

Chapter 40

Society

Our beliefs about human nature shape the ways we try to use other people in controlling our perceptions. When our beliefs about human nature are erroneous, our social actions lead to reductions of control. Some widespread beliefs are erroneous.

It is not true that conditions or events (stimuli) in the environment can cause an individual, in a stimulus-and-response manner, to perform a particular act. It is not true that *you* (or others) can reliably cause an individual to perform a particular act. I wrote about this topic in Chapter 5 under “Controlling Others,” in most of Chapter 29, in all of Chapter 33, in Chapter 34 under “Organizational Management,” and in Chapter 35 under “Leadership.” See also Powers (1973, p. 260 ff.).

You can, it is true, increase or decrease the *proportion* of people (rarely with much precision) who will buy tickets to a performance by the Ungrateful Livers or purchase a tube of ToothShine this month, but it is not true that you can reliably predict whether *this* person will buy a ticket or a tube in September.

It is not true that inner proclivities (personality traits, if you prefer that term) can alone cause an individual to perform a particular act. It is not true, either, that we all have the same needs, personality factors, or some other internal standards. We all have internal standards, but mine are unique and so are yours. (See Chapter 26 on personality and Chapters 20 and 21 on the reorganizing system.)

It is not true that people are necessarily intending to do what they seem to you to be doing. See Chapter 7 under “What Is the Person Doing?” Furthermore, all actions have unintended effects. Similarly, it is not true that two people can perceive the “same” event, and it is not true that anyone can perceive what some thing or event “really is.”

It is not true that you can get rid of bad behavior by getting rid of bad people, because the people who have not yet done those bad things are still out there. If you think, oh, well, the fittest will survive, remember that in the evolutionary context, “fittest” merely means able to bring more offspring to maturity than somebody else does. There is no guarantee that the people who bring the most children to maturity will be good neighbors to you or me or our grandchildren.

It is not true that inner conflict is good for you. If a competitive situation brings you inner conflict, that competition is not good for you. I wrote about competition in Chapter 28.

It is true that much inner conflict is of small moment, occasioning little emotion and triggering little reorganization. Though a small conflict may bring us no benefit, it usually brings little or no harm, either. It is even possible that the prospect of the *risk* of inner conflict can be pleurably exciting. That may be part of the attraction of adventurous fiction. I do not think, however, that inner conflict can be depended upon to strengthen the will, hone judgment, temper the soul, or do any other thing to improve our skill in avoiding further conflict. Sufficiently severe inner conflict sets off reorganization which *may or may not* enable us to avoid conflict more skillfully in the future.

What you can do is limited by what you can perceive to be possible. (Requisite 2.) If you hold wrong ideas, you will take actions that will increase the likelihood of consequences that you do not want. You will try, for example, to bring about particular actions on the part of other people by rewards and threats. Since rewards lose their effect unless they escalate, and since threats almost always escalate in the damage they promise, those techniques bring benefits to a few at the expense of the many. Since many people believe

that the way things *do* work is the only way they *can* work, many of us, maybe most, go on to believe that the only way to be safe, comfortable, and happy is to exploit other people, and the more the merrier.

When we seek to achieve our goals by controlling the behavior of other people, we try, for example, to conduct therapy by the kind of diagnosis and prescription that I described in Chapter 31, and we try to manage organizations by using the kind of restrictions on behavior of which I gave examples in Chapters 34, 37, and 38. We try to reduce crime by putting more people in prisons. I quoted James Gilligan (1995, p. 95) in Chapter 27 that the United States imprisons a percentage of its population *five to twenty times* greater than any other country on earth except Russia. Somehow, most of us still sing unblushingly of “the land of the free.”

I wrote about degrees of freedom in Chapters 27 and 34 and under “Powers” in Chapter 35. When the environment contains sufficient degrees of freedom for all of us, our actions need bring little conflict among ourselves or within ourselves. Threat and counterthreat can become much less likely than now. That is the key to improving society, to enabling it to become nurturing instead of punishing.

People with ample degrees of freedom are less likely, on average, to act so as to reduce *your* degrees of freedom; they are not the people, on average, whose internal conflicts and reorganizations cause them to flail in all directions (and possibly in yours) in their search for solutions to their conflicts. This is not to say that rich people, for example, are never dangerous to the rest of us. People who sometimes *seem to us* to have ample degrees of freedom may in their own perception have too little. In other words, people we think must surely be contented with their circumstances do turn out sometimes to be a danger to us. But I am speaking here in averages. Because people with ample freedom of action will not be using time and energy struggling against conflicts, they can turn some of that time and energy to helping to maintain a society that will provide ample freedom for their children and grandchildren—and for you and yours. Paul Wachtel (1983) in his book *The Poverty of Affluence* does a good job of explaining that in the United States and other developed nations, most people achieve sufficient affluence not to need to dream of wresting further wealth from other people.

That is the gist of what I want to say in this final chapter. In an earlier version of the manuscript for this book, I included four chapters telling about the planetary conditions we have produced that are inimical to our physical welfare, about what we do to worsen them, what we do to meliorate them, and how our human nature helps and hinders us. I came to see, however, that I might be distracting your attention from my chief purpose in this book, which is to explain the theory of perceptual control and some of its implications for what is possible and impossible in human behavior. I will briefly pursue here only two such implications: (1) caring for the future of our species and (2) freedom.

CARING FOR THE FUTURE

Though we are very skillful, as a species, in controlling our perceptions now and in the very near future, we have little skill in controlling perceptions of movement toward a world in which we would be glad to live next year or next decade, not to speak of a world for our grandchildren to live in. This lack of skill has allowed our forebears to transmit to us a physical world which they and *their* forebears had steadily degraded and polluted, and a social world fraught with declining degrees of freedom and with increasing conflict.

