

# ACTION LOGIC AS A LOGIC OF ABSENCE

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## Abstract

I show in this paper that when taking into account the real world to which action is directed, “action logic” is a *logic of absence* in the sense of Bhaskar’s dialectical critical realism (1993). Theoretically and practically that means that if the world were not “pervaded by absences” – by what is NOT THERE (or not yet there) – action in the world would be impossible since there would be no complicity of nature providing entries for human agency, including action (Bhaskar 1993, xxx) .

The paper shows the very real and concrete consequences of this ontological vantage point for work in organizations. Organizational action is seen as the bridge between “thinking” (the realm of thought) and “reality” and is conceived as inherently based on the logic of absence, also called dialectical thinking. As a result, I speak of the “thought form structure” of action, not just of thinking. It is further shown that the tools for absence-based action logic are in place in Laske’s dialectical thought form framework (DTF) created in 2008. The ramifications of dialectical action logic for leadership development and performance are outlined in some detail.

## Introduction

To speak of action without an intrinsic reference to the real world is as non-cogent (or even absurd) as speaking of thinking without such a reference. This way of speaking, however, presently pervades all organizational literature, in particular the leadership literature where “the realm of thought” is taken into account (Torbert et al. ...). The philosophically unaware have created a fiction based on pure formal logical thinking that does not hold up to the vicissitudes of a world in unceasing transformation, despite plentiful uses of the term “transformation”.

In this context, R. Bhaskar’s concept of Absence (also called “negativity”) is a boon for thinking about action and thinking alike. It is based on refuting purely positive (positivistic) thinking about the world in which what is missing, hidden, distorted, ailing, breaking down, and dying is not taken into account as an integral part of the real world.

In consequence thereof, Bhaskar proposes to look at the real world and at action as well as thinking from a vantage point called “MELD”, a short expression for what he has named “the four moments of dialectic”. This means that transformations cannot be understood, only shallow “change”.

| Moment of Dialectic [Bhaskar] | Class of Thought Form [Basseches; Laske] | Reality Defined by Absence |
|-------------------------------|--|----------------------------|
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|----|--------------------|---|
| 1M | Context [C]        | <b>First Moment.</b> The real world lacks a unitary cause and is highly stratified. Thinking errs if making it centric and flat (de-stratifying it).  |
| 2E | Process [P]        | <b>Second Edge.</b> The real world is pervaded by absences (geological shifts, loss, death, ills, etc.). Thinking errs if it denies them and paints the world purely positive.  |
| 3L | Relationship [R]   | <b>Third Level.</b> The real world is a totality of strongly interrelated, often incompatible, components. Thinking errs if it neglects interrelationships, thereby de-totalizing reality.  |
| 4D | Transformation [T] | <b>Fourth Dimension.</b> The real world is in unceasing transformation but offers entry points for human action. Thinking errs if it neglects transformation and denies the possibility of human intervention in the natural cause of events. |

Table 1 Bhaskar’s Four-Moments Dialectic

rendered in terms of human thinking

### Action in the broader sense

Human action, the core of human agency in the real world, extends much further than to life in organizations. It is also present in the arts, where it is referred to “creativity”. Both organizational and creative action have a thought form structure that in visual art can be “seen”, in music can be “heard”, and in sculpture can be “touched”, at least with the eyes.

For example, one of the major aspects of visual art is the use of “negative space”, or empty space, as to how it shapes constellations of forms, colors, shapes, textures, and directs the flow of energy in a painting, drawing, or photography. Take the picture below (Laske, 2016, “Dream”).



In this image, there is a context provided by b/w drawing with slight color added in the upper left. The thought form structure of this context is that of interspersed dimensions of various depth that together make up a whole. The eye naturally “looks for” parts of a whole, their intrinsic relationship with each other and to the whole (TF8), the equilibrium or disequilibrium of the parts within the whole (TF9), and the function of each sub-context forming the whole (TF10). It also looks for hierarchies and sub-hierarchies (TF 11), and assesses the stability of the structure seen (TF 12). In this case, there are several, converging contexts; in addition, the same context is interpreted by different viewers differently (TF14).

But there is more to the image than Context, there are also implications of Process and Relationship, and ultimately, Transformation.

To begin with, while initially the structure seems somewhat static, there is clearly a push of energy centered on the upper right, an energy that seems to “push into” the image from the right due to the two connected shapes the upper one of which is colored at the end (TF3, interpenetrating forces). This energizing structure is “held” in suspense by what is seen in the lower part of the image almost as if it were a pillar on which everything rests. Therefore, the upper and lower parts of the image are seen by the eye as a thesis/antithesis structure (TF 2) which is centered slightly above the center of the image, creating oppositional energy for the image as a whole (TF 1, unceasing motion). The eye also “sees” patterns of interaction that can be verbally described (TF 4) as “in conflict with each other”, a thought form constellation formed by TFs 1, 2, 3, and 4.

This thought form constellation brings into play relationships suggesting “limits of separation” between the upper and lower parts of the image (TF 15). The relationships are “intrinsic” in the sense that the upper part would not make sense without the lower part, and vice versa. Clearly, a reduction to one of

the elements of the image would “de-totalize” the image (TF 17). The eye also intuitively “decodes” the structural aspects of relationship in the picture, by decomposing the image into 3 or 4 zones that constantly interact: one zone “facing downward”, a second one intruding obliquely left to right, and upper one “descending” heading into a clash with the pillar emerging from below. Finally, the eye also detects a “constitutive relationship” signaled by the dark black shapes that seem to keep the movement inside the image in place and stabilize it (TF 21).

Finally, what attracts the eye most powerfully is the transformation it undergoes when “reading” the image. The core of the transformation that occurs is that from a static scene to a totality of moving parts which keeps the image in motion. When viewed in terms of this transformation, it appears that the slightly yellow area below the center line of the image to the left functions as a fulcrum of constant re-totalization of the image. This re-totalization occurs “under the sign of absence” (as Bhaskar would say), meaning that the movement occurs based on something that “is not there” but is “imagined” by the eye, and is nurtured and “real” by the mind that uses the eye to see.

In this way, seeing is “dialectical” or “transformational”, guided by the four moments of dialectic which in seeing are constantly re-generated for the sake of renewing the life of the image. For this reason, the image points “beyond itself”.

Seeing as action has a “thought form structure” because it is based on “thinking”. And the emotions generated by the image are pervaded by the absences thinking “sees” in the picture.

