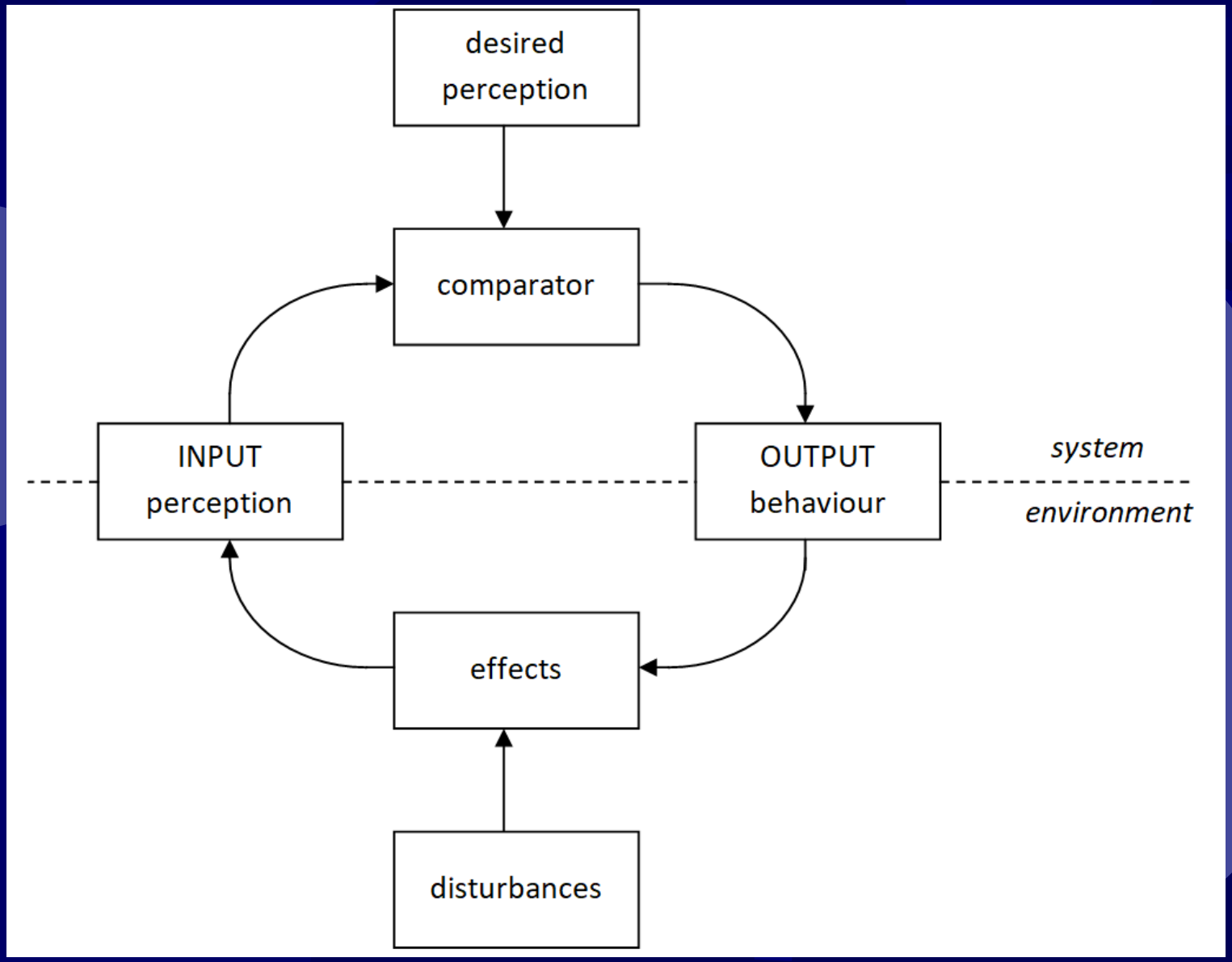
In complex, ambiguous, or changing situations, “unconscious thinking” leads to better decisions than conscious thinking.



