

Chapter 27

Degrees of freedom I

What we can choose to do depends on the opportunities available in the environment (item 2 of the “Requisites”). What is available depends, for example, on where you are on our globe—land, ocean, tropics, arctic, and so on. For humans, what is available in a locality depends to a great degree on what previous humans have left there. Humans far outdistance other animals in reshaping the environment. Most of the marks left 10,000 years ago by the hands and feet of homo sapiens are not easy for most of us to find, but many of the marks left in the last few centuries are very easy to find. The medieval cathedrals of Europe and the motorways of the United States seize the eye. The opportunities (and dangers) in New York City in the year 2000 were different from those available in 1900, and those differed from what was available in New Amsterdam in 1650.

THE LIVING ENVIRONMENT

Control is more successful when variables change slowly (but not too slowly), when fewer variables are changing, and when the variables are being changed by nonliving rather than by living things. The action of a nonliving thing when affected by an external force can be predicted with the assumption of linear causation, but the action of a living thing cannot. Consequently, operating on the nonliving environment in a habitual way can bring highly reliable results, but operating on the living environment is always chancy. Washing a saucepan can be done while thinking of something else, but washing a dog or a child requires continuous attention. Below are some situations in which you might find yourself. They differ in the predictability (reliability) with which the variables available there can be controlled.

Imagine yourself in each. The most predictable situation is listed first, the least last.

Imagine that you are in an environment containing no moving object. Example: Sitting reading in a quiet corner of the library with nobody near. Another example: Standing on a sand hill in western Nebraska at dawn, with no bird or animal close enough or large enough to be encountered.

Imagine that you are in an environment with one moving, nonliving object. Examples: Standing alone in a workshop, drilling a hole in a board. Sitting on the bank of a brook, watching the water flow past. Flying a kite.

You are with several simultaneously moving, nonliving objects. Examples: Playing the piano. Juggling. Hanging clothes on a clothesline on a windy day. Operating a sewing machine, especially one with a treadle.

Notice how relaxed and peaceful the world seems so far. Now I will bring living things into the picture.

You are with one other living creature. Examples: Walking with a dog in a meadow far from other people or animals. Riding a horse along a quiet path in the country. Walking near a woods and hearing the buzz of a bee.

Those seem like relaxed and peaceful activities, too, and all very well could be. Still, the dog can run off and ignore your calls to return, the horse can shy at something and possibly toss you off, and the bee can land on you with hostile intent. Continuing the list:

You are with several living creatures. Examples: Taking six dogs for a walk, all on leashes. The four-person game with eight rubber bands described in Chapter 6 under the heading “Four Controllers.”

If you have seen someone out with several dogs on leashes—or if you have done it yourself—you know that they can become very awkward to manage. In the game with the rubber bands, someone can get cantankerous.

You are using language with one other person.
Examples: Having a conversation in a far corner of the library. Talking on the telephone with one other. Exchanging e-mail.

Conversations can be soothing, charming, invigorating, challenging, demanding, insulting, enraging, accurate or misleading, or have any of a thousand other qualities.

You are using language with several other persons.
Examples: A coffee klatch. A committee meeting. A conference.

Committee meetings can be peaceful or brawling. Large deliberative groups meeting repeatedly (examples are the Senate and the House of Representatives of the United States) have sergeants-at-arms to cope with brawling.

Some communicative situations do not stay classified. A lecture, for example, can become a conversation among many if the lecturer freely allows questions and comments. It can also be a case of the lecturer hearing himself talk while members of the audience sleep, write letters, or watch out the windows at squirrels digging for nuts.

A social encounter can consist almost entirely of talking, but it often includes other kinds of acts: carrying on work of all sorts, playing games, eating, copulating, making music, traveling, and so on. People often prefer certain kinds of settings for satisfying certain kinds of needs; they prefer, that is, settings that offer certain kinds of opportunities for controlling perceptions. Here is a description by Randolph Louis Viscio (1993) of the preferences of teenagers for places to “hang out”:

We were the first generation to set foot on the hard, . . . clinical, sterile, conditioned . . . surfaces of America’s tacky malls. We were so disgusted with what we experienced at the mall, this glimpse of our future, that we naturally attempted to liberate parts of it, to make the arcades, the pizza joints, and the bathrooms places that were open to anyone and free from the conformity that saturated the rest of the institution. Those places were our respected territory. Here we could play, eat,

and piss in peace; we smoked pot in the parking lots and drank tequila and Southern Comfort on the roofs and in the bathrooms. . . . Seen through my eyes, the mall was just like the rest of society: sterile, empty, controlled, and used by the Authorities to make money. . . .

The arcade became a sanctuary we all needed. Everyone shared the space and pretty much respected it as being a place for everyone to hang. It was the first place kids would go when they arrived at the mall. From the arcade, we would form small gangs and go off in different directions to shoplift or smoke a joint. I did a lot of both and particularly enjoyed going onto the roof and conducting guerrilla snowball assaults on the mall police.

We spontaneously created a community of nonconformist youth. The new hangout, however, came to us with one condition; for the time being the Authorities were willing to let us gather as we wanted so long as we continuously fed quarters into the slots of the video games. . . . So we spent a lot of time and effort finding ways to make money—stealing included. At first I stole from my mother. Then I stole from anyplace that was left open to me (the United Way donation jars at the counters [for example]). . . .

A lot of kids, young kids, used to get drunk in the bathrooms and then make love on the roof or in the woods just beyond the parking lot. . . . It was a very rebellious experience to smoke, drink, make love, fight, or just sit in those woods. . . .

Then various mall Authorities got together with the cops and the school Authorities to crack down on the kids doing the mall scene. The media played up announcements that school officials were blaming falling grades on the fact that kids were “spending too much time playing video games in mall arcades. . . .”

Kids stopped hanging out at the mall. But our grades didn’t get any better and we didn’t stop making love or drinking. . . . we just found new places to go; the woods, hard rock concerts, cars, and even the schools could become “hangouts” of sorts.

That account does not give a precise description of the perceptions the author or his friends were trying to control or how “hanging out” helped them to do so, but one can get at least a flavor of the perceptions from some of the phrases: “disgusted with . . . this