A Look at Maslow's "Basic Propositions"

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By Alfie Kohn

Abraham Maslow was a bundle of paradoxes. After writing a popular text on abnormal psychology, he turned to — and virtually initiated — the serious study of healthy people. He apprenticed under some of the leading behaviorists, he was psychoanalyzed for years, yet he shaped a Third Force in psychology which explicitly repudiated behaviorism and psychoanalysis. The anecdotes compiled by his biographer (Hoffman 1988) suggest a man both gentle and intolerant, timid and arrogant. He dreamt of a new society but recoiled from political activism; he was an atheist enthralled by the possibility of transcendent experiences.

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Paradox was a hallmark of his theories as well as his life. Self-actualized people, Maslow told us, transcend dichotomies and resolve oppositions (this volume, proposition 25). They are not entirely this nor that, and they realize the world isn't either. Thus, it seemed appropriate to me when, in college, I first drank in Maslow's books, to find myself decidedly ambivalent about what he had to say. I wrote papers taking him to task for certain ideas, yet his broader vision for psychology enthralled me and became part of me. With the affective charge having abated somewhat, with a quieter affirmation here and a more muted objection there, I feel much the same way a couple of decades later.

A Closer Look at "Self-Actualization"

The specific characteristics that Maslow attributed to the self-actualized individual seem less important to me than the fact that he paid attention to growing, mature, fully functioning people in the first place. Psychology had hitherto been more interested in pathology, and when mental health was discussed at all, it was implicitly understood in terms of adaptation to social norms, such that "healthy" and "normal" were regarded as interchangeable. Maslow argued that "adjustment is, very definitely, *not* necessarily synonymous with psychological health" (proposition 34). (Thus, confronted with "proof" that an instructional technique, or discipline system, in the classroom is effective, we might well ask, "Effective at what?" — knowing that the answer may have more to do with adaptation and adjustment, with the perpetuation of the status quo, than with genuine health.) In addition to challenging the view of health as adaptation, Maslow (along with Marie Jahoda, Erich Fromm, and other humanists) also took issue with the medical model's view of health as tantamount to the absence of illness, insisting instead on a *positive* definition of health — one that specified what human beings are like at their best.

The call for psychologists to investigate health was not a dispassionate recommendation for Maslow, analogous to asking that more attention be paid to this or that developmental stage. Rather, it reflected a belief that there was much about us humans that *was* healthy, admirable, worth celebrating. This conviction, shared by Carl Rogers and others, has provided a contemporary counterpoint to the bleak view of our species offered by Freud, Hobbes, and the doctrine of Original Sin. I found the humanists' benign perspective refreshing when I first encountered it, and I subsequently discovered a cache of empirical evidence that, to some extent at least, corroborated what Maslow and others had been saying (Kohn 1990). More recently, I have become interested in exposing and criticizing the cynical assumptions about children that underlie mainstream arguments for classroom management (Kohn 1996, chap. 1) and character education (Kohn 1997).

Still, I have my reservations. In good Maslovian form, I wonder whether Humans as Good is just the mirror image of Humans as Bad, equally reductive and ultimately as unconvincing. But what is the alternative position? That we are somewhere in between? Maybe. That we are both good and evil? If this is closer to the truth, it suggests that we must come to terms with a full range of human impulses and capacities, as has been argued by Rollo May (1982), perhaps the most incisive and complicated thinker associated with humanistic psychology. Ultimately, though, the alternative to Good vs. Evil may be not that we are both, but that we are neither — at least if good and evil are construed as givens.

The existentialist tradition, which May (1958) single-handedly introduced to American psychology, calls into question the idea of a fixed human nature, emphasizing instead how much we determine our own nature and, more to the point, how we decide not just *whether* to be good but what it means to call something "good" in the first place. Both who we are and how we should act are more within the realm of human choice than we sometimes care to acknowledge. Biological determinism is therefore no less problematic just because we attribute agreeable qualities (e.g., altruism, the capacity to be self-actualizing) rather than disagreeable qualities (e.g., aggression, selfishness) to our essential make-up. The former characteristics may be nice, but that does not make it any less problematic to think of them as "natural" if, in fact, we are creators as much as discoverers, composers as much as archaeologists.

