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Sun Zi and His Art of War by Piotr Plebaniak

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Contact to the copyright holder:
piotr.plebaniak@protonmail.com



Perception is everything

Introduction

What is perception

In psychology, perception is the sensory processes, including also interpreting sensory data and other stimuli coming from the outside world into the mind. These data allow to make decisions and lead to the initiation of actions or reactions to what is happening around, to the course of events. The word “perception” has permeated everyday life, expanding its meaning to include processing sensory data and even forming decisions. We hear: “what is your perception of this?” when we are asked about our view of the world, vision of the world, a mental picture of the events occurring in it. By the question we are asked about the causal relationships that link them into the “trends of things”. The views are consistent with the decision-making model known as OODA:

Observation → Orientation → Decision → Action.

Observation, the “retrieval of sensory data,” is done by means of *sensorium*. In an extremely interesting text *My view on the world* Stanisław Lem defines it as follows:

The *sensorium* is the totality of all the senses and all the pathways (usually nervous) by which information, notifying us of the “existence of anything”, travels into our central nervous system.

Sensorium can be trained, strengthened and expanded. We have radars, binoculars, microscopes, dogs trained to smell drugs, sensors to detect chemicals, and hearing aids¹. The Orientation phase is the process of processing information, including the ability to model and predict the course of things and to look at the picture of a situation from different points of view. According to the OODA model, all four phases occur in parallel, allowing to choose the optimal procedure of action and through feedback correct it during its implementation.

Orientation and observation are activities exposed to disturbances both natural and induced by other entities: people, companies, states, empires. We are subject to cognitive errors collectively

¹ “How is your new hearing aid performing?” “Thank you, doctor. It performs superbly. I've already changed my will three times.”

named selective perception. We succumb to the wiles of deceitful adversaries. We allow ourselves to be deceived and manipulated by the narratives of the world of political leaders or our loved ones. We ourselves influence others with the same set of tools, tools that affect the others' perception of our goals, profit and loss accounts, identity and self-esteem.

The ability to perceive, and later to influence, can be strengthened by training, conditioned by access to the achievements of civilization accumulated over centuries. An observation from the Indian heritage, the Mahabharata, hits the core of the matter most accurately, and perhaps in the best way and perhaps the way that best appeals to the imagination, the way to which we are most receptive to:

Rulers see through spies just as cows by means of smells, brahmins by means of books, and the rest of the people by means of their eyes.

Thomas Kuhn, whose groundbreaking work we are about to discuss, stated:

What a man sees depends on both what he looks at, as well as what he has learned to what he has learned to perceive in his past visual and conceptual experience.

And here is a place to reflect on the definition of *information warfare* created by the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the United States Armed Forces:

it is any action taken to achieve information dominance by influencing an adversary's information, his processing of thereof, and information systems.

People with imagination sought

Stanisław Lem said that if there is progress in culture, it is, above all, conceptual progress. And the precursors and visionary writers such as Lem himself, as Leonardo da Vinci, Arthur C. Clarke, Julius Verne, and Philip K. Dick are the vanguard of human civilization. Their visions have inspired successive generations just as they have inspired many of the contributors to this book. The idea of asking them to name the books that shaped their perception of the world resulted in something that should not have surprised, but did: a significant number of the works declared by the contributors were of science fiction genre.

The ability to process unexpected information and the ability to anticipate future states of affairs is the crucial process in every phase of our perceiving and influencing the outside world. In July 2019, the French army established an expert team composed of science fiction writers. The Red Team is intended to be an advisory body to the Agence de l'Innovation de Défense and to carry out the tasks of conceptualizing of the near and distant future, helping to identify threats to France's national security.

One cannot help but smile at the news that the “mainstream” has finally reached the mother lode of people who like to play with ideas, who like to go beyond what we know about the world today to see tomorrow. Lem accurately stated in one of his interviews, that if someone wanted to hide an account of the future world so that no one would take it seriously, they should publish it as a Sci-Fi novel. The decision of the French agency, to my deep satisfaction, proves that the professionals and the government have finally appreciated a seemingly niche genre of literature.

Lem said of bad books that they are written in such a way that the viewer can simultaneously immerse themselves in safe surprise and remain unconcerned with their philosophy of life. This “life philosophy” is something that, in the vision of this book, determines the ability to perceive such and not another set of regularities, that is, perception.

And perception is everything.

