

Behavior: The Control of Perception

The book jacket, inside flaps:

BEHAVIOR: THE CONTROL OF PERCEPTION
WILLIAM T. POWERS

“Powers’ *Behavior: The Control of Perception* gives social scientists—finally—an alternative to both behaviorism and psychoanalysis. It provides a way, both elegant and sophisticated, to include the basic contributions of both without being partisan or converted. It allows us to bring the soma, culture, society, behavior, and experience into a single framework. We now know much more than we did before this book was published.—PAUL J. BOHANNAN, Stanley G. Harris Professor of Social Science, Northwestern University; author of *Divorce and After*, *Social Anthropology*, and other books.

The highly original thesis of this remarkable book is deceptively simple: that our perceptions are the only reality we can know, and that the purpose of all our actions is to control the state of this perceived world. This simple thesis represents a sharp break with most traditional interpretations of human behavior. The theory set forth and developed in detail in this book proposes a testable model of behavior based on feedback relationships between organism and environment, which can reconcile the conflict between behaviorists and humanists and for the first time put us on the road to an understanding of ourselves that is at once scientific and humane.

The model advanced here explains a range of phenomena from the simplest response of a sensory nerve cell to the construction of a code of ethics, using cybernetic concepts to provide a physical explanation not only for physical acts but also for the existence of goals and purposes. A hierarchical structure of neurological control systems is proposed that is at least potentially identifiable and testable, in which each control system specifies the behavior of lower level systems and thus controls its own perceptions.

The model incorporates the “programming” of behavior in the course of human evolutionary history, the nature and significance of memory, and the reorganizations of behavior brought about by education and experience.

Written with verve and wit, with many illuminating examples and interesting thought questions, *Behavior: The Control of Perception* may well prove to be one of the truly seminal works of our time; at least, this is suggested by the distinguished scholars who read the manuscript in advance of publication (see back cover). The book suggests many new interpretations of neurological, behavioral, and social data, an immense range of new experiments that will modify the model advanced here, and much new insight into such crucial psychological and social processes as education, the resolution of conflict, and the problems of mental illness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William T. Powers received his B.S. in physics and did his graduate work in psychology at Northwestern University. He has consulted for The Center for the Teaching Profession, and was formerly Chief Systems Engineer of the Department of Astronomy at Northwestern. He has published articles in psychology, astronomy and electronics, and has invented and designed a number of electronic instruments.

Behavior: The Control of Perception (1973—2nd edition, paperback, 2005), as well as other books and papers by Powers, is available at www.livingcontrolsystems.com.

Behavior: The Control of Perception—continued

The book jacket, back cover:

RUSSELL L. ACKOFF, Silberberg Professor of Systems Sciences, University of Pennsylvania; Past President of the Operations Research Society of America; author of *The Design of Social Research*, co-author of *On Purposeful Systems*, *fundamentals of Operation Research*, and other books.

“Publication of William Powers’ book, *Behavior: The Control of Perception*, is, in my opinion, a major event in the development of the psychology of perception. The completely new approach he has developed using cybernetic concepts cannot help but be seminal, instigating a new and important line of investigation of a wide range of psychological phenomena in addition to perception. His new way of looking at and conceptualizing old things will help to open the way for a series of important discoveries, and these—because of the rigorous framework he provides—are likely to be sounder scientifically than most of the earlier work that they will displace.”

DONALD T. CAMPBELL, Professor of Psychology, Northwestern University; Past President Of the Division of Personality and Social Psychology of the American Psychological Association, co-author of *Unobtrusive Measures* and other books and articles.

“Powers’ book is, I am convinced, the very best job to date in the application of feed-back theory (servo-system theory, cybernetics) to psychology. Unlike all of its many predecessors, Powers’ book comes up with elegant, relevant, and novel detail. It is the first to really capture the promise of cybernetics. It achieves this by bringing to psychology the concept of the ‘reference signal’ from servo-system theory, and by an explicit hierarchy of ‘orders’ of control systems.”

THOMAS S. KUHN, Professor of the History of Science, Princeton University; author of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

“Powers’ manuscript, *Behavior: The Control of Perception*, is among the most exciting I have read in some time. The problems are of vast importance, and not only to psychologists; the achieved synthesis is thoroughly original; and the presentation is often convincing and almost invariably suggestive. I shall be watching with interest what happens to research in the directions to which Powers points.”

JOHN R. PLATT, Research Biophysicist and Associate Director of the Mental Health Research Institute, University of Michigan; author of *Perception and Change: Projections for Survival* and *Step to Man*.

“Powers has made an important new synthesis in applying the concept of hierarchical levels of feedback-control systems to brain organization and behavior. His ideas throw new light on neural and brain structure, the role of reafferent stimulation in perception and behavior, hierarchical control mechanisms, goal-seeking and feedback at different levels of organization, and epistemology. The book is written in an easy and personal tone with numerous illuminating examples to illustrate the main new points, and with interesting thought-questions at the end of each chapter.”

CARL R. ROGERS, Resident Fellow of the Center for Studies of the Person, La Jolla, California; Past President of the American Psychological Association and recipient of its Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award in 1956; author of *Freedom to Learn*, *On Becoming A Person*, and other books.

“Here is a profound and original book with which every psychologist—indeed every behavioral scientist—should be acquainted. It is delightful to have a person of such varied and unorthodox background come forth with a unique theory of the way in which behavior is controlled in and by the individual, a theory which should spark a great deal of significant research.”