Maslow gave some credence to this idea (proposition 5), but the bulk of his life's work was informed by precisely the opposite conviction. Healthy people, he believed, are those who actualize — that is, make real — what they already are. He spoke frequently of an "inner nature," and saw psychotherapy as an attempt to help "the person to *discover* his Identity, his Real Self, in a word, his own subjective biology, which he can then proceed to actualize, to 'make himself,' to 'choose'" (Maslow 1976, p. 179).

Among the problems with this position is that it commits what philosophers since Hume have identified as the "naturalistic fallacy," which refers to the attempt to derive a value from a fact. Just agreeing that something is part of human nature — or, for that matter, that it is true to *my* nature — does not in and of itself permit us to say that this thing is desirable, good, or healthy. Thus, Maslow was guilty of a very basic conceptual error when he declared that "the word *ought* need not be used" and we can rely on "a naturalistic system of values, a by-product of the empirical description of the deepest tendencies of the human species and of specific individuals" (proposition 23). In another essay, he stated that the best way for a person to discover what he ought to do is to find out who and what he is, because the path to ethical and value decisions, to wiser choices, to oughtness, is via "isness". . . . Many problems simply disappear; many others are easily solved by knowing what is in conformity with one's nature, what is suitable and right (1976, pp. 106-07).

In fact, the problems — and the necessity of demonstrating why something is good or ought to be done — do not disappear at all. They are just conveniently evoked when we blithely invite people to "find their inner selves."

Look at it this way: If Maslow says it is good to be who we really are, that statement is offered either as an analytic truth or an empirical truth. If it's analytical, he is basically saying it is true by definition, that "in conformity with one's nature" is part of the *meaning* of words like "right" or "healthy." This requires some justification; one can't, after all, prove a contention just by defining it to be true. If his claim is empirical, though, then he is suggesting that science can show that people do in fact move toward health or goodness (given certain facilitating environmental conditions), or that what is in conformity with one's nature does in fact turn out to be healthy. In this case, Maslow obviously has some independent standard of what constitutes health or goodness, some value by which our actions can be judged. M. Brewster Smith, a critic from within humanistic psychology, saw the latter as the only way to read Maslow:

His empirical definition of psychological health or self-actualization thus rests, at root, on his own implicit values that underlie this global judgment. The array of characteristics that he reports must then be regarded not as an empirical description of the fully human. . . but rather as an explication of his implicit conception of the fully human, of his orienting frame of human values. . . . I like them, but that is beside the point (Smith 1973, p. 24).

Of course, there is nothing wrong with making value judgments about what humans ought to be like — only with pretending after the fact that they are not really value judgments at all but are magically contained within factual statements about what we *are* like. Then there is the painfully obvious question: Whose values? If Maslow or anyone else commits unspeakable atrocities with some regularity? The humanists' only move here is to discount the bad stuff as not reflective of our *deepest* tendencies, as not being in tune with our *real* nature. But how do we know what is deepest or most real? Have we, once again, simply defined anything evil as less deep or true than the good? How can such a decision be defended? The humanists offer a key caveat, of course, which is that health consists of what people freely choose "under certain conditions that we have learned to call good"; the choices that reveal our nature are those made by "sound adults or children who are not yet twisted and distorted" (Maslow 1970, pp. 272, 278). But these value-laden qualifiers undermine any claim that we can skip the oughts and proceed directly from facts to values[1]; they essentially prove Smith (1973, p. 25) correct when he concludes that "our biology cannot be made to carry our ethics as Maslow would have it."

