Transaction Relationships As Form-Driven and Short; Shared Relationships As Meaning-Driven and Enduring

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**Transactional relationships do not require shared meaning**

The essential characteristics of a transaction are that both parties agree to a specific form, but agreement as to meaning is irrelevant.

Let’s say I talk to three mechanics to decide whom I want to do the work. Beth, the first mechanic, fixes cars because it is her passion, and because it connects her to her father, who taught her how. John, the second mechanic, fixes cars because he has been chronically unable to choose to follow his skills as a writer: to him the meaning of the work is to provide him income and it reminds him of what he considers a failure in his character. Farouk, the third mechanic, fixes cars because this allows him to live in America and fund his education to be a neurologist, his dream goal.

Who do I choose to do the work? It will be the one who I decide will fix my car at the lowest cost for the level and quality of repairs I want, because that is the meaning in this situation for me. I might look for a mechanic who seems to share that meaning if I’m looking for a longer-term relationship, but if I see this as just a one-time situational thing, then that is fairly irrelevant AS LONG AS I DEFINE THE FORM PRECISELY. And a key element of that definition will need to be specifics about what my meaning is for this situation: 1) the car is returned to its previous state; 2) as quickly as possible; and 3) as effortlessly to me as possible.

Often we do not clearly define the meaning behind the form, but assume that the meaning will be the same on both sides. What normal, clear-thinking person wouldn’t see the world the same way I do?

If I choose Beth and she returns the car with a host of improvements I didn’t ask for, because her meaning is to be passionate and do work her father would be proud of her for doing, she has violated my presumption #1 – I just wanted the car back to where it was, not with anything else done.

If I choose John and he procrastinates on fixing the car because he is depressed over his failure to do work that excites and challenges him more, he has violated my presumption #2, that the work be done as quickly as possible.

If I choose Farouk and he requires me to pick the car up before 6 AM because he has an all-day lab that day for one of his classes, he has violated my presumption #3, that the work be done as effortlessly for me as possible.

They all are being honest to their individual meaning for the work, and will be confused when I complain, while I will think that they are being, respectively, greedy, irresponsible, or unthinking about good customer service.

**Differences in meaning naturally tend to lead to differences in form. To offset this, form must be very clearly and specifically defined in those areas where different meanings are possible or are clearly evident.** Some, such as business and professional ethics, may not need to be defined if there are forces at work which ensure that these are aligned for this transaction – fraud laws, for example, or licensure, or current participation in an organization with stated ethics and rules of conduct.

**Other relationships are benefitted by shared understandings of meaning or shared meaning**

If on the other hand, the focus on the relationship is on meaning, not on form, I may find a mechanic like Rebecca. Rebecca also wants to fix cars to get them to their previous state as quickly and effortlessly as possible. Since my car had some dents in the hood previously, she replaces the now bashed in hood with a used hood that also has some minor dings, and so I pay half the cost of the pristine hoods the other mechanics would use. She gets the car done quickly, so she can get on to something new. She does this partly because she hires Julia to do much of the work – Julia works quickly, competently and cheaply, and her involvement makes this more effortless for Rebecca. The next time I need my car repaired I just take it to Rebecca, because I know that whatever form of repair the car needs, **she will “do it right” – she will do it in a way that meets my meaning for this, because she shares that meaning.**

If I never meet someone like Rebecca, then the next time my car needs repairs I will once again look for a mechanic who can best meet my meaning criteria for the specific form those repairs need.

**Applying this to personal relationships**

This is all well and good for car repairs, but what about our personal relationships?

Again, we too often confuse meaning and form. For us, a certain form has a specific meaning. We too often assume, incorrectly, that it has the same meaning for the other person, and then are angry or surprised that their later actions or reactions aren’t as we would expect.

We then blame them for choosing to act against the “shared” (but really just our own) meaning. They respond in confusion, since they are acting in accord with their own meaning, and see US as the one behaving oddly or inappropriately.

