PART I

CONTROL OF PERCEPTION

Back in 1733, the English poet Alexander Pope wrote, "The proper study of mankind is man." Pope was describing the benefits of understanding ourselves and our fellow humans. A great many of us are still engaged in that proper study. This book is one more of the thousands that have followed Pope's advice.

Those who write about people go about the task in various ways. One way to study people would be to circle the globe in a spaceship and observe the evidences of human activity: lakes growing behind dams, clusterings of the lights of cities at night, black clouds rising from burning oil wells, and so on, much as one might study ants by watching the heaps of soil-particles rising around the holes of their burrows. Information about such large-scale events is welcomed by economists, demographers, and geographers, not to speak of public-health professionals, farmers, and astronomers. Another way would be to sit on the side of a mountain for a few centuries, look out across the plain, and watch farmers growing their crops and selling them in markets, road builders opening routes from one horizon to another, houses clustering and cities growing, herds of bison or gnu dwindling, and armies slaughtering each other—the "pageant" of history. Information about events at that scale is welcomed not only by those I mentioned just above, but also by historians, political scientists, and sociologists, not to mention politicians, people in businesses of all sorts, and the military.

Or one could listen at political gatherings, attend public lectures, eavesdrop in hotel lobbies and bus depots, and read newspapers. One could attend rock concerts, conventions, football games, board meetings, classroom meetings, and conferences. One could listen to strollers in the park, conversations by the drinking fountain or in the parking lot, families at dinner, and so on. Information from those settings has been useful to historians, politicians, anthropologists, linguists, psychologists, and sociologists. One could watch a single person for a month or a year, observing the kinds of dealings the person had with others, emotional attachments made and broken, deceits practiced or given up, physical exercise undertaken, and visits to physicians. Information at that scale is welcomed by anthropologists, psychologists, physicians, and novelists, among others. One could also read records such as those kept by physicians and get information interesting to neurologists, physiologists, and some psychologists.

Information about human life at those various scales—from movements of masses of people to the small doings of individuals and the smaller doings of their internal organs—is useful in many ways. But every kind of information is more useful for some purposes and less useful for others. When we watch the actions of other people, we learn the sorts of actions of which they are capable and the circumstances in which they are more capable and less capable. We learn the frequencies with which, this week, they take various sorts of actions and the circumstances in which the various frequencies appear. We do not learn, however, *how* the people can be capable of those actions. We do not learn anything about the internal functioning that *enables* people to do all those things. How is it, for example, that a person can stand upright? How is it that we *can* manage, as a wind pushes on us, as we move to wave at someone, as we stand on the deck of a wallowing ship, and as our muscles tire, to remain upright instead of toppling over, as you would naturally expect a mere assembly of loosely jointed bones and yielding flesh to do? And when we get distracted from our purposes, as we do repeatedly every day, how is it that we can repeatedly return to those previous purposes instead of staying with the new direction into which the distraction (so some would think) has sent us?

Thousands of books have been written about human behavior that do no more than describe what can be observed of the movements of humans. Nevertheless, if a book inquires into the springs of human acts or the human uses of them, the author must inevitably make some assumptions about the functioning of individuals. And of course every author does. Everyone, in fact, author or not, has some belief (some theory) about "what makes people tick." There are two common theories the world over. One is that people do what they do because of the kinds of persons they are. Psychologists call that the theory of personality. The other is that people do what they do because of the stimulation they get—because they are pushed on by something. Psychologists call that the theory of behaviorism. (I am simplifying here, but not much.) Both theories ignore important and obvious features of behavior.

The most obvious thing, it seems to me, is that living and nonliving things obey different laws of behavior. The flesh and blood of living things is as subject to the laws of physics and chemistry as all other materials, but the behavior of the whole living creature arises from causes lying both without and within. Those causes, without and within, act jointly and simultaneously. Accordingly, I spurn theories that rely only on forces from outside the person; the behavior of the whole creature does *not* obey the laws of physics. If you push on a rock, it will roll over and lie there uncomplainingly. If you push on a person, the person is very likely to push back, remain standing, and utter a complaint something like, "Who d'you think you're shoving?" Living things push back. Why do I mention such an obvious thing? If you have never read a book on psychology, you might naturally suppose that every psychology book would begin with the fact that humans and other living creatures typically act to oppose disturbances from the environment, to maintain conditions favorable to them. Actually, few books do, at the beginning or anywhere else.

When we look for the "stimulus" that will "cause" someone to "react" in the way we desire, we are using a conception substantially the same as that of pushing an object to where we want it to go—a conception that works well with rocks, footballs, and dead bodies, but not with living creatures. That conception leads to the belief, when our relations with others are unsatisfactory, that things can be set right by pushing other people into their presumed proper places—into the behavior we think suitable. At the extreme, that conception leads to the murderous use of force. But that conception gets us into trouble long before it gets murderous, because the people we push on are going to push back, in one way or another, at the first smallest hint that we are disturbing the perceptions they want to maintain. They cannot help doing so. All living creatures are built that way.

You can see now why I titled this book "People as Living Things." Living things have purposes, goals, criteria, standards. They want to perceive certain conditions and not others. They are always ready, 24 hours a day and 365 days a year and another on leap years, to react against disturbances to what they want to perceive. *How they can do that* is what this book is about.

The theory I use here to explain how people can maintain their perceptions of what they want to perceive is called Perceptual Control Theory (PCT).

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

Skip this explanation
if you are an old hand with footnotes
and references to literature

Often in these pages, you will encounter mentions of other authors, like this: "Estervern (1832)." Sometimes you will find the mention written out, something like this: "In 1832, Estervern wrote a book in which. . . ." I will always give some clue to the reason I am mentioning Estervern so that you can judge whether you care to read what Estervern has to say. You can find the full bibliographic specifications for Estervern's book, article, or other writing in the list of "references" at the end of the book.

But I will not always be able to tell you in only a few words the reason I have mentioned Estervern. Once in a while the explanation, if I were to put it in the text, would become too long and be a nuisance to you. In those cases, I will use a footnote indicator in the form of a superscripted numeral[1]. The "footnotes" will not appear at the foot of the page, but instead will appear in a list at the end of the chapter as "endnotes." An endnote will always refer to literature, and it will often contain a comment. I will never write an endnote without a reference to other literature.

If you don't care what other writings came to my mind as I wrote, or if you feel no urge to read something further on the topic, you can just let your eye glide past the superscript or Estervern's name.

[1]Like the "1" you just saw after the word "numeral."