

Try it Yourself (page 282)

Skinner once said that freedom is an illusion, but a valuable one (Skinner 1971). Think about some decisions you have made in your life. Have you ever made a decision that was contrary to what other people expected of you? Why did you make that decision? Do you think this was a real choice, as Rogers would say, or could it be that you are simply unaware of the factors that determined your choice? If the latter, does that make freedom an illusion?

There are undoubtedly many factors which determine our behaviour that we are not aware of. Sometimes we discover them much later ("Oh, I bet I did that because..."), and sometimes we never really know. If there are factors that determine our behaviour completely, they must be very large in number, and it can never be conclusively demonstrated that we know about all of them. For example, Freud (Chapter 5) suggested that much of our motivation is based on repressed events and emotions.

In humanistic terms, what we believe is as important as external reality. In Skinner's terms, what we believe about freedom changes our behaviour. Some direct support for this comes from a recent experimental study (Vohs & Schooler, 2008). In this research, encouraging students to believe in determinism led to more cheating; not cheating was related to beliefs about free will!

Many people feel that if determinism is true, it is pointless to try to change our behaviour. But if beliefs can modify behaviour, if we change our beliefs (as many people have about issues such as racial and gender equality), we have a way of changing behaviour as well. The question can be asked, however, did we really choose to change our beliefs, or was that 'decision' determined by factors of which we are unaware as well? Or does it matter?

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Are there particular situations in which you experience incongruence? Why do you think this occurs? Does your feeling of incongruence help to motivate you to do more, or is the discomfort simply disruptive? (For example, some students procrastinate on starting an assignment because they worry the end result will not achieve their desired mark.) In order to experience congruence, we must define our ideal self in terms of goals which foster growth, but which are not based on standards which are impossible to achieve.

Sometimes, our culture creates expectations that can become part of our ideal self. An example of this is the concept of the 'Superwoman', which was popularly discussed a few years ago: The concept imagined a woman who could hold down a full time job, raise several children with constant attention, be a loving and desirable partner to her spouse, cook gourmet meals each evening, have several creative hobbies, and so on. It's exhausting to even read this list, yet many women aspired to this ideal and berated themselves when they found they could not attain it. They found their self-esteem sinking as they told themselves about all the things they 'should' be doing and couldn't seem to manage. Given how unrealistic this ideal is, why do you think some women took it seriously as part of their own ideal selves?

'Perfectionism' is a trait that we often regard with ambivalence. On one hand, since perfection is unattainable, being a perfectionist may mean spending one's life in a state of dissatisfaction with one's self. On the other hand, perfectionism may make one strive to become better and better. In society, who do you think will get the job, the person who says "I'm a perfectionist" or the person who says "I just do what I can and don't strive for perfection."? From a psychological perspective, Humanists would encourage people to strive for excellence and personal best, to become better and better all the time, but not to strive to be perfect since that will only lead them to be in a constant state of incongruence.

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Re-examine your conception of your ideal self. Do you see how it might have arisen? If your ideal self is one of unrealistic standards of performance, consider whether your parents or teachers might have suggested to you that you could only meet their conditions of worth if you achieved these unrealistic levels. Do you think they really meant to convey this message to you? Do you think the intentions of others determine the impact of conditions of worth, or how the individual experiences those conditions?

Parents and teachers have (except in rare instances) the welfare of children at heart and certainly wish to help them become the best that they can be. But sometimes their encouragement is perceived by the child to be a demand and the only way to win approval and love is through high achievement. Parents and teachers typically reward high achievement, but may not be aware that the child's response is mainly that of relief that they crossed one more hurdle. In these cases, the child may feel that their love and approval will only be given for continued achievement; that is, the child may not realize that they are loved and valued for themselves, not just for their achievements. Giving unconditional love seems even more important when we consider the other side of the coin: what about when a child does not meet expectations? Is the child denied approval (again, in the parents' and teachers' desire to motivate the child to do better)? Rogers contends that it is a better idea to make it clear to the child that he/she is always valued and loved for themselves, with the idea that one may 'hate the sin but love the sinner'.