We both continue to view each others actions only from the perspective of our own meaning of things, and to assign motive, intent, and deviance from what is right entirely from our framework – which we “know” is or should be theirs, largely because of the previous actions they did which seemed to be in full accord with our meaning of them.

We are aided in these misconceptions by vagueness in our language. “You’re the person I’ve been looking for” can mean many different things – as can words like love, commitment, intimacy, and many many others. **Just because some words are primarily “meaning” words doesn’t mean that they have the SAME meaning for any other person.** Usually we need to know a lot more, and especially to discuss the actions, reactions, and interpretations of actions done by others, in real or hypothetical situations, to judge if we are “meaning the same thing” in what we say.

**Transactions in personal relationships**

At other times in our relationships, where the focus is on a discrete and specific situation likely to be of short duration, shared meaning is not as important -- instead what is necessary is that each person’s individual meanings for the situation are met. Because we don’t necessarily share the same meaning – or clearly may not do so – I have less trust that you will respond automatically to meet my meaning criteria – in fact, what I really should trust is that you are most likely to simply meet yours, particularly in regard to anything left vague or that spontaneously or unexpectedly becomes part of the situation. You will improvise based on your meaning.

That’s normal and natural, so to offset it **I need to anticipate it and define with you an agreement, a form, where both our meanings can be met.**

And then I need to remember that is the case. I can’t use this to later argue that you were selfish, or that you must have agreed with my meaning to have done this.

Transactions do not have relevance to sustaining and enduring relationships. This is why a single one-night stand affair is easier to deal with by the cheated-on spouse than is a single enduring extramarital relationship or continuous interacting with prostitutes. We see the first as transactional, and the second as affecting sharing. The first is an action based on a specific situation right then, the second an action based on continuation. To use a criminal trial analogy, one seems a crime of passion, and the other premeditated.

Of course, **continuation of what is essentially the same transactional behavior over time will itself usually be an issue of meaning** – however, this is likely to be less an issue regarding relationship between the persons as it is of a relationship with the behavior itself. An example might be an addiction to gambling, which affects the personal relationship but is also separate from it – it would continue whether the personal relationship is there or not.

**Too often in dealing with enduring patterns of behavior the focus is on the specific form it takes, and the presumption is that the form, not the meaning, is the cause of the problem.** Staying with the cheating issue, frequently the focus becomes the actions or character of the other woman or other man. Quite often this misses the real issue, the meaning behind the form. Does this represent just another form of an enduring behavioral pattern?

**Conversely, of course, a strictly situational event can be interpreted incorrectly as primarily about meaning and enduring conditions, rather than about primarily about transactional relationships and form.**

**If I can accept many different forms, my own focus is on meaning. If I can accept only one form, my focus is on form, and meanings will change over time.**

**If I can accept many different meanings, my focus is again on form. If I can accept only one meaning, my focus is on meaning, and forms will change over time.**

**Form and meaning revisited**

Form is about thing-ness. Its essential characteristic is that it does not endure. Form always expresses meaning, but when the form stays constant over time, the meaning of it must change. The facts of history, ours or the world’s, stay the same, but our interpretation of them is constantly changing.

Meaning is about intangibility. Its essential characteristic is that it can endure. Meaning always expresses itself through form, but for the meaning to stay constant over time the form that expresses it must change. The concept of communicating with someone far away is the same, but the form it took in the Middle Ages is far different than today.

Often over time there are changes in both meaning and form. The word liberty has stayed the same, but the meaning of liberty has changed. We use liberty far less today than we do freedom – this change made because freedom is a better fit now for the concept once called liberty.

Those who want things to look the way they were before do so at the cost of the meaning changing. Those who want the meaning to stay the same as before do so at he cost of the form it takes changing.

In relationship, form in terms of cohabitation, togetherness, and fidelity may stay the same, but the meaning of those will change. Meaning in terms of affection, mutual support, expressing love and connection may stay the same, but the forms for those will change over time.

In revisiting our memories, we revisit how form and meaning came together. Sometimes the fit is remarkably well done, and the Mona Lisa smiles, or the Statue of Liberty is built, or you shared that perfect day at the beach, or you remember that first connecting kiss. At other times the fit is not so perfect, or not a good fit at all.