Perception vs. Action

Animals and humans need *sensorium* to survive. We humans need it to build civilizations and for other collective activities. We augment the modest sensory *sensorium* with tools like microscopes and telescopes, but also with languages. Lem in the further part of his argument he writes:

Ethnic language [...] and mathematics, as from this language (from these languages) a narrow-band language of a strongly increased “precise” focus, are here our “tentacles”, our crutches, our “prostheses”. However, just like a blind man tapping his white cane on the stone floor, he tries to tell by hearing whether he is in a room, in the street, or in the nave of a temple, so and we, with these (mathematical) prostheses, “tap out” what we find in a room, in the street, or in the nave of a temple. We “project” to ourselves with these (mathematical) prostheses what is outside the area of our sensory perception.

Whether we act and how we act is influenced by a whole range of factors. Taking action is to a large extent determined by the conviction that the effort will result in an effect. This is a complicated sphere in which the forces of our mind and the influences of external factors come into play. The most important part of this is the degree to which we give in to our so-called learned helplessness. It also involves the possession of instruments of influence (weapons, or instruments of influence): speaking skills, and even mood (morale, belief in one's own worth and strength). One aspect was pointed out in a not entirely obvious way by Bertrand Russell:

The greatest challenge of the thinker is to to formulate a problem in such a way as to obtain a solution.

To equip oneself with a *sensorium*, and thus to achieve the ability to perceive what would ensure survival, but also to create an *instrumentarium* for influencing the external world, “leads to survival or annihilation”. (Sun Zi I.1). Survival of single humans, nations, states and civilizations.

And the truth shall set you free...

“And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” This New Testament verse lives a life of its own in our culture and is extremely susceptible to interpretation. Carved into the marble wall of the Central Intelligence Agency at Langley, has become the institution's motto. The official version of the rationale for this choice speaks of the institution's effort to “get at the truth” or “bring the truth to light.”

The purpose of the CIA, however, is to influence the course of things and align it to the U.S. interests. In practical terms, it can be translated as follows: the Agency's task is to obtain as precise

a picture as possible of events, people, and the relationships between them. This picture is to be useful: it is to generate decision space to influence the course of events as effectively as possible.

Thus, in this simple quotation we have a procedure presented not quite straightforwardly: acquire situational awareness → make a decision → use available instruments of influence to achieve an optimal state of affairs. This is in line with the OODA model of decision making.

In the era of shifting influence to the information realm, so-called intelligence institutions carry out their mission not by stealing secrets, but by executing influence as undetectably as possible. Yuri Bezmenov (p. ___), among others, says about this: the bulk of the tasks of the "services" is not information gathering, but mentally disarming of the enemy, a process stretched over years.

Let us glance at the mottoes of intelligence agencies of other countries. Italian intelligence, before adopting its current "I understand and defend," had the Latin formula *Arcana intellego* ("To understand hidden things") inscribed on its banners. The Czech Republic also has a taste for Latin. The motto of its service *Audi, Vide, Tace* means "Listen, Look, Silence." In this interagency haiku British MI6 adds *Semper Occultus*, "always in hiding". The nature of the interactions of all these services in the context of the influence they potentially have on the course of affairs, was brilliantly summarized by a prominent former member of our Polish intelligence service, Colonel Włodzimierz Sokołowski, known as the widely read author Vincent Severski. At the Security Forum in Warsaw in June 2018, he summarized with masterful insightfulness:

If the services do their job well, wars are unnecessary.

Let the above package of sentences and observations suffice the Reader for an essay on "the services", which this volume for various reasons is lacking. An essay which gives examples of connections between the world of politics and business or the rest of public life is a play on matters extremely difficult to prove and controversial. Let us use as the only example the question of degree of infiltration of Poland's Solidarity movement in early 1980s. Our perception of the events of that period will become less "obvious".

And perception is everything.

"What is truth?"

"What is truth?", the words of Pontius Pilate in the headline above perfectly capture the essence of the struggle on the moral plane and beyond. Pilate himself states: "I find no fault in this man." But the *Force* of the competitive "truth" generated by the crowd prevails. Pilate gives in... and washes his hands of the guilt and responsibility. This phrase, nay, the entire story, is an integral part of our Western language, culture, our perception of the world. It is the core of our perception of this hopeless cluster of conflicts and conflicting visions and narratives of what our lives consist of.

