

Organism, Mind & Body in Psychotherapy¹

By Michael Coster Heller, Dr. Phil

Psychologist & Psychotherapist FSP/AVP/EABP

Rue du Maupas 10, CH-1004 Lausanne

Contact and articles : www.aqualide.ch

Book: [***The Flesh of the soul.***](#)

Bern : Peter Lang, 2001.

Manuel : in French

Psychothérapies corporelles : Fondements et pratiques

(Body psychotherapy : foundations and practices)

Michel Coster Heller

Publisher : Louvain (Belgium) : De Boeck.

Publication : Septembre 2008

The Manuel follows scientific cognitive ethical rules such as:

- Explanations follow the *principle of economy*, established by Descartes, in his *Discours de la méthode* (1637): **only the simplest relevant explanations are considered**, mostly those that are compatible with other existing systems. **All other explanations can not be refuted, but are considered as personal beliefs.**
- A psychotherapist may mention his personal beliefs, but cannot include them in a method he presents as **psychotherapeutic**.
- **Science is a collective exploration.** Thus, an acceptable psychotherapeutic model has necessarily been discussed by members of most psychotherapy schools. Disagreement with current scientific formulations must be explicitly discussed, and justified.

The organism is a system (1)

I. A system:

- I. Is an organization of sub-systems,
- II. which is influenced by its sub-systems,
- III. which is a sub-system of the system that contains it.
- IV. It is what *emerges* from (A) the organization of (B) it's constituents.

The organism is a system (2)

II. The emergent properties of water:

I. Hydrogen + flames = stronger flames

II. Oxygen + flames = stronger flames

III. Oxygen + Hydrogen + the organization of H₂O = weaker flames.

The conflict between flames and water is caused by properties that are not contained in its elements. These are therefore referred to as *emergent properties* of water.

The organism is a system (3)

III. In the Hierarchy of systems:

I. Examples of systems that are *hierarchically* organized: Universe, planets, species, groups, organisms, organs, tissues, cells.

II. A living organism is a system that can (A) reproduce itself, and (B) which is capable to auto regulate itself to adapt to its environment in a way that influences that environment.

III. An organism is organized by its ecology and is influenced by its organs.

Defining the *dimensions* of the organism

An organismic system can be analyzed in function of (a) the levels or organization of matter (cells, organs, tissues, etc.), or (b) of dimensions. Each dimension has the following characteristics:

I. Basic adaptative functions: gravity, maintenance of metabolic equilibrium, adaptation to surrounding objects and organisms, and participation in surrounding social institutions.

II. Basic tools to fulfill their adaptative task: the body, homeostatic regulation systems, behavior, and psychological regulation systems.

III. The capacity to recruit the support of other dimensions and organismic regulation mechanisms¹ to fulfill their task.

IV. Each dimension has enough systemic coherence to become the main target of specialized approaches of the human organism.

¹ These will be defined in a moment.

The dimensions of the organism are:

I. **Body & gravity:** The postural dynamics of the body adapt the organism to *gravity*. They coordinate the *skeletal and muscular systems*, as approached in physiotherapy, sport, dance and forms of relaxation (e.g. Elsa Gindler¹, Rudolph Laban and Edmund Jacobson²).

II. **Homeostasis & metabolism.** Homeostatic regulation systems adapt organismic regulation mechanisms to the requirements of the internal liquid environment in which cells float, as analyzed by biologists and internal medicine.

III. **Behavior & interaction:** Behavior allows an organism to interact with external objects and other organisms. It is mostly analyzed by behaviorist psychologists and psychotherapists, ethologists and in studies of nonverbal communication.

IV. **Psychological regulation systems & social integration:** Psychological regulation systems allow an organism to regulate how it integrates in *social rituals and institutions*. For humans, this implies the *capacity* to communicate through *media* (tools, writing, films, etc.). This dimension is analyzed by psychologists, psychotherapists and all of the social sciences. It is useful to distinguish (A) the means provided by psychological mechanisms (e.g., intelligence, imagination, etc.), from (B) the actual capacity a global organism has to adapt to a specific social context.