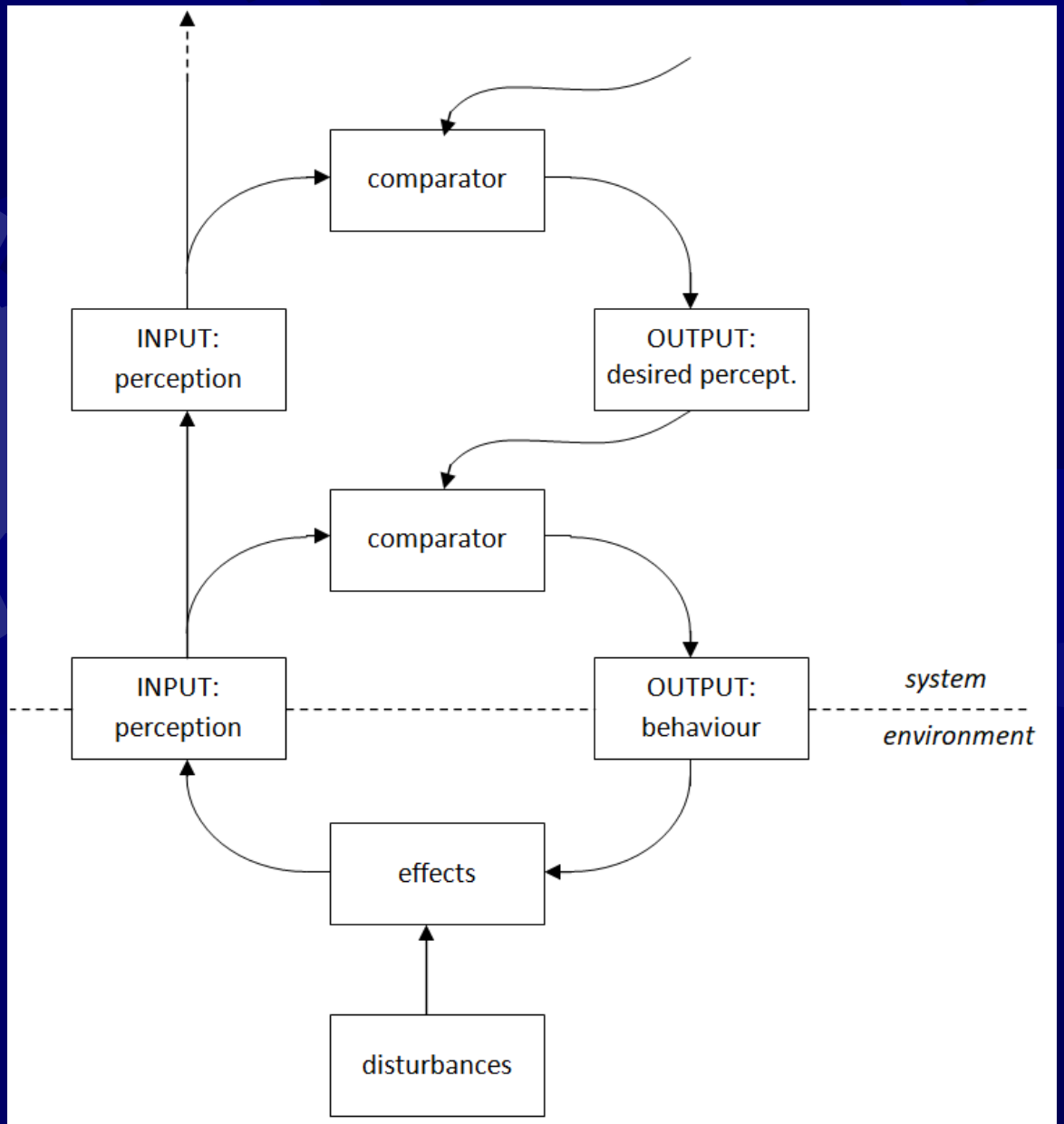
The Emissary (verbal, targeted thinking; left hemisphere) dominates the Master (the experiencing self in context; right hemisphere).