In this book, we will define truth in two ways. First, as the image of the world (its perception) that allows for the optimal use of available instruments of influence. This issue was most accurately put by Alfred Korzybski, whose argument found its place in the SF novel *Time Enough for Love* by Robert A. Heinlein:

Man lives in a world of ideas. Any phenomenon is so complex that he cannot possibly grasp the whole of it. He abstracts certain characteristics of a given phenomenon as an idea, then represents that idea as a symbol, be it a word or a mathematical sign. Human reaction is almost entirely reaction to symbols, and only negligibly to phenomena. As a

matter of fact [...] it can be demonstrated that the human mind can think only in terms of symbols.

When we think, we let symbols operate on other symbols in certain, set fashions—rules of logic, or rules of mathematics. If the symbols have been abstracted so that they are structurally similar to the phenomena they stand for, and if the symbol operations are similar in structure and order to the operations of phenomena in the real world, we think sanely. If our logic-mathematics, or our word-symbols, have been poorly chosen, we do not think sanely.

In the following pages we will deal with the nature and way of generating the so-called situational awareness: orientation in the environment of action allowing to understand the dynamically changing situation and to undertake effective reaction. Building such awareness, i.e. possibly full knowledge of the state of affairs, including one's own advantages and weaknesses, will allow to execute intended actions or maintain possibly optimal state of homeostasis (survive) with higher chance to achieve planned state of affairs.

The second issue is the complicated and ambiguous nature of actions aimed at imposing on others one's own will and vision of the world. It is particularly clearly visible in the geopolitical struggle between state entities. A geopolitical entity such as a nation-state or empire must secure its own survival and pursue its interests. It does so either by means of voluntary exchange with others or by enforcing conditions of interaction: the gray area between the two tools range from imposing of unfair trade treaties to open conquest.

The use of force must be justified, both on legal and ethical grounds. Decision-makers who go to war thus invent national myths, create the need to regain lost honor, and revive greatness and glory of bygone days. And at the same time, mindful of historical responsibility, they prepare pretexts: they propose impossible ultimatums, provoke to strike the first blow or, finally, with the help of an instrument such as, among others, “services”, they manufacture a “war”, The first is to use an instrument such as the “services” to exert influence in a covert manner.

In order to justify an act of aggression, an ideology must be orchestrated into being. We must build up a coherent mental image that which, as effectively as possible, absolves (frees) the person who uses violence from the moral, psychological, historical, and any other consequences of its use. Such a task is exemplified by the so-called “killer training” implemented in the U.S. Army after World War II. It is supposed to limit the instinctual inhibition of interspecies aggression: killing an opponent ceases to be the deprivation of life of a human being, and becomes a procedure regulated, among others, by muscle memory: “threat → elimination of threat”.

Similar differences in the perception of ethical consequences can be seen in the ideological dispute between the *pro-life* and *pro-choice* movements. The former brand abortion as “the murder of a human being” or “the killing of a child,” while the latter call it “freedom of choice and the human right to decide for oneself.” Both sides manifest a range of worldviews that contradict with the visions of their opponents. In this and other conflicts, the crux of the interaction (the center of gravity of the confrontation) is not so much the “common search for truth” or the search for consensus. The goal is to dominate the opponents and impose one's own vision of the world in order to justify and validate one's own ideal and worldviews.

In practically all people and communities, their immediate interests and vision of their own identity sooner or later come into conflict with the values that are the foundation of that identity. This applies to religious and scientific views. The coherence of the world picture can be shaken or undermined by the so-called ideological subversion. It can also be a natural state of forms of social life. This is where the title of the social psychology work *Illusions That Make It Possible to Live*

comes to mind, which at this point I strongly recommend getting acquainted with the book's content.

In this book, however, we will not focus on deciding who has rights and who does not. We will focus on the tools of the battle. We create our vision of the world in order to pursue our interests and impose that vision on others. Perception can limit the pool of actions available to us or expand it. It can burden us with “past”² and guilt or free us from them.

And perception is everything.

“Names obscure things.”

We owe this succinct observation to Christopher Kąkolewski (1930-2015). But words don't just cut us off from reality, which language is not always able to map, to reflect. Names allow us to create mental constructs, allow us to build a civilization. Stanislaw Lem observes:

To master the world, you must first name it.

The Czech writer Karel Čapek shared an excellent observation of the world:

As long as a thing has no name, it worries man, it stands before him mysterious and closed, inaccessible and uncontrollable. As long as a thing has no name, it worries man, it stands before him mysterious and closed, unapproachable and uncontrollable, but if it has a name, then it is as if man knew it and no longer needs to be afraid of it; it is somehow included into other things, marked and as if even mastered; for man it is a matter somehow settled. Behold how omnipotent and magical a power a name is!