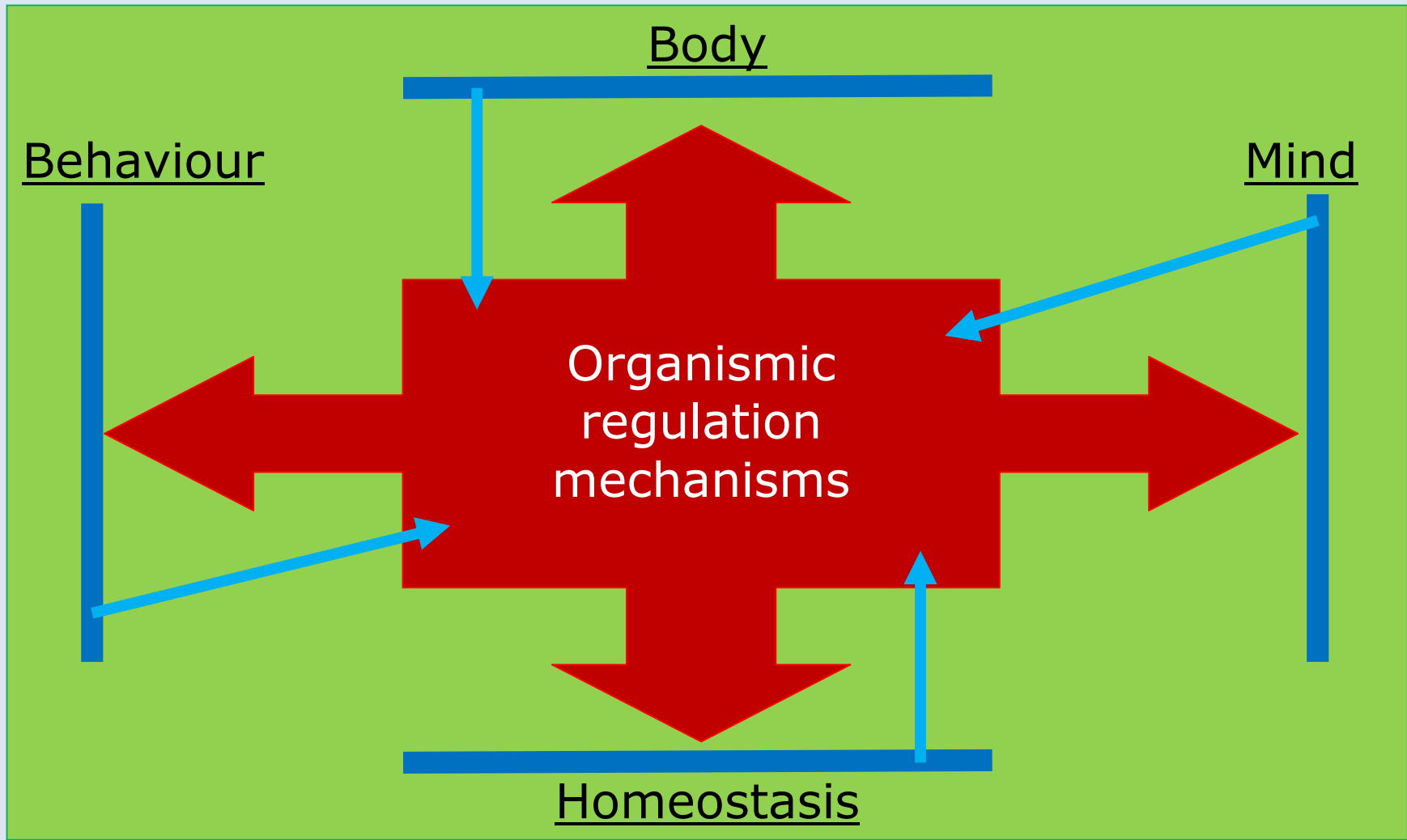
¹ Elsa Lindenberg, Laura Perls, Moshe Feldenkrais and Wilhelm Reich were familiar with this method.

² Trygve Braatøy, Nic Waal and Alexander Lowen were trained in the Jacobson relaxation technique.

Organismic regulation mechanisms organize dimensions

Organismic dimensions are organized by *organismic regulation mechanisms*. All links between dimensions (body and mind for example) are therefore **indirect**. Organismic activity is consciously experienced as affects (moods, emotions, etc.)

The organism



Organismic regulation mechanisms

Definition: All mechanisms that **connect and organize** dimensions are organismic regulation mechanisms. They are consciously experienced as affects (instincts, moods, emotions, etc.).

They are *influenced* by what happens in each dimension, and are *organized* by the interaction between the organism and its environment. Examples of organismic coordination, classed by their complexity, are:

- I. The *nervous system*: vegetative and central.
- II. The *cardio-vascular system*
- III. *Breathing*: external (air) and internal (cellular)
- IV. The *hormonal system*.
- V. The *immune system*.

Any event occurring in one dimension of the organism require logistic support from the 6 basic organismic regulation mechanisms and the 4 dimensions. For example, the requirements of the internal milieu of the organism activates homeostatic regulation systems, which require the participation of all the capacities of the organism and its social environment to satisfy a need.

Regulating warmth through homeostatic and behavioral dimensions

Edward Z. Tronick¹ gives the following example related to how newborn children regulate warmth:

I. The *internal milieu* of the baby's organism requires a constant temperature and a certain peripheral warmth of the skin. "When the infant is not in homeostatic balance", homeostatic regulation mechanisms require that "she must devote all her regulatory capacity" to successfully restore the temperature".

