Writing
The Relational Map Method — I

A Method for Writing and Thinking About Problems

Jaimin L. Symonds Patel

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Contents

1 Introduction

In this entry I want to propose a method of digesting and dissecting pretty much any topic. Naturally, this means the same method can be used to write about topics too on paper – and I intend to use it myself in the future.

2 Background

This method is inspired by Socrates' dialogues, and my own thinking/formulation of what a "problem" is in the first place.

I have no doubt that this method is implicitly used all the time in some way by other people, however I haven't seen it explicitly laid out myself, which is why I'm writing this short essay on the method.

3 Socrates

One of the first things you will notice if you read Socrates' dialogues is that on any given topic, Socrates has an ability to bring in new areas or situations to test the consistency of previously reached conclusions.

For instance, when discussing about what bravery is (in *Laches*), Laches (who is talking to Socrates) first says that it is basically perseverance. But then, Socrates brings into the discussion the fact that in many battles, the prudent thing to do is to withdraw or flee. Since courage is virtue, Socrates argues that it cannot contradict prudence (as being another virtue). Therefore, by bringing in prudence, Socrates shows that if bravery is just perseverance, then it is inconsistent with prudence as a virtue.

Therefore, we see two things here that Socrates brings. Firstly, he simply pulls in new topics/aspects into the discussion to use as lenses for the original topic. Secondly, Socrates tests the consistency between these newly introduced topics with all the previous ones, in order to arrive at the truth.

It's this idea that consistency between all concepts constitutes the truth, that is so important. It is the measuring stick of the truth because by it, what is false is filtered out by showing inconsistency.

You may be thinking that this "consistency" method is very basic and plain to see in normal debates and discourses (at least, when they are done right). But the beauty of Socrates' dialogues is that this method of "consistency" probably shows itself no clearer than in his dialogues.

4 Problems as Relationships

This aspect may be considered as an implication of Socrates' dialogues, but just like the Socratic method itself, has not been made explicit within the dialogues.

Here, I bring into the picture the fact that a "problem" is simply an unevaluated relationship. For example, we might consider the problem of living a moral life. Although this is a multifaceted problem, at its core is the unreconciled relationship between Morality and Human Life. Figure 4.1 shows this.

Figure 4.1: Relational map between Morality and Human Life as the two main topics a core relational problem.

When this relationship is ascertained, then the problem is resolved. But of course, this is a huge problem to be using as an example, so let's look at another example.

If the problem now was that of affording a holiday, we can see this idea of a main relationship in a more accessible way. The fundamental problem in this new example is that the relationship between a holiday and your finances is not known, as shown in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2: Relational map between a Holiday and Personal Finances as the two main topics a core relational problem.

If that specific relationship is known, then it would be known whether a holiday is affordable for a that person. Here also, there are many aspects of this relationship such as their job, family commitments, mortgage payments, and bills, and all of these things will either increase or decrease the affordability of a holiday. With that, I'll move on, but the main principle here is that a problem can be seen as a to-be-evaluated relationship.

5 Mixing It Together – Relational Maps

So, just to recap, we have two key ideas:

1. The idea that consistency between all aspects of a problem constitutes what is true. Therefore, the truth of a statement can be tested by testing its consistency with other aspects. This we get – or at least I get – from Socrates' dialogues.

2. The idea that a problem is fundamentally decomposable to a relationship between two things, which is not yet defined/evaluated fully. This is just what I've seen – whether others have thought of it before me I don't know.

These two ideas, once mixed and expanded, result in what I call the method of Relational Maps. By treating the several aspects of a main problem as being sub-problems, we can re-apply relationships between the main topics and the surrounding aspects. Furthermore, these sub-relationships will be able to point to the nature of the relationship of the main topics. By having a systematic web of relationships, we are able to measure consistency between them in a more structured way.

6 Examples

The best way to explain how this method works, is to give some examples, and so I have included two here.

6.1 Morality $\longleftrightarrow$ War

The first example will be based around the following problem:

> "Is it morally okay/right to go to war?"

In this problem we have the main relationship (which we want to find the nature of) between "Morality" and "War", which we can see below in Figure 6.1.

Figure 6.1: Relational map between a Morality and War as the two main topics in a core relational problem.