Let us deepen our insight with Albert Einstein's confession:

I very rarely think in words. A thought comes to me... comes to me and I may try to express it in words later.

Words, then, will be a hindrance to learning about reality, learning about its nature and discovering methods to influence it. Words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters and finally whole books are mental images or visions woven from their sets. They are perceptions by which we decide whether something is possible, or others decide it for us. Whether an action is necessary or unnecessary; desirable or unwanted. One of the most inspiring thoughts about perceptions of reality and the practical consequences of this was inspired by Tomasz Kołodziejczak in his SF novel *Captured in Lights*:

When Daniel was first introduced to these interpretations of the Korgardian invasion, he found them amusing, grotesque. But then he realized that they were not based on the beliefs of another crazy religious sect, but were based on the paradigms of Parksan science. Paradigms that had successfully led this race to space exploration and the use of hyperspace. As well as humans with their theories. So these explanations can be as

² “It was not my sword, Mondego, but your past that disarmed you!”, we hear in the movie *Count of Monte Christo* (1934).

good as mankind's.

In action and inaction, in our perceptions of the laws of nature and mankind's place in the universe, in the crucial decisions of our lives and identity we are guided by bundles of prejudices. Those acquired in the process of socialization (indoctrination to the state of culture and civilization) and those physiologically conditioned. We are guided by perceptions.

And perceptions? And perceptions are everything.

We, the prisoners of our own vision of the world

One of the most accurate and coherent visions of how humans perceive the world and construct their understanding of its nature is Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn's complex argument about the ability to radically change one's vision of the world is embellished by a description of an extremely Kuhn enriches his complicated argument about the ability to radically change the vision of the world with a description of an extremely momentous experiment with a machine which displays images at high speed.

A perfidious experimenter had his "victims" recognize playing cards. Some of the cards were changed. For example, spades were red and hearts were black. With shorter exposure times:

[...] for example, the four of hearts was made in black color and it was identified with either the four of hearts or the four of spades. **Without realizing that there was any problem, it was immediately included in one of the previously acquired conceptual categories.** [...] When the exposure of the abnormal cards was prolonged, hesitation began and the presence of anomalies became apparent. For example, at the sight of a red six of spades a subject sometimes said: "It is the six of spades, but there is something strange about it, there are red edges around the black There are red edges around the black field." [...] after identifying two or three wrong cards, it was much less difficult to continue. However, a few people never managed to fit the card into the correct category. [...] Those who were unsuccessful sometimes fell into a state of severe depression. Someone exclaimed: "I can't tell what it is, I don't care. Now it doesn't even look like a card anymore. I don't know what color it is, or whether it is spades or hearts. I'm not even sure what spades looks like. Oh my God!"

The subjects did not distinguish between individual features, but between their combined ensembles or amalgams in an inseparable whole. The result of the experiment is interpreted as confirmation that looking is a "culturally borrowed" activity, that we see what we understand.³ The experiment and its effect on the participants in my opinion clearly demonstrates, that with appropriate interventions it is possible to induce perceptual helplessness, which in turn can produce indecisiveness, and in turn into an effect similar to, or which is essentially learned helplessness.

Weapons that induce mental disorders so defined are the primary weapons of modern

³ The experiment describes the so-called Stroop effect, which shows the dependence of reaction time and error rate on the coherence of the message when object of observation is inconsistent, such as the word "green" in red font. The issue discussed in the book *In the Power of Imagination* by Marcin Napiórkowski, Warsaw 2014, pp. 42-43.

information warfare, wars below the threshold of war. An elaboration of the issue is known in psychology as so-called perceptual dissonance. It can be summed up with a remarkably apt observation by the French philosopher Henri Bergson:

The eye sees only what the mind is prepared to comprehend.

By observing and participating in conflicts and wars... By defining and protecting their own identity and imposing their own will and vision of the world on others.... In concluding the reading of each of the essays and impressions of this collective work.... let the reader repeat this mantra to himself, like Cato the Elder calling out *Carthago delenda est*⁴, like a monk reciting a litany to the Holy Spirit, let us repeat a simple but fundamental principle. How was it?... Ah, yes!

Perception is everything.

Piotr Plebaniak
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⁴ Latin, Carthage must be destroyed.