

Chapter 33

Influence

If I leave a gun in your car, and two days later you find it and shoot at something with it, have I influenced you? If the government builds a road to Seattle, and you avail yourself of it, has the government influenced you? If a friend of yours is elected a U.S. senator and invites you to visit her in Washington, D.C., did the framers of the constitution influence you to visit Washington, D.C.?

I have not found a definition of influence to suit me. Here is the best I can do. If I make use of you as a means of controlling a perception of mine, or if you make use of me, or if I provide a disturbance to a variable you are controlling, then I have influenced you, regardless of whether either of us is aware of the use or the disturbance. But that definition has gaps I dislike. For example, suppose I board a passenger train and travel on it to Seattle. In doing that, have I influenced the engineer? Has the engineer influenced me? Answering yes to either of those seems to me pretty thin. I set down here my flawed definition not in the hope of being precise, but only to show you the direction of my thinking. I can get along without a definition, and I hope you can, too. In Chapter 25, I said that logicians urge us to state our *undefined* terms. I just stated one: *influence*.

I will be writing here mostly about intended influence, though influence can be unintended, as mine would be if you were to tire of my long-windedness and donate this book to the Goodwill people. I will be writing mostly about verbal influence, though of course influence can be wordless. An example of the latter is shouldering someone off the sidewalk. Another is building a fence across an existing walkway. Another is acting in such a way that another person wants to imitate your action.

You can influence others by offering new environmental opportunities (as implied in Figure 28–5). In the short term, the person can then (1) choose a

new action to control the perception or (2) choose to control a perception higher in the hierarchy which will improve overall control, including the control of the original perception. In the long term, given enough variety of experience, the person can, as a result of reorganization, come to control new perceptions and therefore use environmental opportunities in ways effective in controlling the new perceptions.

No change in the environment can guarantee that the person will choose some *particular* action. In practice, you can sometimes make one particular action very easy to choose—as in the case of the rat pressing the lever in the Skinner box. You can also make an act “easy” to choose by threatening terrible consequences for any other act. “Make him an offer he can’t refuse.” You cannot be sure the person will choose the “easy” act; there are always a few who will spurn it. “Damn the torpedoes!” cried Admiral Farragut at Mobile Bay in August of 1864. When the person does take the act you have surrounded by threats, you can be sure you have only temporary control. If Farragut had not damned the torpedoes, he might have found some other way past them. You can maintain a person’s conformity by threat only by maintaining the threat, which usually requires carrying out the threatened punishment when the person deviates from the acts you want. In the meantime, since the person’s action will be increasing the error in many other of her controls, reorganization will be occurring. And as always, we cannot predict what actions will result from the reorganizations. Sometimes the peasants, the slaves, the prisoners, and even the students rise up in revolt.

I will now put more detail on what I mean by a particular act. Admittedly, the boundaries of an act are arbitrary, a matter for every individual’s unique perception. Furthermore, an act can be viewed from any level. For example, I can look at your hand rising

with a fork in it and perceive that you are putting food in your mouth, or eating, or dining, or acting as a guest at a dinner party, or showing political solidarity with the other guests. I can perceive you “doing” something at one level while you are perceiving yourself as “doing” something at another level. I can perceive that you are showing political support for the after-dinner speaker while you perceive yourself to be making an opportunity to speak to another guest about hiring your nephew. As I said under “What is the Person Doing?” in Chapter 7, you can not be sure what a person is doing by watching what she is doing. When you are predicting an act or influencing someone to perform an act, what are its boundaries, and from which level of control are you observing it? From which level of control is the person controlling?

If I want you to perform a particular act, how can I be sure you are performing it? Let’s suppose I asked you to attend the dinner being given to honor that politician. You did so. But what act did you perform? My purpose was to enable the politician to perceive one more supporter. Your purpose was to get a job for your nephew. Was I correct in predicting that you would accede to my request? Did I cause you to attend the dinner? You did attend the dinner. But did you enable the politician to perceive another supporter? My interpretation of the event is that we both made use of our social environments to achieve our own purposes.

Here is another example. Harry is a good friend of yours. He is always ready to be helpful to you. You ask him to help you carry a sofa into another room. You predict that he will help you. But Harry says, “Aw, gee, I’d like to help, but I strained my wrist yesterday, and I just shouldn’t put that much weight on it yet.” Did you predict correctly? You might say, “Well, he would have helped me if he hadn’t strained his wrist.” And that illustrates my point. Whether a particular act occurs depends on (among other things) whether it will weaken control called for by some other internal standard—such as preserving the proper functioning of the muscles in your wrist.

We do act every day as if we know what other people will do. We make predictions such as whether certain people will be helpful to us in certain ways in certain circumstances. And we are right much of the time. When I say you cannot, in principle, predict particular acts, I do not mean that social life is random. I mean that every now and then, you are going to be wrong. You will be wrong not merely

because you are unskillful, but because it is hopeless to satisfy all the Requisites for a Particular Act.

I mean a little more than that. I mean that you should not be confident you are correctly tallying your successes and failures. Was I correct in predicting that you would help me show support for the politician? No, you attended the dinner, but you did not make a contribution to the politician’s election campaign or even vote for her. Were you incorrect in your prediction that Harry would want to help you? No, you were correct about that even though he did not help you. He might even have offered to hire someone to move the sofa for you.

OTHER LITERATURE

Just about everything written about human behavior could be considered to be relevant to the topic of influence. In the first draft of this book, I included a paltry 30 pages summarizing some scholarly literature on influence, but that draft was much too long. In this version, you will get only a few paragraphs. In my first draft, from the hundreds of authors whose thoughts could illustrate my points, I wrote about Maslow (1954, revised in 1970), Herzberg (1968), Alderfer (1972), the Foas (1974), Boulding (1978, 1990), Harrison (1978), and Harrison and Kouzes (1980). Here I will give you a few paragraphs from Boulding (1978). He and those other authors have a good deal in common.

In his 1978 book, Kenneth Boulding describes three “social organizers.” By that term, he means modes of influence that enable organizations and societies to take form. He says:

The social organizers are relationships among two or more individuals that change role structures, which thereby create organizations, and which create great networks of hierarchy, dependency, and mutuality (pp. 139–140).

You can see the idea of influence in that sentence: “change role structures . . . networks of hierarchy, dependency, and mutuality.” Those are all words that tell of the social coordination and miscoordination, the dependence and independence, the organization and disorganization, the millions of influence links and gaps that result in the “social order,” much as the condensations and rarefactions of sound waves result in language or music. Boulding continues: