What does guide our actions?
A wider context of S.R. Covey’s philosophy

Barbara J. Gabrys
Department of Materials
University of Oxford

Abstract. The fundamentals of S.R. Covey’s practical philosophy are analysed and comparison is drawn with other philosophical and religious approaches.

I. Introduction

In the second half of the last century a peculiar phenomenon swept the Western world: a mass search for meaning of an individual life. In the proliferation of self-help and personal growth books the works of Stephen R. Covey stand out [in particular 1, 2] if only through the sales of millions of copies. His practical philosophy became an industry not only in the US but worldwide; several large corporations have sought his advice on running their business through a ‘principle-centred’ leadership. The cornerstone of this approach is a combination of ethical and spiritual development and action in a real world.

In order to understand the success of Covey’s ‘applied philosophy’ it is necessary to examine the foundations on which it rests. This is done in the next section, with emphasis on ways to become independent. Section III briefly examines the practical side of this philosophy, and focuses on the implications of managing time with the aid of a compass and a clock. Section IV sets this analysis in a wider context, and touches on the spiritual dimension.

This paper comes with the health warning: if you think that philosophy should not appeal to the masses, stop reading now!
II. Covey’s philosophy in a nutshell

*Success in a technological society*

Covey’s thinking grew out of the analysis of what others considered to be a success and the route to achieve it. He surveyed the ‘success literature’ published in America in the last two centuries. From this he concluded that initially success should be achieved via the *Character Ethics* or internalisation of the principles of integrity, hard work, modesty, courage, fairness etc. However, in the first quarter of the last century there was a visible shift of focus to the *Personality Ethics*, with foundations in personality, attitudes and techniques; these are roughly summarised in public relations and positive mental attitude. As I see it, subscribing to the personality ethics results in an ego-centred view of the world (Figure 1).

![The Personality Ethics](image)

Figure 1 The self-centred view of the world, dominating the Western thought for the last century. A comic strip representation.

Many self-help and management books reinforce this view. However, while self-centred living can deliver short-term benefits, in the long run it will fall short of expectations. This way of life promises more than it can deliver, as it ignores principles of growth and change.
Principles or natural laws

The basis of Covey’s “Character Ethics” (Figure 2 below) is an assumption that some “universal, timeless, self-evident principles common to every enduring, prospering society throughout history” [1] govern human effectiveness. Hence principles or natural laws are a part of these ethical, social philosophy or religious systems which withstood the test of time. Fundamental principles comprise fairness, integrity and honesty, human dignity, potential and growth. In short, principles are guidelines for our conduct, and correct actions and true values follow from them.

Covey does not claim to have invented the Character Ethics but simply to have “identified and organised these principles into a sequential framework”. He states that humans possess self-awareness, understood as an ability to think about their own thought processes. This provides a route to an examination of principles, values and paradigms. While he very carefully refrains from a reference to any specific religion or ethics, the Judeo-Christian point of view occasionally surfaces, as in his belief that Man has dominion over all things in the world.

Since we act upon and are acted on by the world, it is essential to identify the limits of our influence. There is a Circle of Concern, i.e. events and actions we have no real influence but which still affect us. There is also a Circle of Influence which comprises events and actions we have some control over. The art is to focus our efforts in the latter. (The Circle of Concern should be inside the Circle of Influence for ‘proactive people’). Working on things one can do something about, and enlarging this class is one of essential ingredients of success. His approach has attracted both acclaim and critique (see, for example, [3]) as it could create an impression that we can become completely independent of others. This has been rectified in his next, co-authored book [2] which I consider to be the most useful and applicable of his works.
Development of self-awareness
One has to recognise from the outset that Covey advocates action and fulfilling one’s responsibilities in a technological society. This leaves aside a question of purely spiritual pursuits which by their nature are not ‘productive’ as commonly understood. He acknowledges though the need for spiritual development and for reflection – time put aside e.g. for reading scriptures, prayer and meditation or simply pondering ethical and moral questions.

How can we realise our human potential? According to Covey we need to “identify and apply the principle or natural law that governs the results you seek” [1]. This goes against the instant results and gratification mentality as it involves a lot of effort, self-questioning and patience needed for personal development. This approach differs greatly from that advocated by many popular self-help systems; it is the way of self-development in any worthy ethical or spiritual systems.

The question arises how can we change in order to become better – and better organised – human beings? This can be achieved through
development of seven habits of highly effective people [1]. A habit is defined as an intersection of **knowledge** (what to do and why), **skill** (how to do) and **desire** (want to do). The path from dependence through independence to interdependence leads via cultivation and implementation of these habits (Figure 3).

![Figure 3](image)

Figure 3 The seven habits according to Covey which foster self-development. His 7th habit ‘sharpen the saw’ is represented here by ‘managing the mind’ [4].

*From dependence to independence*

The first habit to cultivate is to be proactive, i.e. take responsibility for our actions and to be able to override our social and other conditioning through a measured response to a stimulus in the decision-making process. This freedom to choose is informed by our **self-awareness**, **imagination** (to go mentally beyond present reality), **conscience** (an innate awareness of right and wrong) and **independent will**. The second habit ‘begin with the end in mind’ means looking at our plans and actions in the frame of a grand picture: a clear understanding of our destination, perhaps even destiny. This embraces a principle that all things are created twice: firstly mentally, then physically. (E.g. in research a grant application requires projection of the final result of an
enquiry and setting it out on paper; if the application is successful the research is then carried out. The details of results may vary from the expected ones, adding excitement; or a greater challenge of an unexpected can reward the researcher.) A practical way to nurture the second habit is to develop a personal mission statement or personal long, medium and short term objectives. This serves as a marker along the path of personal development if based on the correct principles.

The first two habits underpin the third one, that of putting first things first. It requires mastering of the first two habits in order to become principle centred and giving the priority, in every single moment, to the most important things which our vision encompasses. It necessitates discipline to honour promises, meet deadlines, and fulfil obligations as a daily practice. Further, the mastery of the third habit brings independence from being ruled by crises and wishes of others. If we fall back on principles and live our life’s mission then we are not swept by events as leaves on a windy street but are able to achieve to what we have set to.

These three habits are encompassed and reinforced by a habit number seven – that of managing your mind or as Covey puts it, ‘sharpening the saw’. This is recognition that in order to function well and live harmoniously we need to hone our physical, spiritual, mental and social/emotional dimensions. The physical well-being and health underlies the other three, and is achieved through proper nutrition and exercise. Spiritual dimension is arguably the most important one, and as most private it is left to us to choose the way to spiritual renewal. Mental recreation should be a worthy one and comprises lifelong learning. Finally the social/emotional dimension is of an utmost importance in dealing with others, and encompasses passage from independence to interdependence. On face of it, this type of advice is a very common one; parts of it can be traced back to ancient Greece. The maxim ‘Know thyself’ is attributed to at least six philosophers, and was inscribed in the forecourt of Temple of Apollo in Delphi, according to Pausanias [5]. The knowledge of oneself should lead ultimately to understanding others.

Harder to accept is the idea of having a personal ‘mission’ and ‘vision’, since so often these words are being abused. As a matter of
fact each of us has a mission though we may rarely think or talk about it. For example, some children dream from an early age to be a doctor and to cure currently incurable diseases such as Aids. Others, like the Dalai Lama, are born into their mission as a religious leader. Politicians may claim a mission to improve their countries’ economies thus bring welfare to their people. Scientists may aspire to reach the stars, find whether there is life on Mars or develop new sources of energy for the benefit of human kind.

III. Putting theory into practice

First things first
A diligent and regular application of the above habits will result in life and time management where the activities and tasks are organised and executed around priorities. This is referred to as an (emerging) time management of the fourth generation – where we need to manage ourselves, not time. It is principle-centred, conscience-directed, defines our unique mission, helps us balance life by identifying roles and gives a context through weekly organising. In practical terms, the focus is on relationship and results, with time being subjugated to them [2].

The novelty of Covey’s time management methodology was a proposition that the most successful people are guided both by a compass and a clock. What is a compass? In analogy with walking, rather than wander aimlessly along the country roads leading from A to B we would use the compass to point you in the right direction. If we want to go to the Northern Pole, the compass is set to point to the north. Then while going we would consult it frequently to check, whether we’re still going in the right direction; while dealing with obstacles in the direct path we would still keep our orientation right. The same reasoning applies to our ethical compass – it is informed by mission and vision, and should always point to ‘true north’. And True North is defined by principles or natural laws.

Reputed to be the most popular book on time management ever, First things first [2] prescribes an integral way of life and work based on a few building blocks described above. It seemed to me that Covey’s approach can be adapted to academic practice in the sciences [4]. This
is because his philosophy stems from generic principles and the interpretation of what these natural laws are and where they come from is left to the reader. This leaves scientists a freedom to function within their particular frame of reference. However the description of practical details of such time management is beyond the scope of this article.

In my view the relationship between the *compass* and the *clock* is the most important factor of Covey’ success: his practical philosophy provides a frame of reference to believers and non-believers alike by avoiding explicit religious message. It yet provides a moral guidance of which details are left to an individual. Covey addresses the yearning to make sense and live meaningfully in a modern world though some people may find his language and guru-like exposition not palatable. He attempts to place Man back in an ordered universe where things have purpose not always evident to us. In doing so he goes back to a couple of centuries (viz. [6] for a thorough analysis of the making of modern identity). Yet there is a power of choice between stimulus and response which resonates better with a modern man.

**IV. Wider context**

*The horizons of a modern man*

One way of looking at Covey’s proposition is to see it as a conflict between the place of man in a hierarchical order and a modern individuality. Then, seemingly, Covey tries to turn back the clock by subjecting an individual to a rule of natural laws. However it is possible to perceive his efforts as reconciliation of individualism and some greater, perhaps cosmic, order. The latter interpretation justifies a mission as something essential to one’s life, something worth dying for. This fits readily with philosophy of morality. For example, according to Taylor [6] the expression of morality as that of following a voice of nature within us is due to a philosopher Jean Jacque Rousseau. The essential condition of leading a contented and rightful life is to be in an intimate moral contact with our Self.

How can this intimate contact be achieved? In today’s understanding the way is through spiritual practice which may take a form of prayer,
meditation or ethical considerations. This is also what Covey means by asking a reader to ‘deeply connect with your vision and mission’; meaning to examine the underlying principles.

How well does Covey address the needs of modern society? Taylor [7] identifies three malaises which trouble us: individualism, the disenchantment of the world or “instrumental reason” and the consequences for political life of these. Individualism at its worst became ideology of the ‘me’ generation where ‘I’ and ‘my’ needs are central (cf Covey’s Personality Ethics). In order to overcome it one has to go beyond the current culture of authenticity. This way, the needs of others have their rightful place, the care of and sharing with others enriches (cf Covey’s Character Ethics). Instrumental reason is the common tendency to measure everything in terms of cost and benefits and where the maximum efficiency is god [7]. Covey has his own understanding of efficiency and tries to redress the balance through bringing about synergy with others as one of critical ingredients of success. The success of any industry, as well that of families, is brought down to personal efforts of each member and their subscription to a common mission and vision [2]. He carefully avoids the murky waters of politics, as pointed out by his academic critics [3].

This leaves some essential questions open: what are natural laws? By whom or by what are they established? How do we know whether we are in harmony with them, or are trespassing?

Covey simply acknowledges the existence of natural laws or principles which underlie and ought to guide our actions, and wisely does not prescribe any explicit religious or political meaning. His personal interpretation is a Christian one – the source is God, and presumably the laws would be summed up as Ten Commandments. Consider other great teachings, for example Buddhism - the basic structure of human society relies on sense of responsibility, stemming from compassion and altruism. Success in life is due to determination, will and courage which flow out of altruism. Buddhism also teaches interdependence of all sentient and non-sentient beings thus widening the responsibility beyond human kind [8]. As everything is interrelated, our welfare ultimately depends on the welfare of others.
The source of action (and motivation) is mind which ‘operates’ on two levels of consciousness: the grosser level produced by the brain and the independent, ultimate, innermost subtle level of consciousness. Our influence and power to transform is over the former; the laws (Dharma) flow from the latter.

Graf von Dürckheim expresses the need for and the meaning of spiritual development through reconciliation of Western and Eastern thought [9]. For him, the three basic concerns of human kind are to live or survive, live meaningfully and be accepted by community. They make us tick and are central to our living and fulfilment. They are reflected in otherworldly Being as undivided plenitude, absolute order and all-embracing unity. Being manifests itself in existence, and its tri-unity is interpreted in Christianity as the power, wisdom and goodness of God the Father. Buddhism has three treasures – Buddha, Dharma (the law) and Sangha (the community of disciples) [9]. With regard to the three basic concerns, we can experience self-consciousness of three kinds - that is of our own strength, of our own value and of our links with others, respectively. On a deeper level, we can experience self-consciousness from our True Nature, which is going beyond one’s ego and touching our own centre or Being. It is claimed that such phenomenon happens e.g in near-death experiences [10].

For many of Covey’s readers his practical philosophy would suffice – there is a way to live in accordance with ones’ conscience and yet practical enough to generate income and contribute to the society. This is laudable, as put forward by Dürckheim:

“It is a truism that all work, all art and all professional activity require practice if they are to succeed. This we accept, and in order that we may establish ourselves in the world, it is obvious that we must be at pains in all our vocations, avocations and transactions to practise and assimilate experience.” [11]

V. Conclusion

The central thesis of Covey’s philosophy is the statement that man has power to make and break habits through self-awareness: observation,
reflection and a free will to choose response to a stimulus. His practical approach addresses needs of modern man and strikes a chord with ethical messages of philosophy of morality, Buddhism and Christianity.

In analogy to spiritual practice one can use the layers of Covey’s philosophy simply for increased efficiency in daily life, as Zen can be practised just for improving health. However this would be only a little progress on ‘recipe’ type of time management approaches – the deeper meaning of putting first things first is then irrevocably lost.

Acknowledgment
I would like to thank Adam Parker Rhodes for pointing out the relevance of Charles Taylor’s book ‘Sources of the self’ to this contribution.

Note
In the above text the term ‘man’ is used in general way and comprises men, women and trans-gender individuals.

Selected references

[8] The transformed mind: reflections on truth, love and happiness,


My philosophy senior thesis was not only the best part of my Lehigh experience, but it has helped me tremendously throughout law school and my life. Are we responsible for what we do, or are we just helpless victims of our genes, environment, and upbringing? Is there a God? What is the best sort of life to live? Does art have to be beautiful to be good? Can we justify our judgments about the merits of a film, a book, a painting, a poem? What is it for one thing to cause another thing to happen? Is there a scientific method? What does historical concept formation mean? H. Rickert starts with explaining how the problem of concept formation belongs to the historical sciences. In his opinion, when speaking about natural science, it is not seriously questionable what to form the concept means. That is why their method is generalization. But Rickert is convinced that there is a wide group of sciences oriented to the understanding of individual things. Actually, forming our historical concepts, we select necessary features of the given material and put them into a single intellectual unit — this is the essence of cognition in concepts itself; this selection means simplification of the empirical reality, and this operation needs the principle, or the premise. Action theory (or theory of action) is an area in philosophy concerned with theories about the processes causing willful human bodily movements of a more or less complex kind. This area of thought involves epistemology, ethics, metaphysics, jurisprudence, and philosophy of mind, and has attracted the strong interest of philosophers ever since Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics (Third Book). With the advent of psychology and later neuroscience, many theories of action are now subject to empirical testing.