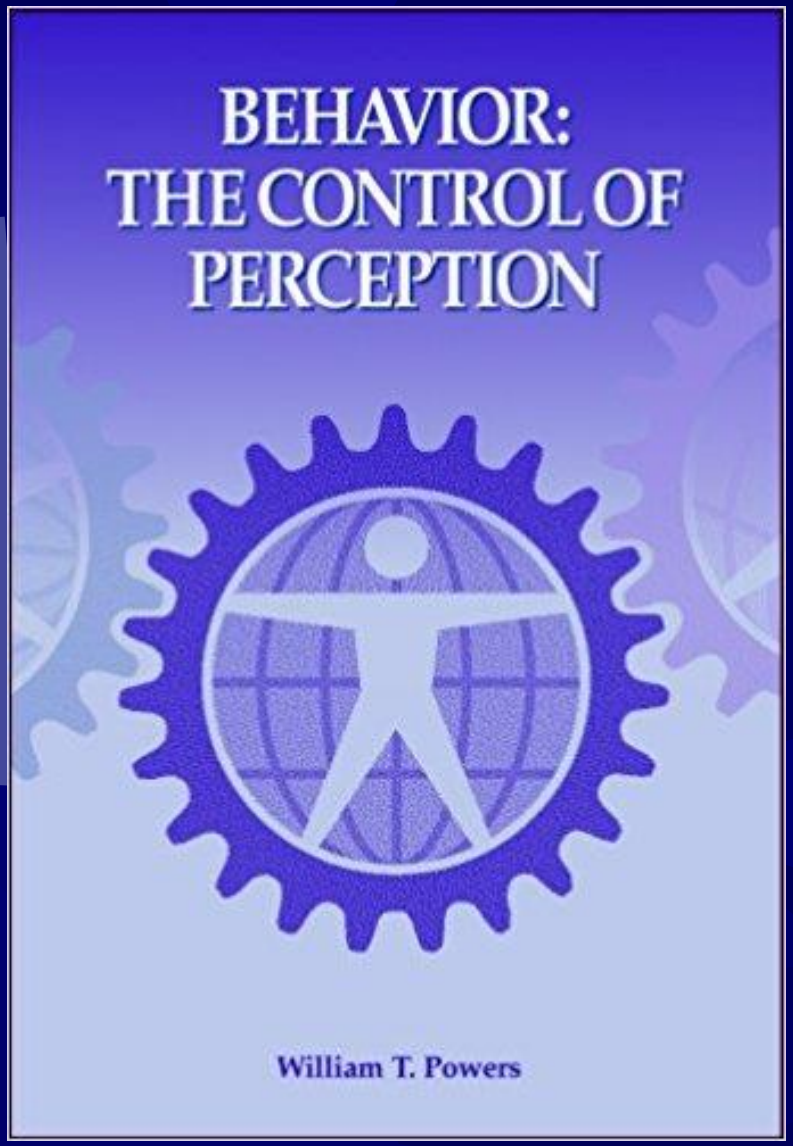
System 2 Conscious thinking Left hemisphere	System 1 'Smart unconscious' Right hemisphere
Serial processing	Many parallel processes
Effortful, slow	Effortless, fast
Classify, analyse	"Aha-erlebnis", intuition, dream
Applies rules, algorithmic	Associative, heuristic
Verbal representations, story	Living reality, here and now experience
Directed at self	Directed at context, other
Sensitive to positive feedback	Sensitive to negative feedback
Goal directed, persistent	Tendency to do something else
Overconfident, dominating	Modest, speechless
We identify with this	Represents ourselves in contexts better