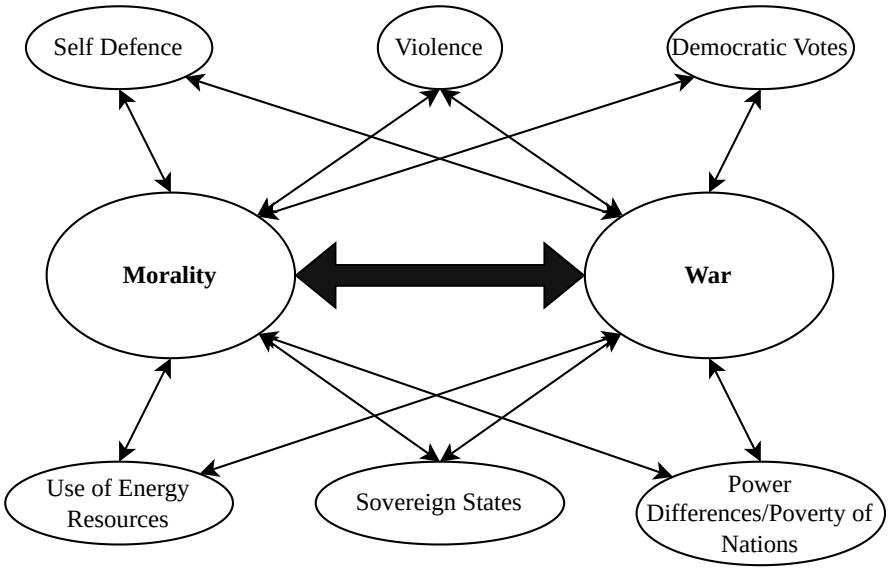


Figure 6.2: Relational map between Morality and War including surrounding aspects.

However, the problem cannot be solved on its own since we know there are many aspects to it, and so we need to deduce the relationship that is consistent between the two, by evaluating the consistency between each topic and those many aspects. I name a few in Figure 6.2.

So here, the relationship between morality and war becomes the sum of consistent relationships between each aspect, and the two main topics (in isolation).

So the way in which we work with this can go like so:

1. Self Defence
   (a) Self Defence $\longleftrightarrow$ Morality
      - It would seem right that an individual is able to protect themselves against an external threat (who makes an initial attack).
   (b) Self Defence $\longleftrightarrow$ War
      - Wars can arise out of a nation acting in self defence.
   (c) Evaluating Consistency
      - Since it seems just that an entity is able to defend themselves when presented with a threat, then it seems justified that a country engages in war on the premise that they act out of self defence.
2. Violence
   (a) Violence $\longleftrightarrow$ Morality
      - It would seem that it is wrong to enact any violence on another person/party, since they are not yours to harm – you have no right to do harm to them.
      - Furthermore, by virtue of our common human dignity, stemming from our common maker, violence against another would seem to violate the very personhood not only of the victim, but also the perpetrator.
   (b) Violence $\longleftrightarrow$ War
      - War, since it involves force of some kind, always involves some kind of violence.
   (c) Evaluating Consistency
      - It would seem that war which includes any violence is wrong.
3. Evaluating Consistency Among Sub-relationships
   - War including violence seems wrong.
   - Yet, one who engages in war out of genuine self defence is justified, including the use of violence.

- To say that all violence to any degree is okay in the position of self defence contradicts and makes light of the relationship of Violence $\longleftrightarrow$ Morality (violence being wrong).
- At the same time, to disallow the use of all violence at all (which we said is inherent in war), would contradict and make light of the moral ability of a party to defend themselves (Self Defence $\longleftrightarrow$ Morality).
- Therefore, it seems that violence within war, bound to an acceptable degree of self defence, is justified.

I hope you can see how we are able to build together the main relationship of Morality and War, by consistently summing up sub-relationships deduced in isolation. In this act of summing up globally consistent relationships, we adjust the conditions between sub-relationships, to arrive at aspects of the main problem itself which are consistent with each other.

So, in this example we discovered a part of the relationship between Morality and War, that is consistent with the aspects of Self Defence and Violence. We did this by looking first at the isolated relationships between each aspect and both main topics. Then, by pulling together these isolated relationships, we arrived at aspects of the main relationship which are consistent with all the sub-relationships (for the two covered so far at least in this example). Notice also that we implicitly inferred the relationship between Violence and Self Defence themselves.

I doubt that a perfectly systematic and air-tight method can be built for tackling all problems, but I hope this approach closes the gap at least a bit. It should then be easier to discuss sub-relationships among groups with this structure, and provide a systematic way of summing up isolated relationships to infer the consistent relationship between the main topics that serve as the core problem.

6.2 Wind Speed $\longleftrightarrow$ Street X

I would also like to point out the utility of this method within science/engineering. It goes without saying that many in science/engineering have implicitly used this method already, so much so that giving it explicit steps probably adds little to no value at all.

But nonetheless, let's look at an example in this domain. Imagine we want to know the wind speed down a particular street – let's call it "Street X", then the main problem becomes the relationship below in Figure 6.3.

Also, considering relevant aspects, we have the relational map shown in Figure 6.4.

Figure 6.3: Relational map between Wind Speed and Street X.