**Because sometimes the fit between form and meaning seems so right, we believe that we have discovered the perfect way to keep these locked together.** We look at the enduring meaning and forget that form is about thing-ness Because the world changes, things change, and forms change. We can have continuing times when meaning and form fit so well, but these will and must change.

You can’t go home again, in the sense of physically recreating the exact same situation now and re-creating the exact same and feeling/meaning you had then. You can remember it, but you will either alter your memory of it in subtle ways, changing the form of it, or you will change the meaning of it in subtle or less-subtle ways, because you are in now, not in then. Police question eye-witnesses as soon after an event as they can, because their memories of the event start to change almost immediately to keep the meaning of it the same.

You can’t ever be who you were again, because you are in now, not then. You can “go home again” if you mean re-experiencing the meaning of “going home again” – but the form will be different, it won’t be the same physical home. Likewise, you can go physically home again (if that place still exists and is unchanged in the ways that are essential to you), but the meaning won’t be the same.

Change is sometimes subtle. Change can be made by forms through self-renewal: the forest may look the same, but it is constantly changing. Our body cells are completely replaced over a period of 7 years. Change can also be so slow as to be imperceptible: the landscape slowly erodes, tectonic plates gradually raise or lower.

Our lives also, by extension, are an expression of meaning through form. When we change form, we can keep that unchanged for a time to help us change the meaning we express. If we find the meaning we want to express, we can hold firm to that and allow the form that expression takes to change. Since the meaning of who we are usually evolves or emerges over time, almost everyone experiences changes in both areas – meaning and form.

For single situational, non-lasting changes, the best route may be to focus on transactional relationships with a specific form. For longer, durable (or chronic) changes, focus on meaning and expect the form to keep changing.

**Back to shared relationships as meaning-focused**

**If the above is true, then enduring relationships must be in harmony as to meaning, since it is meaning that endures.** Longer-term transactional relationships are possible, of course, as are self-renewing transactions, but there is no way to escape the ultimate thing-ness of them. Endings can be staved off, but endings are inevitable. The sun will eventually burn out, our bodies will die.

But can there be short-term shared relationships? Of course – look, for example, at a chance encounter with someone who connects deeply in a non-transactional way, and them disappears from your life forever. The relationship may endure in your thoughts, but didn’t otherwise.

**Confusing shared and transactional relationships by using length of the relationship as the single way to define them**

We instinctively feel that long-term relationships should be about meaning, and short-term ones about form. So **the tendency will be to try to force long-term relationships into the shared, meaning-focused category, however transactional they are, and short-term relationships into the transactional, form-focused category however shared they actually were.**

“If it was shared, why didn’t it last?” we ask. We also say, “Since it didn’t last I must have been wrong as seeing it as shared – they must have seen it as transactional. “ Hence I was used – which is an impossible statement in a shared relationship, but nicely thing-oriented for a transactional one.

Conversely, we also say to ourselves that since this situation has lasted so long, it must be about sharing and not transactions – this must be a meaningful relationship. We may also say, Why does this transactional relationship last so long? – I can’t nail down what it means; the meaning of it seems to keep changing.

We also expect that sharing relationships will endure. We had an intense sharing experience – in combat or going through a dangerous situation or being roommates in college – and expect that this will keep us sharing in the future, only to discover that the sharing is only about that time, not about now. We feel uneasy that the sharing has subsided, because sharing relationships are supposed to endure.

We also believe that sharing relationships must be meaningful. When we encounter sharing relationships, we may misperceive them as being necessarily meaningful and enduring, causing us to overcommit and over-expect.