Now consider what conditions of worth you impose on others. For example, what do you expect of another person in order to classify that person as your friend? What condition of worth would they have to violate to lose your friendship? Seen in these terms, we can begin to see growth as interdependent, with each of us influencing, and being influenced by, other people.

One area in which conflicts may arise in relationships is the area of conditions of worth. Sometimes we feel that our conditions of worth are so obvious that everyone must share them. This is not necessarily the case. Sometimes our definitions differ from other people. Take this example: A young couple who agreed to save their money to buy a house had severe conflicts. The wife said that her husband was not saving money because he bought new golf clubs. His response was "But I bought the cheapest ones there were!" Clearly, while this couple agreed to budget their money, their definitions of budgeting differed. These differences can often be overcome if people are clear with one other about their conditions of worth and exactly what would constitute a violation of these conditions.

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Think about the people who are important to you. Do they provide you with unconditional positive regard, openness and empathy? Have you ever wished that you received more of any of these elements from some of these people? Does what you receive from others influence your choice of friends? Sometimes we are attracted to people because of their status or other factors, rather than what they provide to us; how could you explain this in terms of Rogers's theory?

For the most part, we want unconditional positive regard, openness and empathy from others, and we feel close to those people who give these to us. But sometimes, we seem to have other needs that we want fulfilled by people as well. For example, some people are attracted to high status friends because they feel that the friend's status reflects upon them ("I must be pretty good if this high status person spends time with me"). In some cases, people are attracted to others who seem to give them very little but need much from them. In these cases, people seem to feel that being able to help their needy friends wins them love and approval, affirms their own status and makes them feel good about themselves. Rogers might suggest that in cases such as these two, we are basing our relationships on the fulfilling of conditions of worth that were set for us long ago; we may have given up on receiving unconditional positive regard or may not even realize that unconditional positive regard is possible, so we are striving for conditional positive regard in whatever way we have learned is most effective to achieve it.

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Consider the list of values in Box 6.2: Do you agree with Rogers's choice of values? If not, what would you omit? Why? What values would you add to this list? Ask some of your friends and family members what they would omit or add. Do their answers indicate common values or are there points of disagreement?

Values differ from individual to individual. Even more interesting is considering how values may differ among cultures, religions and ethnic groups. For example, subordination of self-interest in the interest of the employer is much more highly valued in Japan than in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. In religions, it is moving to note that virtually all religions agree on one thing: it is important to be good to each other.

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What needs are important to you at this point in your life? Where in the hierarchy do they fit? Do you perceive needs which don't fit within Maslow's hierarchy?

One issue to consider is that people sometimes mislabel their needs. For example, Pierre claims that he "needs" a new car, even though his old car still runs perfectly well. He contends that a new car would satisfy his safety needs. But is that the real reason? Is it possible that, deep down, he wants to buy a new automobile to fulfil his esteem needs? (One indicator would be whether Pierre would be satisfied buying a basic, low-cost vehicle, or insists on getting a fancy car that he can't really afford.) Examine your own needs in this light—only you can determine where, on Maslow's hierarchy, they really fit.

Advertising in the media encourages us to confuse our needs with our wants, and this increases the dissatisfaction we often feel in our lives. It is often useful in our lives to examine our areas of dissatisfaction in these terms: do we really need the new clothes, or do we just want them? On a deeper level, do we really need everyone to agree with our opinions, or do we just want them to do this? Do we believe this would fulfil our need for love and belongingness, or our need for esteem? If this is the case, is it possible to ever fulfil our needs adequately? Consider the role of our expectations in this regard. If we expect our needs to be fulfilled at an unreasonably high level, can we ever feel fulfilled? How can we determine what constitutes a 'reasonable' level of fulfillment? Do our past experiences of our childhoods play a part in this?

