Things I'd like to say if they wouldn't think I'm a nut

Or — Overgeneralizations that aren't that far over.

William T. Powers, 1989

When you study human beings, remember that you are a human being. You can't do anything that they can't do. You think with a human brain, experience with human senses, act on the world as human beings experience a world. Whatever you say about them is true about you. Whatever you can do, they can do.

Understanding human nature means more than having a large vocabulary. You experience the world at many levels, some lower than symbols and some higher. If you try to understand by using nothing but words, you'll miss most of the picture. What most people call "intellectual" is really just "verbal." If you always use the same terms to refer to the same idea, it's not an idea but a verbal pattern. Most important words don't mean much. Words that "everybody knows" don't mean anything. Words that are used to describe psychological phenomena are almost all informal laymen's terms that have negative scientific meaning: they imply the existence of things that don't exist, like "intelligence" or "aggressiveness" or "altruism." Or "conditioning" or "habits" or "aptitudes" or—see the literature.

Knowledge isn't what you can remember or name: it's what you can work out from scratch any time you need to, from basic principles. The behavioral sciences don't have any basic principles. None, that is, that would survive scientific testing.

Statistical findings are worse than useless. They give the illusion of knowledge. Even when they're true for a population, they're false when applied to any given person. To rely on statistics as a way of understanding how people work is to take up superstition in the name of science. It's to formalize prejudice.

When you propose an explanation of human behavior, you ought to make sure that the explanation works in its own terms: what exactly does it predict? Most explanations in the behavioral sciences consist of describing a phenomenon, saying "because," and then describing it again in slightly different words.

Perceptual control theory may have a long way to go as a theory of human nature, but it's the only theory that deals with individuals and accepts them as autonomous, thinking, aware entities. You might say that thinking about them that way is what makes control theory possible to understand. Using control theory, you don't have to ignore individuals who deviate from the average. Using control theory you can propose explanations that you can test. Using control theory you can learn that scientific understanding isn't any different from ordinary understanding. A scientist would judge that a cooling device used in regions of very low ambient temperatures would be inefficient, and you can't sell a refrigerator to an Eskimo, either.

But never forget that science bought Phlogiston for 150 years, and stimulus-response theory—so far—for 350 years. We're still crawling our way out of one system of faith into the next, still looking for dry land and solid ground. Is control theory the new faith? Not as long as you can forget everything you've memorized and reason it out for yourself.

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