II. "The infant must collaborate with others to successfully regulate their temperature". This is done through behavioral interaction.

III. This implies (A) a *calibration* between behavioral and homeostatic dimensions of the organism; and (B) that this calibration is *organized* by the climate, and how the caregivers respond to the child's needs.

IV. The result will be a set of skills used by the child to auto-regulate in function of contextual dynamics.

¹ Tronick, E.Z. (1998). Dyadically expanded states of consciousness and the process of therapeutic change. *Infant mental health journal*, 19, 3: 290-299.

The organismic organization of dimensions participates in the organization of interaction through behavior

(drawing from Beebe & Lachmann 2002)

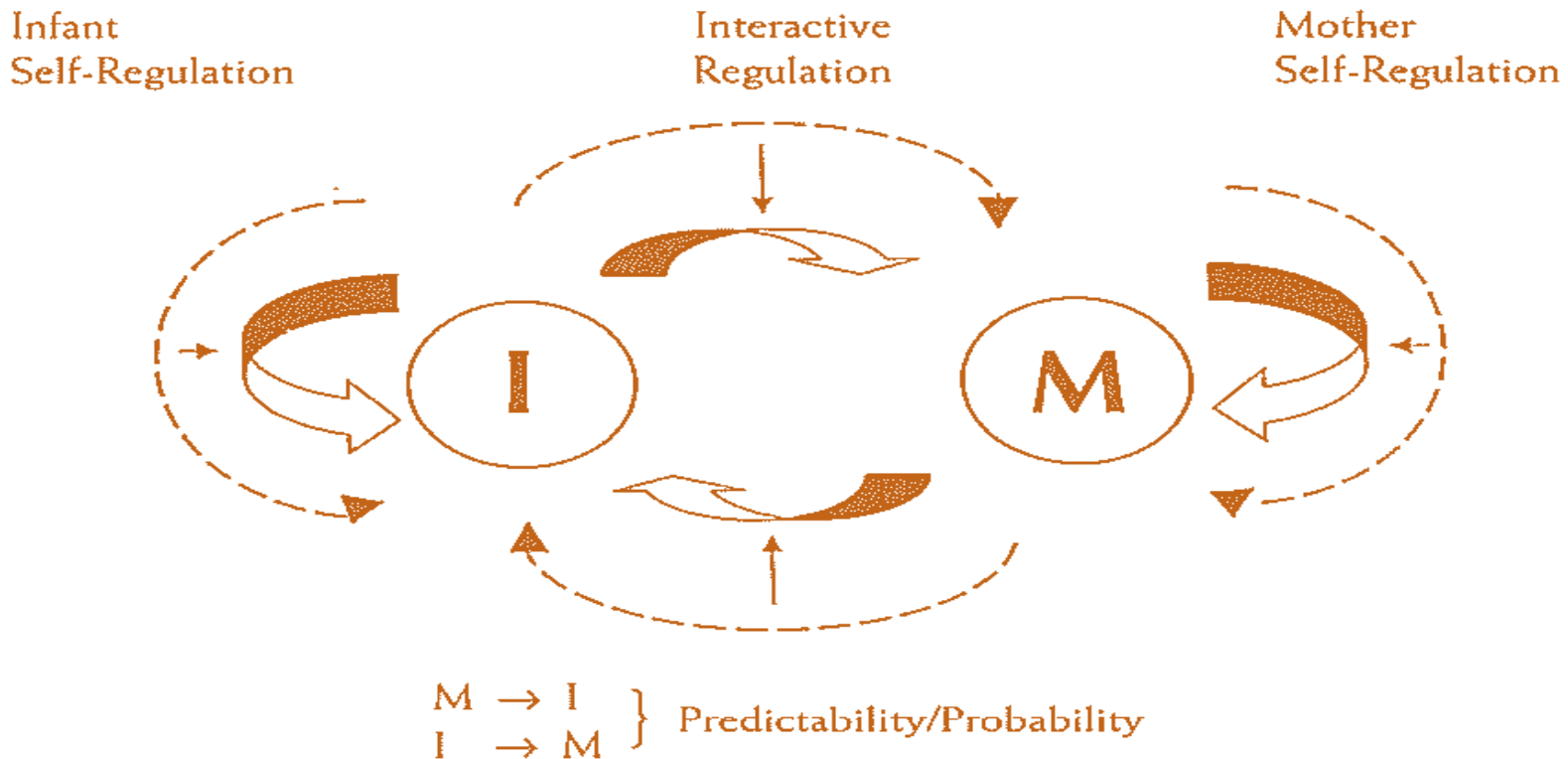


Figure 1. Systems Model of Interaction. Arrows indicate predictability ("coordination" or "influence") between partners. Dotted arrows represent the history of the pattern of predictability.