Gary Gardner (2001) writes:

Indeed, this threshold moment is virtually unprecedented in world history. Only the Agricultural Revolution that started 10,000 years ago and the Industrial Revolution of the past two centuries which brought unparalleled prosperity as well as environmental pathologies to a large share of humankind rival the current era as moments of wholesale change in human societies. But those global transformations unfolded much more slowly, and began in different regions at different times. The changes under way today are compressed to just a few decades and are global in scope. The question facing this generation is whether the human community will take charge of its own cultural evolution and implement a rational shift to sustainable economies, or will instead stand by watching nature impose change as environmental systems break down (p. 190).

Against the ever-present possibility of violence, the Kalahari Bushmen also carefully follow social customs for maintaining peace:

“When a young man kills much meat he comes to think of the rest of us as his servants or inferiors. We can’t accept this. We refuse one who boasts, for some day his pride will make him kill somebody. So we always speak of his meat as worthless. This way we cool his heart and make him gentle.”

Hunter-gatherers live by the principle that the only way to get along together is in a society of equals. Accumulating wealth in any form is unheard of. Social pressure is so intense that an individual with a valuable object feels ill at ease and guilty for having something that others want. He gives it away with a sigh of relief, a passion that exceeds generosity. A Bushman who received a sweater from a visitor gave it to his son a few weeks later. Within a month it had passed to the brother of the son’s wife, and when last seen it was being worn by a cousin in a band twenty miles away (Pfeiffer 1977, pp. 62–63).

With the advent of agriculture, towns and cities arose in which a resident would encounter many more than 25 other persons during an ordinary day. There were customs for courtesy and maintaining peace, but few of the new customs were fitted to relationships among equals. By then, I suppose, most customs regulated relationships of dominance and subservience between bosses and bossed. No longer could people hope to reduce arrogance by making disparaging remarks, as the Bushmen do, to someone who was gathering more riches than they.

If our society is to lessen conflict, it is vital that children learn that cooperation does not come about simply because some people are “by nature” cooperative and some not, but instead that cooperation is a special pattern for living and working with others that anyone can recognize, learn, and practice. Some people now know ways of introducing cooperative work into schools. William Kreidler (1989) wrote a book describing “200 activities for keeping peace in the classroom, K–6.” Morton Deutsch (1993), Deutsch and Coleman (2000), Shlomo Sharan (1994), Sharan, Shachar, and Levine (1999), and Schmuck and Schmuck (2002) all wrote books about improving cooperation and reducing conflict in schools. Nancy and Theodore Graves edit the *Newsletter of the International Association for the Study of Cooperation in Education*.

SUMMING UP

It is possible, even here at the end of the book, that you might want to say something like this: “You tell me you don’t want to tell me any particular thing to do. But sooner or later somebody has to *do* something.” Of course. I have told you about a good many things that people have done or could do, both helpful and unhelpful. But I cannot tell you just when, under circumstances that *you* will encounter, any particular act will be helpful, unhelpful, or null. When you choose your own act for your own circumstances, you will act continuously to keep yourself going toward your goal. If, instead, you try to do what I tell you to do, your attention will be on doing the “right” thing in the “right” way; you will wait too long before correcting your course of action. You will realize too late that you are, as always, on your own. You should act on your own inventiveness. If you can use what I have said here to stimulate your own inventiveness, I will be proud.

Actions to increase the available degrees of freedom must occur in families, workplaces, schoolrooms, and neighborhoods. But those intimate actions must be permitted and encouraged by actions in boardrooms, city councils, and legislatures. And what is right for Peoria today is not necessarily right for Pasadena, Berlin, or Nairobi tomorrow. I cannot guess here what would be the right actions in any of those places. Persons to consult are the more forward-looking of the local and regional politicians and the more skilled among neighborhood organizers. Names of those people can be found easily in the alternative press.

Here I will offer three statements to comprise the policy, the habit of thought, the principles I think will be useful for the next hundred years or so. I phrase these in the imperative mood to suggest action, but I do not mean for you to rush out tomorrow morning and *do* something. Rather, I offer these statements as principles you may wish to adopt as criteria for any action you may contemplate. They are not prescriptions for particular actions; they are criteria for selecting actions to serve whatever purposes are pressing.

- 1 *Degrees of freedom:* Try to arrange environments, physical and social, so that everyone can achieve sufficient degrees of freedom. Do this everywhere: in your kitchen, on the street, at your place of work, in the halls of Congress.

- 2 *The future:* Whatever other internal standards are guiding your action, try to make use of some that concern the welfare of your grandchildren.
- 3 *Reality:* Try to keep in touch with scientific findings about the physical and social worlds. Remember modeling. Remember PCT. Remember the Method of Levels. Remember, too, that experts are helpful and dangerous at the same time.

I wish you well.

ENDNOTE

¹I treated cooperation and competition in Chapter 28 under “Cooperation and Competition,” and in Chapter 37 under “Good Schools.” I treated the matter of controlling others in Chapter 5 under “Controlling Others,” in Chapter 28 under “Interpersonal Conflict,” in Chapter 29 under “Social Life, Conflict, and Deviant Behavior,” in Chapter 33 under “Controlling Others,” in Chapter 35 under “Leadership Styles,” in Chapter 36 under “Consulting,” and in Chapters 28 and 39 under “Countercontrol.” I told how to *avoid* controlling others in Chapter 27 under “Opportunities” and in all of Chapter 30.