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Have you ever had an experience that made you would describe as a peak experience? If you have, did these experiences seem to arise because of a particular situation, or did they seem to arise without a clear cause? If it was triggered by a particular situation, was it a positive moment, or not? As Maslow recognized, sometimes even negative situations provoke peak experiences. For example, adults whose parents die often report that although they grieve greatly, the bereavement has made them more loving and appreciative of their remaining families and friends, and more determined to fulfil their own potential (Marshall, 2004; Petersen & Rafuls, 1998; Pope, 2005). Peak experiences seem to lead individuals to be more intensely aware of life, and even loss can lead someone to transcend purely personal concerns and relate more openly and appreciatively to life and to the people around them.

While not suggesting that even dire tragedies may be blessings in disguise, it is possible to find growth in even the worst of experiences. Many of us say "Maybe someday I'll see the reason for this happening to me", but that suggests that the universe will cooperate with what we want and lead us to some form of enlightenment. A better way is to absorb the bad experience and make meaning in it for ourselves: "What can I learn from this? How can I grow from this?" This may be the ultimate way to deal with the disappointments and tragedies of life, and to aid ourselves in coming to self-actualization.

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When I (MH) was 12 years old, I told my great-grandmother that I was "mature." My great-grandmother responded, "Really? I'm 86 years old and I'm not. But I'm working on it." If someone said to you, "I'm self-actualised", would you believe them? Why or why not? Given that self-actualisation is a process, not an end, do you think a self-actualised person would make such a statement?

Probably not. Self-actualisation, like maturity, is a process, not a fixed state, and personal growth is never complete. Understanding self-actualisation (like understanding maturity) means that one would never claim to have reached the ultimate state. Be skeptical of those people who claim to have reached it!

Do you know anyone personally whom you would consider highly self-actualised? What leads you to think so? Do their values seem consistent with Maslow's description? If you can, talk to them—do they consider themselves to be self-actualized?

In all likelihood, the people whom you consider to be highly self-actualised would be the first to say "Oh no, I'm still growing and developing." These individuals recognise that the process is never complete, but they don't despair of this; rather, they revel in the excitement of the growth ahead of them. This is part of self-actualisation!

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Have you ever been through a difficult experience which nonetheless had a positive influence on your life? Why was it ultimately positive?

Consider this example: I (MH) once had a student who was denied admission to law school. Bitterly disappointed, he entered a graduate programme in education instead. Years later, he contacted me to say how much he enjoyed teaching in Third World countries, and how fulfilling his career was. "Thank heaven I wasn't accepted to law," he said. "That would have been a disaster for me!"

In suggesting that suffering could be a possible source of meaning, Frankl was not suggesting that we should welcome hurt and pain, but rather that meaning truly lies in how we interpret experience. Frankl found personal meaning even while confronted with the horrors of the concentration camps; can we find meaning in the challenges that *we* face?

MH's student's comments suggest that he credited some universal plan or destiny for his joy in his occupation, but Frankl would suggest that the credit belongs to him for making meaning of the disappointment he received. Certainly the student did this without being aware of it consciously. How much more meaning can be found when we are aware of our ability to make meaning out of adversity?

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What makes you happy? Have you ever looked forward to buying/doing something, only to find that when you finally did, you weren't happier as a result? One way to explore what makes you happy is to keep a record for a week of your mood state, especially times when you feel happy. What do you think you'll find? For example, do you think that playing with your children or pets will result in happiness? Or that finally finishing a term paper will make you happy? After a week, see if your predictions match the situations in which you felt happiness. In thinking about what makes you happy, can you relate your experience to the positive psychology research on happiness?

Usually what makes us happy are the small moments of joy within a day. With an optimist outlook, we can maximise the occurrence of these moments, and make ourselves genuinely more content and satisfied with our lives. For example, take a second right now to experience the moment you are living in. For most of you, at this moment, you are warm and safe and doing something productive. This moment will never come again. Can you savour it for what it is without letting your thoughts be cluttered by worries and concerns of tomorrow or past or ongoing resentments? Being able to focus on and savour the present moment is called 'mindfulness' and is the basis of many forms of meditation, which is demonstrated to be stress-reducing and conducive to a happier, more satisfying life.