Needs

If the specifics of Maslow's definition of health become more problematic upon closer inspection, his willingness to devote serious attention to the subject may be his more admirable, and lasting, legacy. Exactly the same is true of his contribution to the study of what people need. Maslow proposed that the extent to which our needs are met can predict how well we function, and this insight helps us understand what happens in families, classrooms, workplaces, and society more generally. Particularly with respect to children, we can predict that more developmentally appropriate and constructive practices will follow when our first question is "What do kids need, and how we can meet those needs?" as opposed to "How can we get kids to do what we tell them?" Any number of thinkers have made a similar point — one thinks of the motivational psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan or the psychiatrist William Glasser, for example — but back in the 1940s Maslow helped all of us to grasp the importance of ensuring, as he later put it, "that the child's basic psychological needs are satisfied" (1976, p. 183).

Maslow explicitly repudiated the homeostatic (or tension-reduction) view that says we, like all organisms, are motivated chiefly to satisfy our inborn needs in an effort to return to a condition of rest or stasis. Maslow believed that "gratification of one need and its consequent removal from the center of the stage brings about not a state of rest. . . but rather the emergence into consciousness of another 'higher' need" (Maslow 1968, p. 30). The higher needs are distinguished, among other things, by seeming more like desires than compulsions.

This proposition simultaneously challenges the Freudian model, which is essentially homeostatic, and the behaviorist model, which sees us as no more than "repertoires of behaviors" that are, in turn, fully determined by "environmental contingencies." The humanistic view holds that we are not at the mercy of outside forces; our motivations often come from within and, moreover, have a freely chosen component to them. ("The self-actualizer's wishes and plans are the primary determiners, rather than stresses from the environment" [1968, p. 35].) The goal is not stasis but continual growth, not a respite from needs but a shift to different kinds of needs and more joy in satisfying them.

Maslow distinguished between deficiency and growth motivation, between need-interested and need-disinterested perception, and between D (for Deficiency) love and B (for Being) love (propositions 18 and 19). I have found this set of distinctions both provocative and useful in thinking about a range of issues, notwithstanding the inherent limitations of dualities. Truly, some people see what they need to see, while others are more successful at encountering a new idea or situation without construing it as a means to their own ends, without filtering it through their own emotional hurts and histories. Some people attach themselves to others with a desperation suggesting D-love, much as a starving person would approach a plate of food, while others have the emotional freedom to appreciate others for who they are, feeling more flexible and autonomous, less driven and less likely to turn others into something they aren't. The same basic distinction can be applied to how one approaches ideas — a purer B-cognition presumably being one goal of education — or even to one's sense of humor. Consistent with the B vs. D formulation, for example, one might argue that competitiveness is properly understood as a deficiency-motivated trait: being good at an activity may be something we choose to do, but winning is experienced as something we *have* to do, psychologically speaking (Kohn 1986, p. 101). Tragically, competition exacerbates rather than satisfies that lower-level need.

Again, though, the ambivalence: while making use of Maslow's framework, I have found myself wincing at its epistemological implications. The very idea of "need-free perception," suggesting that healthy individuals can see things (and people) as they really are, derives from Maslow's straight-faced talk about "the world of unyielding facts" (proposition 16). It is also a correlative of his assertion that it is possible for psychologists to study our "inner nature scientifically and objectively (that is, with the right kind of 'science') and to discover what it is like (*discover* — not invent or construct)" (proposition 3). This brand of naive, even quaint, empiricism has been roundly displaced by 20th-century physics, to say nothing of modern constructivism. No matter how healthy we may be, "knowledge does not reflect an 'objective' ontological reality, but exclusively an ordering and organization of a world constituted by our experience" (von Glasersfeld 1984, p. 24). Progressive educators may be attracted both to Maslow's humanism and to a constructivist understanding of learning, but it is important to acknowledge that the two cannot be entirely reconciled.