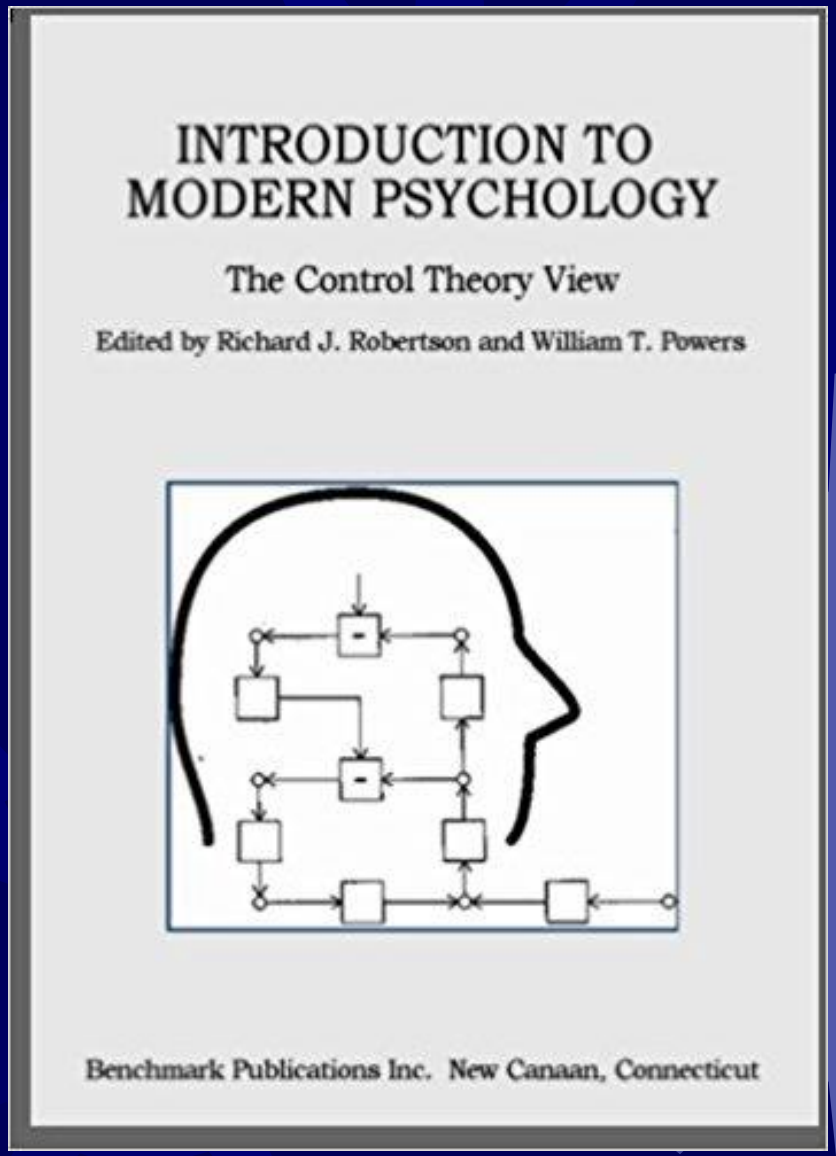
A basic cybernetic structure



A piece of a control hierarchy




BEHAVIOR:
THE CONTROL OF
PERCEPTION
William T. Powers


INTRODUCTION TO
MODERN PSYCHOLOGY
The Control Theory View
Edited by Richard J. Robertson and William T. Powers
Benchmark Publications Inc. New Canaan, Connecticut

Hierarchy of 11 levels according to Perceptual Control Theory (Robertson & Powers, 1990).	
11	System concepts
10	Principle
9	Program
8	Sequence
7	Category
6	Relationship
5	Event
4	Transition
3	Configuration
2	Sensation
1	Intensity