While I want my enduring relationships to be sharing ones, because they are the most resilient to real-world changes, that doesn’t mean that sharing relationships always endure, or that enduring relationships are always sharing ones. **Our expectations that these things must go together will skew our perception of reality.**

Likewise, while it is true that while I want my transactional experiences to be temporary, avoiding sharing and the need for endurance, sometimes they endure much longer than anticipated (often through habit-formation). **I may get confused over why, if the relationship is transactional, I choose to have it endure – I look for what it means, when it may mean nothing in itself, but only have meaning as a conditioned response.**

Relationships may start out about transactions -- take the pretty girl to dinner, get the popular boy to be with you because you help him with his homework – and then search for sharing in order to become enduring . These start with form – how does he/she look, how am I supposed to act? – and go towards meaning: How do I feel about this relationship, what does he/she mean to me?

Others start with sharing – I’m lonely, too; We like the same music – and struggle towards transactions to move from the possible to the actual: How do I show her how much I like her; What will she do to respond? These relationships often start with meaning – I want to be loved; I’ve always wanted someone to understand me – and move towards form: Let’s tell others we’re dating; Let’s get married.

**“Loveless” marriages are transactional relationships which endure. “Unrequited love” is about sharing relationships which do not endure. “He dumped her for a new woman” is about relationships which should be sharing but are instead transactional. “She married her agent” is about relationships which should be transactional but are instead sharing. Because all of these conflict with our expectations, they engender drama, Because all of these go against our expectations they can engender anger.**

**Risks from transposing one kind of relationship for another**

Because of our expectations, we face the following risks:

1. If transactional relationships endure too long, our expectations will begin to push us towards seeing these relationships as more sharing and meaningful than they are*.*

*“I see them every day – I’m starting to have feelings for them. These feelings must be meaningful.”*

1. If sharing relationships are cut too short, our expectations will begin to push us to see these relationships as transactional and form/object-based than they are.

*“I thought we really connected but she hasn’t answered my last two texts. Maybe she was just bored and led me on for her amusement.”*

1. If enduring relationships are too form-based or form-focused, our expectations will begin to push us to question whether these should endure and whether they lack meaning.

*“He always has to make love the exact same way. I’m beginning to think sex is just a thing I’m supposed to do for him, that it’s not about him loving me. Now I don’t feel any desire for sex with him at all, and avoid it whenever I can.”*

1. If short relationships are too meaning-focused or meaning-based, our expectations will begin to push us to question whether these should not be made enduring and whether they have hidden agendas of meaning. *“Whenever we’re together we have such a good time talking about the big questions in life – you don’t get that unless the person really is right for you, even if they don’t know it yet.” or “ They’re more into me than they’re willing to realize.”*
2. Transactional relationships which do not have enough variance over time will lead to habituation and endurance, linking habituation with meaning, and change/short-duration with form.

*“I got into this emotionally abusive relationship with Bill – it started out just as sex but then we were together so much we decided to get married. I want things to change, but all I seem capable of is these short-term affairs which give me some temporary relief.”*

1. Sharing relationships which have too much variance over time, or too much change, will lose the benefits of habituation and internal neutral point harmony as tools to aid in endurance, linking de-habituation, extra effort, and change with loss of meaning. This also leads to linking habituation with form, as in over-loyalty.

*“Our lives have been in such turmoil, I think we’ve gotten unglued from each other – I’m pretty sure I’ve fallen out of love with her. Everything about the relationship takes so much more effort than it used to. I think the only reason this endures at all is because a piece of paper says we’re married; we’re just looking like everything’s OK, but the magic is gone.”*

**Note that for all the above the unusualness of the pattern – the variance of reality from the expectations that transactional relationships, short-term situations, and a focus on form should all go together, and that shared relationships, enduring situations, and meaning should all go together – should prompt questions and explorations.**

The conclusions may be true – all the above statements might reflect the actual circumstances -- but they are all also quite potentially false. **Misbelieving that the attributes MUST go together creates misperceptions of what is real, and shifts focus from exploring why there is a variation to believing one KNOWS why there is a variation.**

It also labels these variance situations as deceptive or bad, when they may in fact be a good choice under the circumstances. Finally, it creates a belief that to “fix” the situation one must address the part that is “wrong”, when there may be nothing wrong about that part at all – and possibly nothing that needs fixing other than your own belief that the “right” or “good” choice must be one that links these attributes in only 2 of their possible 8 ways.

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