Where Maslow gets into more trouble is where his theory gets more specific (and more famous): the well-known triangle on which needs are arrayed. Here the two-stage hierarchy of needs — deficiency and growth — is supplanted by a five-stage hierarchy, as follows: At the bottom are physiological needs, which are "prepotent," meaning that they must be satisfied first. When people get food and other bodily necessities, they are then concerned about safety. After safety comes the need for belongingness or love, then esteem or achievement, and finally, at the top of the triangle, comes the need for self-actualization, which he defined as "the desire to become more and more what one idiosyncratically is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming" (Maslow 1970, p. 46). (Incidentally, in the revised edition to his basic text on motivation, published the year he died, Maslow made it clear that he believed "self-actualization does not occur in young people" [p. xx].)

Before mentioning some problems with the hierarchy of needs, we should take a moment to clear up a misconception that is not Maslow's fault. Some people, casually invoking his theory, declare that it is appropriate and even necessary to provide extrinsic inducements (notably, rewards) to an individual, because only later will he or she be ready to "move up" to the level of intrinsic motivation. This formulation is based on several errors. First, it assumes that because intrinsic motivation is desirable, it must be a higher need in the sense that it appears at a later stage of development. In fact, however, Maslow's entire theory of motivation and the whole range of needs it embraces (including the need for self-actualization) could be said to be intrinsic, or part of who we are. We do not always find ourselves in environments that meet these needs and fulfill our potential, but intrinsic motivation, seen as a function of these needs, is present from the start.

What is not there from the start, however, is an extrinsic orientation. There is a profound difference between the things we need (e.g., food, money, approval) and the deliberate use of these things *as rewards* to induce people to behave in a certain way. Those who are controlled with rewards may well come to lose interest in what they have been rewarded for doing (Kohn 1993) and thereafter may seem extrinsically oriented. But this does not mean that a dependence on (or an expectation of) extrinsic rewards is prepotent over intrinsic, in Maslow's language. In fact, one study of nearly 800 employed adults found "no evidence that workers must learn to appreciate or need intrinsic satisfaction. . . . Extrinsic rewards become an important determinant of overall job satisfaction only among workers for whom intrinsic rewards are relatively unavailable" (Gruenberg 1980, p. 268). The same may be said of students who appear to be dependent on extrinsic rewards such as grades, stickers, pizza, and praise: what they really needed from the beginning simply wasn't available. The concept of intrinsic motivation is generally traced back to the work of Robert White (on competence), Richard deCharms (on personal causation), and finally to Harry Harlow, who was apparently the first to use the term in 1950. Maslow, interestingly, was Harlow's first doctoral student some two decades before Harlow and his colleagues discovered that rhesus monkeys not only learned how to operate a mechanical puzzle in the absence of food rewards, but that the introduction of rewards "seriously disrupted the efficient puzzle solution which they had repeatedly demonstrated previously" (Harlow et al. 1950, p. 231). Maslow's name does not appear prominently in most accounts of intrinsic motivation, but there is no doubt that his personality theory helped set the stage for an understanding of the concept. For what it's worth, I'm certain that my own interest in the topic was indirectly an outgrowth of my immersion in Maslow's work some time earlier.

Let us stipulate, then, that intrinsic motivation is part of Maslow's legacy and that misunderstandings of the "need" for extrinsic motivators are not his fault. Nevertheless, there are real problems with his hierarchy of needs, beginning with the slipperiness of his terms and the difficulty of demonstrating empirically whether or not he was right. It is not just that Maslow was "out ahead of the data," as he himself put it, but that it is virtually impossible to test his theory:

For example, what behavior should or should not be included in each need category? How can a need be gratified out of existence? What does dominance of a given need mean? What are the conditions under which the theory is operative? How does the shift from one need to another take place? Do people also go down the hierarchy as they go up in it? Is there an independent hierarchy for each situation or do people develop a general hierarchy for all situations? What is the time span for the unfolding of the hierarchy? These and similar questions are not answered by Maslow and are open for many interpretations. The most problematic aspect of Maslow's theory, however, is that. . . it is not clear what is meant by the concept of need (Wahba and Bridwell, 1976, p. 234).