Characteristics PCT

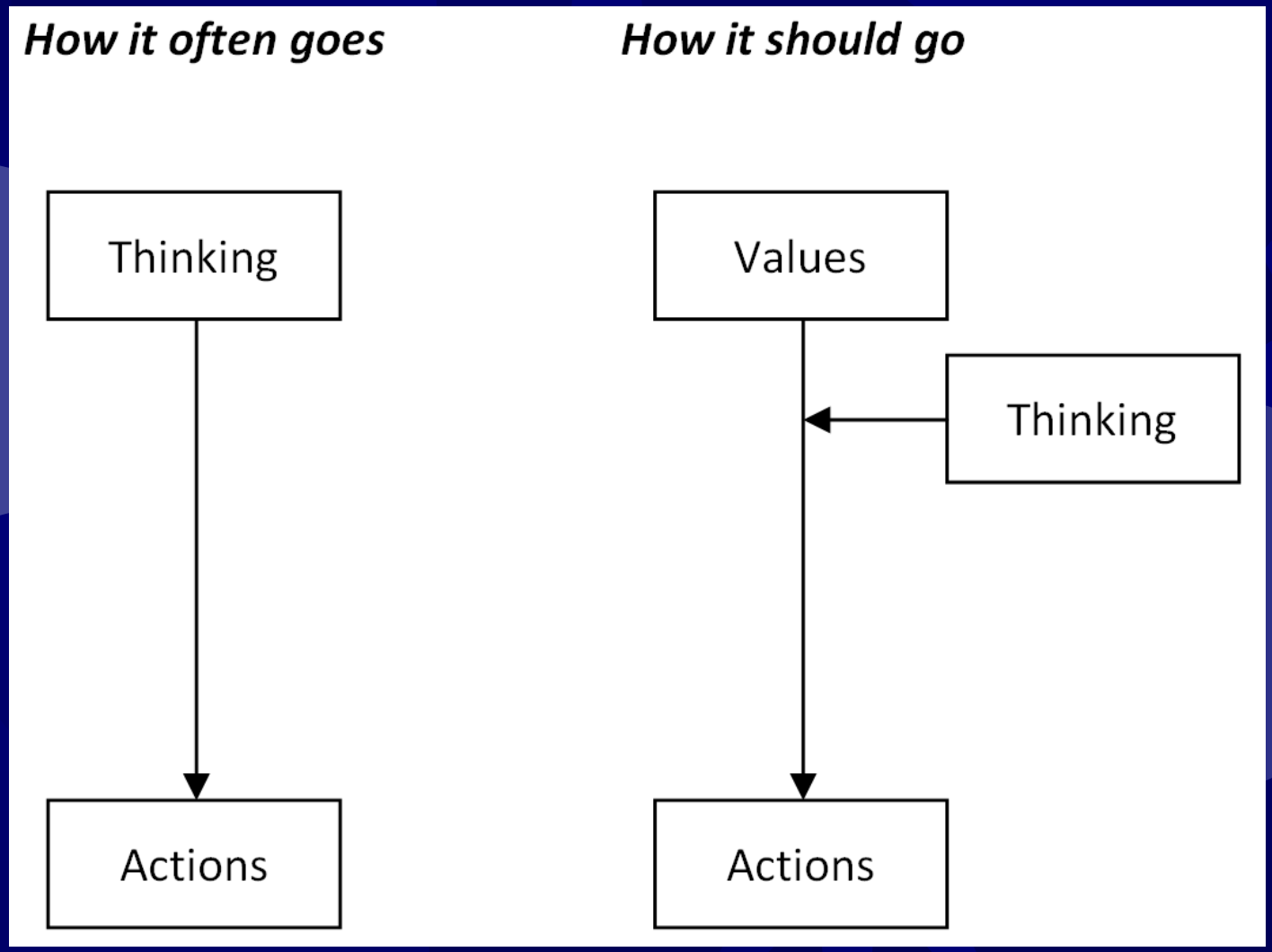
- Behaviour is the control of perception
- A dynamic, circular process
- Continuous bottom-up and top-down interaction and feedback from the environment
- No controller in the control system

- A ‘parsimonious’ theory with much predicting and explaining power (Pfau, 2017)
- Successfully applied in several sub-domains of psychology that are relevant for career development, e.g.:
  - learning (Hershberger, 1990)