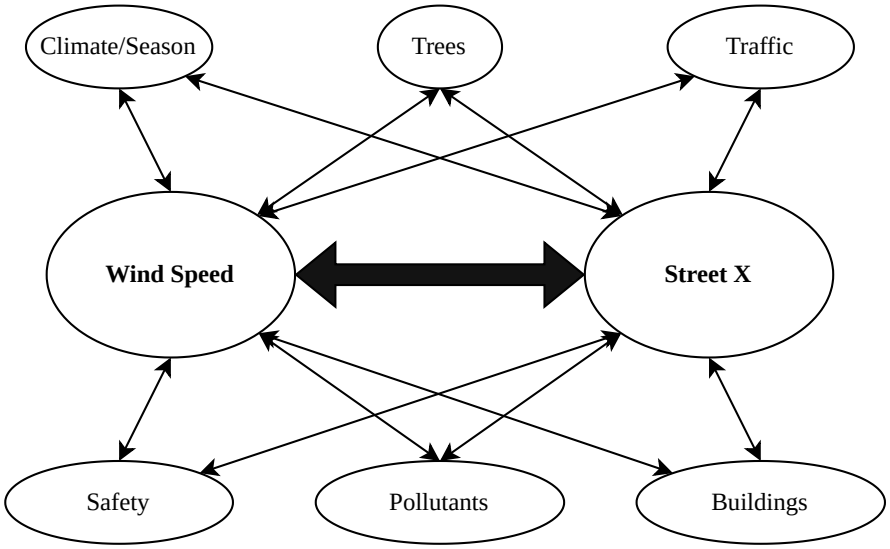


Figure 6.4: Relational map between Wind Speed and Street X including surrounding aspects.

So now we can systematically piece together the sub-relationships:

1. Climate/Season:
   (a) Climate/Season $\longleftrightarrow$ Wind Speed (how season affects wind speed)
   (b) Climate/Season $\longleftrightarrow$ Street X (what climate/seasons Street X experiences)
2. Trees:
   (a) Trees $\longleftrightarrow$ Wind Speed (how trees affect wind speed)
   (b) Trees $\longleftrightarrow$ Street X (what trees Street X has)
3. (Etc...)

It may be that most of the sub-relationships between Wind Speed and the surrounding aspects construct the function of wind speed in terms of those respective arguments, and that most sub-relationships between Street X and the surrounding aspects construct the specific model inputs for that function of wind speed.

The aspect of Safety introduces conditions of acceptable wind speeds in relation also to Street X. The aspect of Pollutants might impose a desirable wind speed to ensure adequate ventilation on the street for pedestrians.

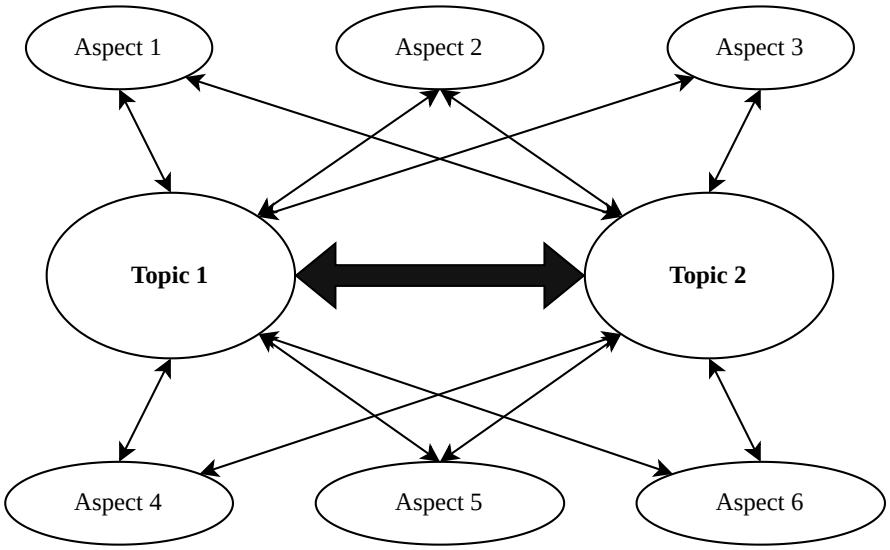
And so, again, in this example I hope you can see the use of this method as an explicit tool, in being able to break down more technical problems.

7 An Explicit Systematic Method

A more structured outline of an actual method would therefore look like this:

1. Formulate the initial problem as a fundamental unknown relationship between two main topics:

2. Include relevant aspects of the main relationship, and mark the sub-relationships between each aspect and the main topics:



3. Go through each sub-relationship for each aspect, determining its nature in isolation.
4. Given each sub-relationship, evaluate the consistent implication with the other sub-relationship for the same aspect. This is usually brief, if not obvious, implication.
5. Given each aspect, evaluate the consistency between the sub-relationships within all other aspects, either one at a time at the end, or as each aspects' sub-relationships are evaluated.

The end result should be that the relationship between the two main topics is found in terms of the consistent relationships between all aspects and their sub-relationships.

8 Conclusion

As said before, I think this method has been used implicitly before. But even then, I hope that by making this explicit formulation of it, it might serve as a structured way to address, write about, and discuss various problems we face today, especially in the context of a common approach used in group discussions.

Thank you for reading.

END