To the extent one *can* meaningfully derive testable hypotheses from Maslow's theory, moreover, there is serious reason to think it was wrong. First, the underlying assumption is remarkably deterministic, and one could argue that "what we choose to do depends more on our ethics than on satisfying needs" (Maccoby 1988, p. 32). If our actions are not in fact driven by a progressive unfolding of inborn needs, then the accuracy — or at least the functional relevance — of the theory is called into question. Second, while it may be intuitively plausible to talk about safety needs, belongingness needs, and so on, "there is no clear evidence that human needs are classified in five distinct categories, or that these categories are structured in a special hierarchy" (Wahba and Bridwell 1976, p. 224). In fact, there is some evidence to the contrary. Finally, it has never been shown that one need triggers the next in the way Maslow described. If he was right, the satisfaction of a given need — accepting for the sake of the argument that a need can ever really be "satisfied" — should cause that need to subside and also cause the next need in the hierarchy to become more salient. Attempts to demonstrate this, however, have generally failed (e.g., Hall and Nougaim 1968, Lawler and Suttle 1972).

The subjects in much of the research on this topic have been corporate managers, possibly limiting the generalizability of the negative findings; moreover, the studies have been plagued by a number of methodological limitations (see Wicker et al. 1993). But even the data that do appear to be supportive may not require the theory as a whole. It can be shown that people think less about food once they are fed, but that doesn't demonstrate that the same principle operates with higher needs. It can be shown that corporate employees start out being preoccupied with safety needs and later become more concerned about achievement, but this may be a function of changing social roles or situations rather than proof of some inherent relationship among innate needs that plays out automatically.

Once the empirical basis for Maslow's hierarchy has been challenged, one is free to identify and question the values that led him to arrange these needs in the order he did. That Maslow seems to regard the need for love or affiliation as "lower" than the need for self-actualization or even achievement seems to suggest that the desire to connect with others is "some sort of irritant that needs fixing so that people will be free to focus on more important things such as achievement and success" (Sergiovanni 1994, pp. 65-66). One has difficulty imagining this particular hierarchy being proposed by a female or Asian psychologist, for example.

Maslow has been faulted for "an atomistic view of the self" (Geller 1982, p. 69), for his premise that we "achieve full humanness through an intense affair with the self" (Aron 1986, p. 99).[2] But even those who are sympathetic to the individualism that undergirds his writings, including his equation of health with *self*-actualization, ought to keep in mind that this is the worldview of a particular historical period and a particular set of cultural assumptions. Maslow was sufficiently schooled in anthropology (and sufficiently influenced by Ruth Benedict) to be cautious about explicitly claiming his observations were universal truths (e.g., see Maslow 1970, pp. 54-55), yet much of his work is presented as being a description of human nature. Anyone enamored of self-actualization theory would do well to remember what Clifford Geertz observed:

The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against both other such wholes and against its social and natural background, is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures (Geertz 1983, p. 59).

Maslow on Education

Maslow had remarkably little to say on the subject of education. His essay in this volume did not pay much attention to what happens in schools despite the fact that he was writing it for ASCD, and there is little evidence of careful thought about pedagogical matters in an article he wrote six years later for the *Harvard Educational Review* (reprinted in Maslow 1976, chap. 13). His few paragraphs on the subject consisted of a call for education to foster "growth toward self-actualization" (proposition 34), "learning of the heart" (Maslow 1970, p. 282), "learning who you are," "being able to hear your inner voices" (Maslow 1976, p. 177), and for education to "refreshen consciousness so that we are continually aware of the beauty and wonder of life" (p. 183). He thought there should be more emphasis on creativity and developing a "healthy unconscious" (proposition 28), and more concern, at least in our culture, with "spontaneity, the ability to be expressive, unwilled. . ." (proposition 11). By contrast, schools were said to place too much emphasis on "purely abstract thinking" (proposition 28) and "implanting the greatest number of facts into the greatest possible number of children" (Maslow 1976, p. 173).