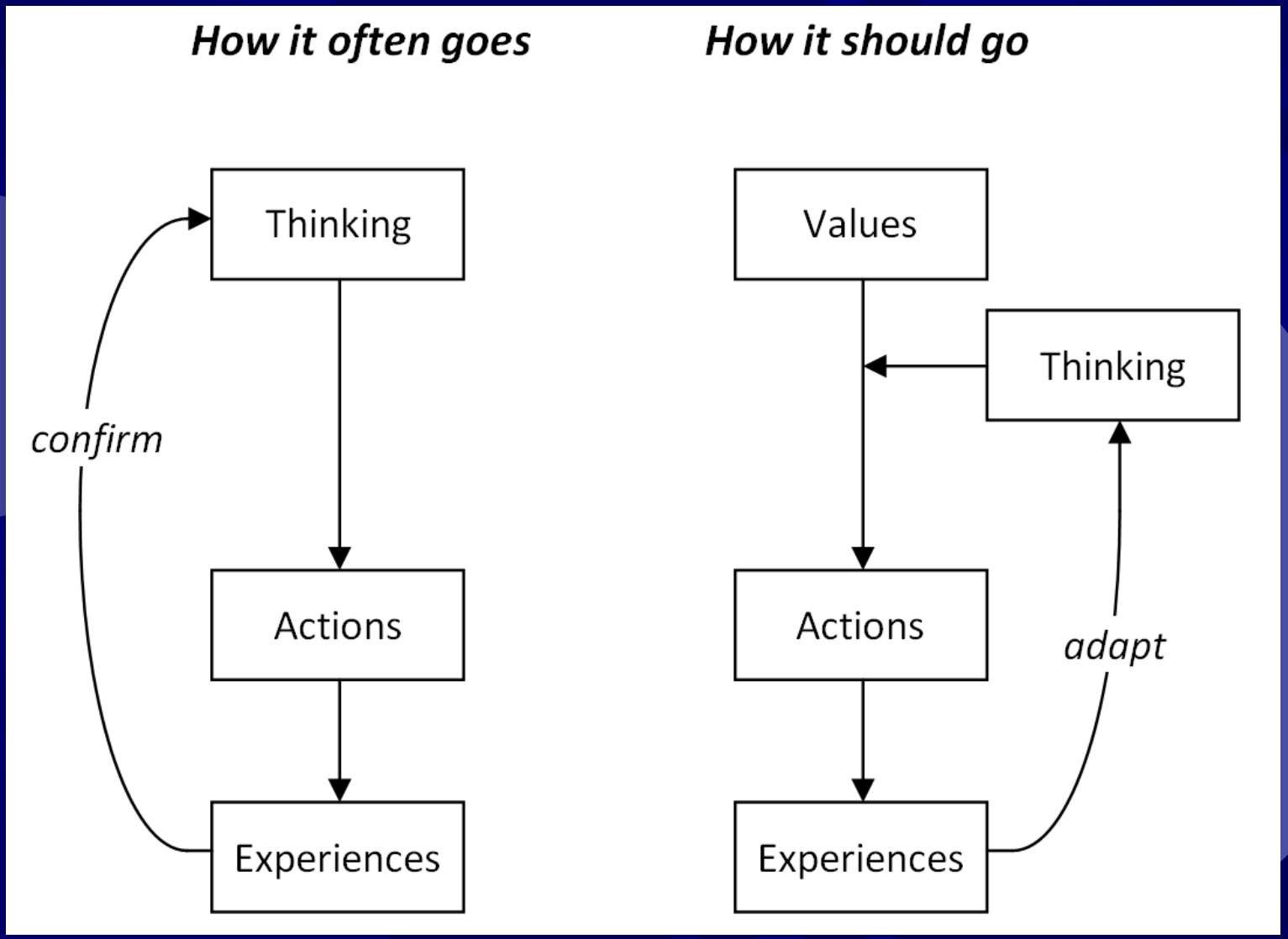
- thinking (Pezzulo & Castelfranchi, 2009)
- identity development (Kerpelman, Pittman, & Lamke, 1997)
- psychological health and psychotherapy (Higginson, Mansell, & Wood, 2011)
- goal striving processes (Vancouver & Putka, 2000)

- Correspond well with recent neuroscientific findings (Jordan, 2013; Yin, 2014).