When asked about education, Maslow tended to think primarily about the college years — understandably, since he spent most of his life in universities. He was dismayed at the prevailing preoccupation with "means, i.e., grades, degrees, credits, diplomas, rather than with ends, i.e., wisdom, understanding, good judgment, good taste" (Maslow 1970, p. 282). He wrote about students so driven by "extrinsic rewards" that they could not fathom why anyone would read a book that wasn't required for a course, and he remarked that learning itself was so little valued that "leaving college before the completion of one's senior year is considered to be a waste of time by the society and a minor tragedy by parents" (Maslow 1976, pp. 174-75). By way of contrast, he told a story about Upton Sinclair:

When Sinclair was a young man, he found that he was unable to raise the tuition money needed to attend college. Upon careful reading of the college catalogue, however, he found that if a student failed a course, he received no credit for the course, but was obliged to take another course in its place. The college did not charge the student for the second course, reasoning that he had already paid once for his credit. Sinclair took advantage of this policy and got a free education by deliberately failing all his courses (Maslow 1976, pp. 174-75).

The little that he did write on education, per se, will likely continue to elicit enthusiasm among progressives and derision among traditionalists. To be sure, Maslow's message is not well-suited to an era that seems ever more determined to judge its schools on the basis of standardized test scores and that ratchets up standards to make students more "competitive." But even those of us who nod at Maslow's remarks about extrinsic rewards (and smile at the Sinclair anecdote) may be forgiven for finding all the earnest talk about spontaneity and inner voices to be rather less than helpful. Authenticity never goes out of date, but Maslow's declarations are sometimes so sweeping and simplistic as to provoke a twinge of embarrassment, as, for example, when he informs educators that addicts "will give up drugs easily if you offer them instead some meaning to their lives" (Maslow 1976, p. 180) or that even when "parents convey their own distorted patterns of behavior to the child. . . if the teacher is healthier and stronger, the children will imitate these instead" (p. 181). There is very little of substance or specificity in Maslow's writings to guide teachers through the exigencies of life in real classrooms. Only once that I am aware of did he even acknowledge the structural barriers that might constrain teachers from encouraging peak experiences in their students.[3] In general, while Maslow's thoughts about psychology may be indirectly relevant to education, just as they may be indirectly relevant to architecture or any other field, he was clearly not steeped in the particulars of life at school or how children learn.

On the other hand, educators absorb and reflect a set of assumptions about who we are as human beings and what we can (and ought to) become. Maslow's optimism, his tireless attention to growth and health, and his analysis of motivation and needs collectively define a psychological perspective that is richer, deeper, and more heuristic than the behaviorism that captivated Maslow himself at age 20 but which he later transcended. We might take issue with any number of his ideas while still finding his conception of human potential a basis for lively discussion and a source of energy and inspiration.

NOTES

1. I believe these objections also apply to Lawrence Kohlberg's (1971) cleverer and more self-conscious attempt to do essentially the same thing with his stage theory of moral development.
2. Aron's essay is reprinted in *Politics and Innocence*, a fascinating collection devoted to the social and political implications of humanistic psychology. Contributions by Walter Nord and Allan R. Buss, in particular, explore the conservative and individualistic implications of humanistic psychology and especially of Maslow's work. As Buss (1986, p. 140) puts it, "A theory that disposes one to focus more upon individual freedom and development rather than the larger social reality, works in favor of maintaining that social reality."
3. "Of course, with the traditional model of thirty-five children in one classroom and a curriculum of subject matter which has to be gotten through in a given period of time, the teacher is forced to pay more attention to orderliness and lack of noise than [to] making learning a joyful experience" (Maslow 1976, p. 181).

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