Key point


How it often goes
Thinking
Actions
How it should go
Values
Thinking
Actions

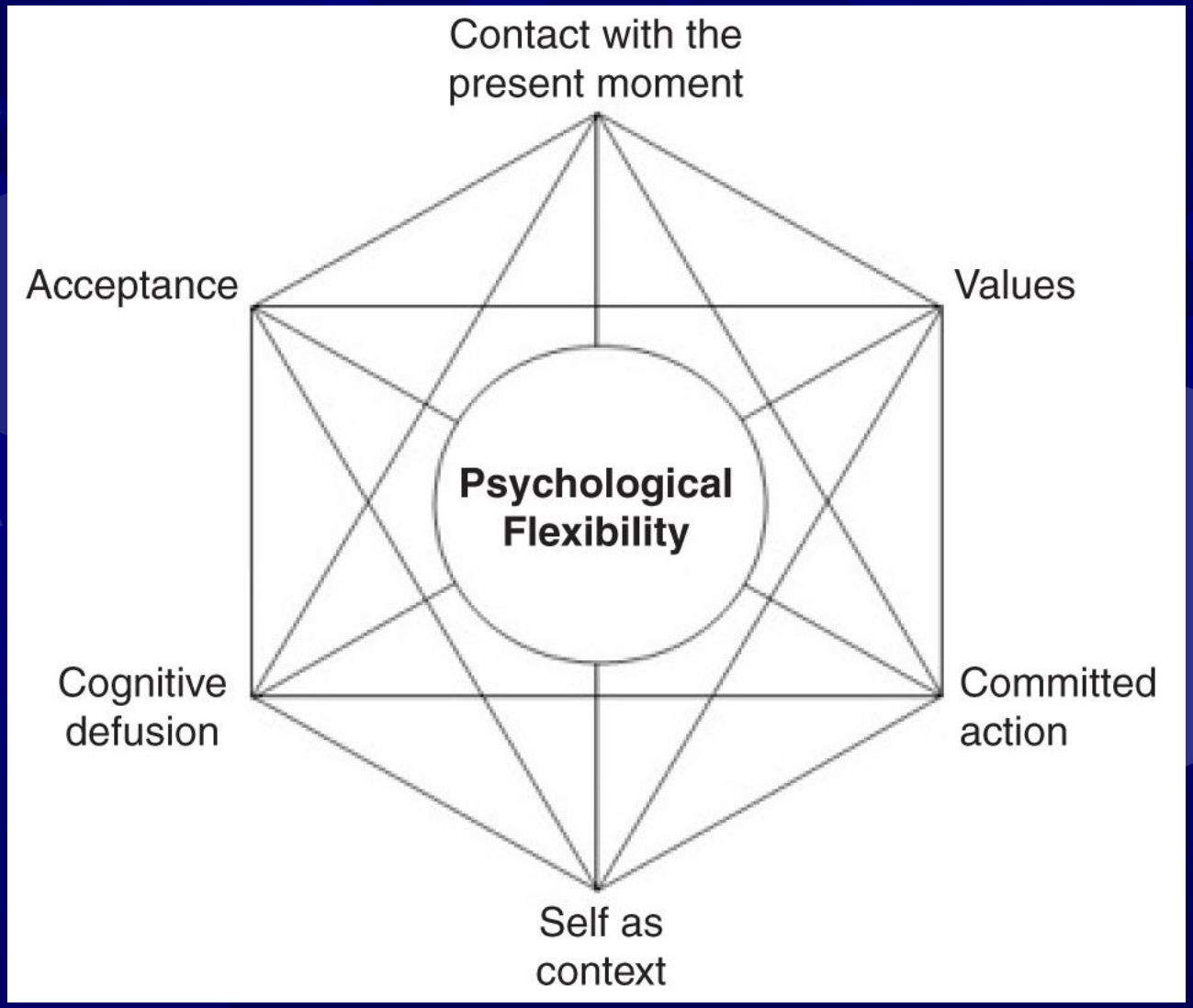
Key point (continued)



Characteristics ACT

- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy → Approach, Movement
- Founded by Steven Hayes since the 1990s
- Rather solid theoretical foundation ("Relational Frame Theory")
- Proven effectiveness in many therapeutical and preventive contexts
- In my opinion, a vision on human nature that is sophisticated and needed

Six ACT core processes



Goals	*Values*
Attainable ends of programs	"Chosen life directions" (Hayes & Smith, 2005, p. 155) "chosen qualities of purposive action that can never be obtained as an object but can be instantiated moment by moment" (Hayes et al., 2006, p. 9)
Formulated in language or numbers	Images (of activities)
Left hemisphere	Right hemisphere
Concrete, clear	Not too clear; different interpretations possible
Risk of frustration (when goal is missed – or achieved and immediately replaced for another goal) or loss of motivation ('I am ready')	Intrinsically satisfying and motivating. No end-state.
E.g., become a doctor	E.g., helping in a caring way people who suffer from physical problems

Contributions ACT to career development

- Acceptance and mindfulness for
  - Reliable and valid perceptual input for making decisions, evaluating progress, and adjusting course
  - Creating a calm atmosphere in which quiet inner voices may be heard
- Values and commitment for
  - Overarching, flexible goals
  - Sense of direction, identity
- Self as context and cognitive diffusion for
  - Preventing foreclosure and rumination
- ACT as a whole for
  - Psychological flexibility → Career adaptability
  - Psychological health and resilience

Implications

- Work to do at the scientific foundations of the career field
- For practice:
  - Don’t put too much emphasis on information seeking and conscious thinking
  - Offer and encourage diverse experiences
  - Trust unconscious processes
  - Get inspiration from the Acceptance and Commitment approach, e.g.:
    - Offer counselling for values clarification
    - Practice and encourage mindfulness

Know more?

- http://www.pctweb.org (with many articles and even books that may be downloaded)
- https://contextualscience.org (much information about ACT theory and practice)
- https://www.act-in-lob.eu/home (project site toolkit ACT in career guidance – in Dutch)
- http://tom-luken.nl/publ.htm (publications Tom Luken)
- mail@tom-luken.nl

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